

A paragraph is a group of related sentences that discuss one (and usually only one) main idea. A paragraph can be as short as one sentence or as long as ten sentences. The number of sentences is unimportant; however, the paragraph should be long enough to develop the main idea clearly.

Divide the following text into paragraphs:

The history of Britain spans many centuries, and its origins are lost in the mists of time. In its earliest phase Britain was linked to Europe by a land-bridge, and it was only gradually that Britain became an island, perhaps around 5000 B.C. The earliest known inhabitants of Britain were Paleolithic hunters, who have left little behind on the physical landscape except cave-dwellings and a few primitive earthworks and barrows. Gradually, however, perhaps around 4000 B.C., farming – agriculture and pastoralism – was introduced into Britain, and the Neolithic peoples who practised it have left behind far more in the way of artefacts and above all standing stones, barrows and tumuli, which marked out ancestral claims to property. There were also enclosures, which were centres of ritual and seasonal tribal feasting. From them developed, late in the third millennium, more clearly ceremonial ditch-enclosed earthworks known as henge monuments, some of them of great size. Thus British Neolithic culture developed its own individuality. One very distinctive ethnic group that settled in Britain in Neolithic times was a curly black-haired type whose descendants are to be found in parts of Wales and Cornwall, and whose counterparts may be sought in northern Spain. The next wave of settlers (arriving around 2300 B.C., and the first to leave behind some truly impressive archaeological remains) is the mysterious Beaker Folk, a Late-Neolithic and Early-Bronze Age people that extended over much of western Europe some 4000 years ago and was responsible for the transformation of Stonehenge, Britain's most important historic site. Magnificent though this structure is, not least from the technical viewpoint, its exact function is shrouded in mystery, as are the origins of the builders. The Beaker Folk are identifiable mainly because of the metallurgy that they introduced and their practice of burying their dead in individual graves, often with the "beakers". The next settlers were mainly Celts, who colonised Britain in successive waves, the earliest being the representatives of the Iron-Age Hallstatt and Urnfield cultures (700-500 B.C.). Some of the first hill-forts in Britain were constructed in this period, suggesting powerful chieftains and conditions of strife. These Celtic settlers were followed by those of the highly sophisticated La Tene culture (as from 300 B.C.) and by the Belgae (c. 150 B.C.), who settled above all in Southern England. By 200 B.C. Britain had fully developed its insular, Celtic character. The next great phase of settlement is the Roman colonisation of Britain, which began in 43 A.D. and lasted until the early fifth century, and which was confined to England and Wales. Several 40 Roman authors have written about Britain, and we also possess a wealth of archeological and numismatic evidence from that period.

The topic sentence

All paragraphs have a topic sentence and supporting sentences, and some paragraphs also have a concluding sentence. The topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. It not only names the topic of the paragraph, but it also limits the topic to one specific area that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph. A topic sentence is supposed to be complete and neither too general nor too specific.

Read the sentences in each group, and decide which sentence is the best topic sentence. Then, Decide what is wrong with the other sentences. They may be too general, or they may be too specific, or they may be incomplete sentences. The first one has been done for you as an example.

A. A lunar eclipse is an omen of a coming disaster. – too specific

- B. Superstitions have been around forever. – too general
- C. People hold many superstitious beliefs about the moon. – best

1.

- A. The history of astronomy is interesting.
- B. Ice age people recorded the appearance of new moons by making scratches in animal bones.
- C. For example, Stonehenge in Britain, built 3,500 years ago to track the movement of the sun.
- D. Ancient people observed and recorded lunar and solar events in different ways.

2.

- A. It is hard to know which foods are safe to eat nowadays.
- B. In some large ocean fish, there are high levels of mercury.
- C. Undercooked chicken and hamburger may carry E. coli bacteria.
- D. Food safety is an important issue.

3.

- A. Hybrid cars are more economical to operate than gasoline-powered cars.
- B. Hybrid cars are very popular.
- C. Hybrid cars have good fuel economy because a computer under the hood decides to run the electric motor, the small gasoline engine, or the two together.
- D. Hybrid cars are popular because of their fuel economy.

4.

- A. The North American Catawba Indians of the Southeast and the Tlingit of the Northwest both see the rainbow as a kind of bridge between heaven and earth.
- B. A rainbow seen from an aeroplane is a complete circle.
- C. Many cultures interpret rainbows in positive ways.
- D. Rainbows are beautiful.

Write topic sentences for the following paragraphs.

1.

For example, English speakers who live in a warm climate may take an afternoon *siesta* on an outdoor *patio* without realizing that these are Spanish words. In their gardens, they may enjoy the fragrance of *jasmine* flowers, a word that came into English from Persian. They may even relax on a *chaise* while snacking on *yogurt*, words of French and Turkish origin, respectively. At night, they may *shampoo* their hair and put on *pyjamas*, words from the Hindi language of India.

2.

In some European universities, students are not required to attend classes. In fact, professors in Germany generally do not know the names of the students enrolled in their courses. In Poland, however, students are required to attend all classes and may be penalized if they do not. Furthermore, in the German system, students usually take just one comprehensive examination at the end of their entire four or five years of study. In Poland, on the other hand, students usually have numerous quizzes, tests, and homework assignments, and they almost always have to take a final examination in each course at the end of each semester.

