What is a paragraph?
The paragraphs in the body of a paper are the heart of a good literary argument. This is where all the real 'work' of the argument occurs. What matters most in a strong argumentative paragraph is not length, but the unity and coherence of ideas from sentence to sentence. What makes a group of sentences into a paragraph is the fact that they are unified around one central, controlling idea. A strong paragraph guides the reader, first introducing us to the controlling idea, then developing and analyzing the support for this idea, and then offering a conclusion about the idea’s larger significance (in relation to the controlling idea or thesis of the entire paper). Whether that completion happens with one sentence or with twenty, the end result is still a paragraph.

Every paragraph in a paper should be:

• **Unified.** The sentences should all refer to the main idea, or thesis, of the paper.

• **Coherent.** The sentences should be arranged in a logical manner and should follow a definite plan for development.

• **Well-Developed.** Every idea discussed in the paragraph should be adequately explained and supported through evidence and details that work together to explain the paper's controlling idea.

5 STEP PROCESS TO PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT

1. **Topic/Controlling Idea** - the expression of the main idea or topic of the paragraph in a sentence or a collection of sentences.

Paragraph development begins with the formulation of the controlling idea. This idea directs the paragraph’s development. Often, the controlling idea of a paragraph will appear in the form of a topic sentence. Readers tend to expect to find important information in the topic sentence, so it is often most effective to locate your controlling idea there. While in other genres of argument it is perfectly okay to locate the topic sentence in the middle or the end of a paragraph, in complex academic arguments, this is often a big risk. If your main idea is buried, it is far more likely it will be overlooked.

<table>
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<th>Check Your Paragraph</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Does the paragraph begin with a controlling idea?</strong> Make sure your paragraph begins with a clear claim, not with evidence. Is your claim specific enough? Does it capture the most interesting part of your central idea?</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Does the paragraph tell us why your controlling idea matters?</strong> Can we see clearly how and why this idea is worth an entire paragraph?</td>
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<td>3. <strong>Is your evidence the right kind of evidence?</strong> Take a look at the evidence you include. Are you spending too much time summarizing plot or describing? Does your evidence pay attention to specific language choices?</td>
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<td>4. <strong>How are you integrating evidence and analysis?</strong> As you see in this sample paragraph, you don’t always need long quotes to make your point. Sometimes smaller pieces of text, integrated into your analysis, will be a more effective way of arguing your point.</td>
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<td>5. <strong>How does it end?</strong> Take a second look at the last sentence of your paragraph. Do you end with evidence? Does the conclusion just restate the claim, or is there a new, final synthesis that will leave the reader satisfied?</td>
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Here is a sample idea from a student paper on Honoré de Balzac's short story "Sarrasine." This paragraph is analyzing the narrator's initial description of one of the story's main characters, a strange old man who appears at an elegant evening party and creates a disturbance. This man, we discover over the course of the story, is a once famous castrato, a singer who was castrated at a young age in order to prevent his voice from changing. The writer of this paragraph is examining how the initial descriptions of the party and the old man foreshadow the later revelation that he has been castrated.

The sample statement below also serves as the topic sentence for the paragraph that will be developed to support this idea.

**Sample Controlling idea/Topic sentence**

The initial description of the old man foreshadows the eventual revelation that he is a castrato and begins to color how readers will interpret the meaning of his castration.

2. **Explanation of the controlling idea**: the writer's rationale for his/her claim. This is often a chance to develop the idea in the topic sentence more fully, and begin to suggest how this idea comes out of the evidence in the text.

Paragraph development continues with an expression of the rationale or the explanation that the writer gives for how the reader should interpret the information presented in the idea statement or topic sentence of the paragraph. Here's the sentence that would follow the controlling idea about the old man in "Sarrasine":

**Sample explanation**

The old man inspires "profound horror" in all the guests at the De Lanty party because he seems to combine two elements that we assume are absolutely opposed — the horror of death and the beauty of life.

3. **Evidence** — the development of the support for the controlling idea.

Paragraph development progresses with the expression of some type of support or evidence for the idea and the explanation that came before it. In this paragraph, the writer offers some specific quotations that support the claim:

**Evidence A**

This juxtaposition is established through the initial description of the party, where the narrator contrasts the wintery "Dance of the Dead" outside the window with the warm, inviting "Dance of the Living" that is embodied by the beauty of the women in the de Lanty's salon (208). At first, the old man seems associated with the former, with death. He is a "fragile machine," an "artificial creature," and a "cadaverous skull" (213).

