5.10: Sentence and Paragraph Construction

You should construct your paragraphs and sentences with intention because these elements are the building blocks of scholarly writing. Plan your writing by briefly outlining the main idea of each paragraph. Each paragraph should convey one main point, usually identified in the first sentence, that links to the overarching purpose of your paper – this is often referred to as your topic sentence. Each paragraph should include several sentences supporting this main point. The end of each paragraph should link to the next paragraph to enhance flow of the overall paper. Watch Film Clip 5.1 about the building blocks of paragraphs.

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Film Clip 5.1: Building blocks of a paragraph [1:31]
Paragraph and sentence length will vary depending on the length of your paper and the complexity of the ideas. For example, you wouldn’t use a one-page paragraph in a three-page paper. Overly long sentences and paragraphs can be unclear and confusing to your reader. The most important thing to keep in mind is that the amount of space needed to develop one idea will likely be different than the amount of space needed to develop another. When is a paragraph complete? When it’s fully developed. Check out Table 5.2 for some pointers on when to end a paragraph and when to combine paragraphs.

Table 5.2: Paragraph pointers

Signals that it’s time to end a paragraph and start a new one

- You’re ready to begin developing a new idea.
- You want to emphasize a new point by setting it apart.
- You’re getting ready to continue discussing the same idea but in a different way (e.g., shifting from comparison to contrast).
- You notice that your current paragraph is getting too long (more than three-fourths of a page or so), and you think your writers will need a visual break.
- You notice that some of your paragraphs appear to be short and choppy.

Signals that you may want to combine paragraphs

- You have multiple paragraphs on the same topic.
- You have undeveloped material that needs to be united under a clear topic.

Student Tip

Paragraph and Sentence Length

Although there are exceptions, here are some guiding principles for paragraph and sentence length:

1. Sentences should be no longer than three lines. Longer sentences can be complex and confusing: it’s best to write more concisely and/or divide the sentence into two sentences.
2. Paragraphs should be at least 3-8 sentences.
3. In a double-spaced paper, paragraphs should be about one-half to three-quarters of a page. Longer paragraphs tend to be confusing and usually include more than one idea or repetitive information. Try to make your writing more concise.

The number of paragraphs shares similar qualities to paragraph length. You may have been asked in the past to write a five-paragraph essay – there’s nothing inherently wrong with a five-paragraph essay, but just like sentence length and paragraph length, the number of paragraphs in an essay depends on what’s needed to get the job done. There’s really
no way to know that until you start writing. Try not to worry too much about the exact length and number of paragraphs. Start writing and see where the essay and the paragraphs take you. You’ll have plenty of time to sort out the organization during the revision process. You’re letting your ideas unfold: give yourself – and your ideas – the space to let that happen.

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