3.

For example, the Eskimos, living in a treeless region of snow and ice, sometimes built temporary homes out of thick blocks of ice. People who lived in deserts, on the other hand, used the most available materials, mud or clay, which provide insulation from the heat. In Northern Europe, Russia, and other areas of the world where forests are plentiful, people usually constructed their homes out of wood. In the islands of the South Pacific, where there is an abundant supply of bamboo and palm, people used these tough, fibrous plants to build their homes.

Supporting sentences

Supporting sentences explain or prove the topic sentence. One of the biggest problems in student writing is that student writers often fail to support their ideas adequately. They need to use specific details to be thorough and convincing. There are several kinds of specific supporting details: examples, statistics, and quotations.

Although we all possess the same physical organs for sensing the world – eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, noses for smelling, skin for feeling, and mouths for tasting – our perception of the world depends to a great extent on the language we speak, according to a famous hypothesis proposed by linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They hypothesized that language is like a pair of eyeglasses through which we “see” the world in a particular way. A classic example of the relationship between language and perception is the word *snow*. Eskimo languages have as many as 32 different words for snow. For instance, the Eskimos have different words for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed as hard as ice, slushy snow, wind-driven snow, and what we might call “cornmeal” snow. The ancient Aztec languages of Mexico, in contrast, used only one word to mean snow, cold, and ice. Thus, if the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is correct and we can perceive only things that we have words for, the Aztecs perceived snow, cold, and ice as one and the same phenomenon.

1. What is the main idea of this paragraph? Highlight the part of the topic sentence that expresses the main idea.
2. What examples does the writer use to support this idea?
3. What words and phrases introduce the examples?

The concluding sentence

A concluding sentence serves two purposes:

1. It signals the end of the paragraph.
2. It leaves the reader with the most important ideas to remember. It can do this in two ways:
 - By summarizing the main points of the paragraph OR
 - By repeating the topic sentence in different words

A paragraph does not always need a concluding sentence. For single paragraphs, especially long ones, a concluding sentence is helpful to the reader because it is a reminder of the important points. However, a concluding sentence is not needed for every paragraph in a multi-paragraph essay.

Add a concluding sentence to these paragraphs:

You can be a good conversationalist by being a good listener. When you are conversing with someone, pay close attention to the speaker's words while looking at his or her face. Show your interest by smiling and nodding. Furthermore, do not interrupt while someone is speaking; it is impolite to do so. If you have a good story, wait until the speaker is finished. Also, watch your body language; it can affect your communication whether you are the speaker or the listener. For instance, do not sit slumped in a chair or make nervous hand and foot movements. Be relaxed and bend your body slightly forward to show interest in the person and the conversation.

Modern communication technology is driving workers in the corporate world crazy. They feel buried under the large number of messages they receive daily. In addition to telephone calls, office workers receive dozens of e-mail and voice mail messages daily. In one company, in fact, managers receive an average of 100 messages a day. Because they do not have enough time to respond to these messages during office hours, it is common for them to do so in the evenings or on weekends at home.

Decide on the order in which the sentences should be arranged so as to form a paragraph. Make any other necessary changes.

A.

Britain's lively capital, with a population of eight million, is the perfect place to live and study. Overall, London is probably the best place in the world to study. Comfortable accommodation is always available, and transport is provided by the reliable underground railway system. London is an ideal city for students. Another advantage is the fact that London is multi-cultural, which makes it easier for foreign students to fit in.

B.

The Romans were the first people to build a bridge near the position of today's Tower Bridge. Its dominance is due to its strategic site near the lowest crossing point of the River Thames. London has been the English capital for over 1,000 years. Over 500 years ago the area below the bridge had become a major river port for ships trading with Europe. For many centuries it has been the centre of the country's economic, cultural and social life.

C.

The cost of travel and accommodation adds significantly to their expenses. Every year large numbers of students travel abroad to study at university. Increasing numbers of universities are offering tuition by the internet, and this has many advantages for students. In the future most students are likely to stay at home and study in front of a computer. But they could save a lot of money by studying their courses on-line, using the internet and email. Most of them spend thousands of pounds on their degree courses.

D.

Regrettably, Antarctica has always faced the problem of the pollution in the ice and snow. The remains of very early expeditions at the beginning of the twentieth century have acquired historical value and will be preserved.

As a result some research stations are surrounded by the rubbish of nearly 60 years' operations.

In the past, snowfall slowly covered the waste left behind, but now, possibly due to global warming, the ice is thinning and these are being exposed.

Although untouched compared with other regions in the world, the bitter cold of Antarctica means that the normal process of decay is prevented.

Before the last century no humans had visited Antarctica, and even today the vast continent has a winter population of fewer than 200 people.

In 1991, the countries using Antarctica agreed a treaty on waste disposal, under which everything is to be taken home, and this has improved the situation.

Despite popular belief, the polar continent is really a desert, with less precipitation than the Sahara. However, the scientists do not want everything removed.