

Effective paragraphing is a central skill in academic writing. Many writers have been told a paragraph should contain a single idea; many have heard paragraphs have to be a minimum length—three sentences, for instance. In reality, paragraphs come in different shapes and sizes, and some so-called “rules” may put writers in a straightjacket that unnecessarily hampers their ability to convey their ideas as needed in a particular piece of writing. Nevertheless, grasping the general form of a paragraph provides a good foundation. Once you have this basic building block at your command, you can vary from it by conscious choice when needed.

One way to envision a body paragraph is as a “complete MEAL,” with the components being the paragraph’s Main idea, Evidence, Analysis, and Link back to the larger claim.

The Main Idea

The *main idea* is the paragraph’s central thrust. In academic writing, that thrust is often argumentative—a paragraph makes an assertion that’s part of the writer’s larger claim. Often the main idea appears in the paragraph’s first sentence, where it is sometimes called the “topic sentence.” However, some paragraphs offer their main idea in the second, third, or last sentence; some don’t have a single sentence that encapsulates the main idea. That said, your reader should come away from each paragraph with a clear understanding of its main idea. He or she shouldn’t have to stop and reread the paragraph, trying to figure out what it’s saying.

It’s true that a paragraph should usually focus on a single idea—paragraphs are, after all, the bite-sized chunks into which you break your argument so that your reader will be able to digest it easily. But keep in mind that, to some degree, you can bring unity to a paragraph that seems to contain two or three ideas by showing how those ideas really fit under the same umbrella. The way a paragraph conveys its claim, in other words, dictates whether your reader will see it as a coherent idea or as a hodge-podge of different points.

Evidence and Analysis

Evidence and *analysis* are a paragraph’s main course; they are what allow you to prove that your paragraph’s main idea is plausible. Your evidence could be information from journal articles you’ve found in the library; it could be data from research or interviews you’ve conducted yourself; it could be a quotation or paraphrase from a work of literature; it could be an image; it could be a chain of logical reasoning you have developed; in some types of papers, it might be an anecdote or personal experience. However, evidence shouldn’t be plopped down in a paragraph and left to “speak for itself.” If you leave your evidence unexplained, your reader may interpret it differently than you intended, and if that happens, your main idea doesn’t get the support it needs. Therefore your paragraph should carefully *analyze* the evidence it provides; it should, in other words, explain exactly how the evidence you’ve cited proves what you think it proves. Often a paragraph’s “E” and “A” are hard to separate: you might provide some evidence, analyze it, and then provide more evidence and analysis. Sometimes individual sentences will contain both evidentiary and analytic elements. But in most academic writing, both evidence and analysis are essential to a paragraph’s well being.

Link Back to the Larger Claim

A paragraph's *link back to the larger claim* is often implicit—it can be awkward to wrap up a paragraph with a really heavy-handed link (“This idea is important to my claim because of X, Y, and Z”). Nevertheless your reader should get a good sense of how your paragraph fits into the larger scheme of your paper’s argument. He or she shouldn’t finish reading the paragraph and think, “Why did the writer put this paragraph in this paper? I don’t see how this idea is relevant!” An effective paragraph will clarify its own place in the essay’s (or section’s) larger claim.

Here’s an example of a paragraph drawn from an essay in *Deliberations: A Journal of First-Year Writing at Duke University*; the column on the left maps the parts of the paragraph’s “complete MEAL”:

M: Danielson here uses a traditional “topic sentence” that lays out the paragraph’s overall point.

E: His evidence is indirect, drawn from a work on Roman history.

A: His analysis links the historical evidence to his own assertion about the United States by outlining the two cultures’ similarity.

L: He uses the central terms of his paper’s argument to remind his reader of the paragraph’s relevance.

It is here that indeed one may foresee a new union between Church and State, one that the “religious right” may not completely predict: the complete eradication of all forms of traditional religion from government, to be replaced by the Worship of Government itself. This seemingly far-fetched idea finds its historical roots in an obvious and powerful reality: the ancient Roman Empire. According to early twentieth century historian Louis Sweet, the “Worship of Roma” was indeed quite common in the Roman Empire. This worship, which Sweet refers to as the “Roma-cult,” started most clearly “immediately after the entrance of the Romans into Asiatic affairs. The similarities between such ancient, pagan patriotic worship and the current American situation cannot be overlooked. Just as Rome developed nation-worship after its conquest of Asian lands, so the United States seems to be entering a similar stage of paganism during its conquest of the Middle East. “The Roma-cult is interlocked from the beginning with the imperial,” Sweet reminds his readers. Will the vague patriotic monotheism of America, stripped of traditional religion, become her vague patriotic paganism as she continues on her imperialistic crusade? (14)

Source:

Danielson, Donald Kyle. “Imperium Dei: America’s New Religion.” *Deliberations: A Journal of First-Year Writing at Duke University*. Fall 2006: 10-16.