4. **Analysis**— this evidence needs to be followed up with a statement that shows the reader the reasoning behind why you chose to use these particular quotes as evidence to support the claim. What is it that you want the reader to notice about your evidence?
Analysis of Evidence A

Throughout the opening scenes of the story, we are continually encouraged to compare the old man to the inanimate, the unreal, and the dead.

The next movement in paragraph development is an explanation of each piece of evidence and its relevance to the topic sentence and the rationale given at the beginning of the paragraph. This pattern continues until all points/examples that the reader deems necessary have been made and explained. NONE of your examples should be left unexplained; the relationship between the example and the idea should always be expressed.

Notice that you can and should repeat steps 3 & 4 until you have fully developed your support for the controlling idea. In the sample paragraph, this pattern of evidence and analysis is repeated once more.

Evidence and analysis B:

Yet these images are juxtaposed with another pattern of imagery that associates the old man with the feminine and the beautiful. He wears a wig with "innumerable (blond) curls" and decorated with gold and gems that "glitter" (213). The narrator even claims that the jewelry gives the old man a "feminine coquetry" and compares his watch to a woman's bejeweled choker (213).

5. Conclusion and Transition --a final synthesis that not only restates the controlling idea, but builds on the analysis of the paragraph to offer a new perspective on that idea, one that helps your reader see the relevance or significance of the analysis that you have just presented. A good conclusion also helps prepare for your reader for the paragraph that follows.

The final movement in paragraph development involves tying up the loose ends of the paragraph-and showing the reader of the relevance of the information in this paragraph to the main or controlling idea of the paper. Here's an example of conclusion that completes the sample paragraph. Notice it can take more than one sentence to effectively conclude:

Sample conclusion

On the most basic level, these traces of the feminine foreshadow the revelation to come; they hint to us that the old man has been unmanned by his castration. More significantly, though, the merging of images of death and life transform these signs of feminine beauty into something at once ridiculous, unnatural, and even monstrous. He inspires horror because he is both alive and dead, masculine and feminine.

Now here is a look at the completed paragraph:

The initial description of the old man foreshadows the eventual revelation that he is a castrato and begins to color how readers will interpret the meaning of his castration. The old man inspires "profound horror" in all the guests at the De Lanty party because he seems to combine two elements that we assume are absolutely opposed —the horror of death and the beauty of life. This juxtaposition is established through the initial description of the party, where the narrator contrasts the wintery "Dance of the Dead" outside the window with the warm, inviting "Dance of the Living" that is embodied by the beauty of the women in the de Lanty's salon (208). At first, the old man seems associated with the former, with death. He is a "fragile machine," an "artificial creature," and a
"cadaverous skull" (213). Throughout the opening scenes of the story, we are continually encouraged to compare the old man to the inanimate, the unreal, and the dead. Yet these images are juxtaposed with another pattern of imagery that associates the old man with the feminine and the beautiful. He wears a wig with "innumerable (blond) curls" and decorated with gold and gems that "glitter" (213). The narrator even claims that the jewelry gives the old man a "feminine coquetry" and compares his watch to a woman's bejeweled choker (213). On the most basic level, these traces of the feminine foreshadow the revelation to come; they hint to us that the old man has been unmanned by his castration. More significantly, though, the merging of images of death and life transform these signs of femininity into something at once ridiculous, unnatural, and even monstrous. He inspires horror because he is both alive and dead, masculine and feminine.

Transition/Statement of new topic:

The next paragraph in this paper needs to express a clear relationship to this paragraph. This writer did this by building on an idea in the conclusion and connecting it to the new topic. Remember the transition is not a sentence or a word, it is a relationship between the ideas of one paragraph and the next.

Sample transition

...More significantly, though, the merging of images of death and life transform these signs of femininity into something at once ridiculous, unnatural, and even monstrous. He inspires horror because he is both alive and dead, masculine and feminine.

It is because the castrato occupies just such an 'in between' state that his history, related by the narrator, becomes a problem for both characters and readers to interpret. He at once inspires horror and sympathy.

Beneath the Model for Paragraph Development:
Here are some additional handouts that you can use to work on specific issues that are part of paragraph development:

Paragraph Structure

Integrating Quotes

Coherence and Cohesion

Writer's Resource Center. Written and maintained by Laura Kuske von Wallmenich, Alma College. http://faculty-staffpages.alma.edu/~vonwallmenich/writing2.html This is a free resource for all students and educators.