Ways to Develop a Paragraph

Before we talk about ways to develop a paragraph, there are two terms I'd like to mention: *analysis* and *synthesis*. These are words that recur frequently in academic discourse. What does it mean to analyze or synthesize a topic? Let's look at analysis first.

If we type in 'define:analysis', we get "an investigation of the component parts of a whole and their relations in making up the whole" and several other more technical definitions.

But you get the idea—analysis, from the Greek ανάλυση, is taking something apart to have a close look at it.

Now I'll type in 'define:synthesis', and we get "the combination of ideas into a complex whole" and "deduction: reasoning from the general to the particular (or from cause to effect)", and there is a definition specific to chemistry.

So synthesis, from the Greek σύνθεση, is putting the parts back together, and when you're thinking and writing, you put them back together in new ways to get new ideas.

Okay, back to the paragraph. I suggested earlier that you ask your paragraphs what they are doing to support the thesis of your paper. Here are seven really basic ways that paragraphs might do something useful:

1. Narrate or tell a story
2. Describe sensory detail
3. Outline a process
4. Give examples
5. Compare and contrast
6. Define
7. Show a cause-and-effect relationship.

In a sense, every good piece of writing tells a story. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end presented in a way that keeps the attention of your audience. In storytelling, or in a short story or novel, it's the literal account of events we want, with all of the juicy bits.

In academic writing, it's a good rule of thumb to use personal anecdotes and description of sensory detail only when you really need to. In fact, each of the strategies I just listed should be used only when appropriate to the topic.

A descriptive pattern is characterized by vivid sensory description. It uses sense words like *bitter, light, bright, pungent, loud*; vivid action verbs like *dive, drip, rip*; and transitions of space like *here, there, to the left, up* to give sense impressions of a scene.

This pattern of development is useful when you want to create a dominant sensory impression. However, many academic papers call for analysis and synthesis, and although description can contribute to that type of development, use it sparingly to make room for more analytical paragraphs.

Click on the link to the left for samples of descriptive paragraphs.

Note that some instructors use the word *describe* in a more general sense to mean "paraphrase" or "define." For example, "Describe four ways in which communication has changed over the past 100 years" is not asking for sensory detail, but for facts. So, whenever your instructor asks you to "describe" or use description in your essay, it's a good idea to ask what he or she means.

A process explains a procedure or how something works, for example, how to make toast or how a toaster works.

A procedure uses enumeration (for example, *first, second, third*) or time (for example, *then, next*, *finally*) or both. This is the right pattern of development when you want to help your readers understand the steps in a procedure or to give instructions.

Any paragraph describing a process relies on clear, complete, and accurate communication of the steps or parts to your readers.

Here's a tip on writing instructions: For each new step, tell the reader what to do using an imperative verb form followed by the result of the action and any related information as appropriate. For example:

1. *Place* the frozen bread into the slot labeled "Single Slice."
2. *Depress* the handle that lowers the bread until it clicks. The toaster elements will begin to heat.
3. When the toast pops up, *remove* it from the toaster.

Enough of that! Click on the link to the left for a sample of a process paragraph.

Using examples—or one longer, extended example—to support the topic sentence is one way to provide evidence for your thesis. You start with a general statement—the topic sentence—and then add specific instances—supporting details—as proof. Good examples are usually quite persuasive and worth the trouble it takes to find them.

One way is to simply do an Internet search using relevant terms as we did for the paragraph on gambling. Be careful, though. You could end up with something spurious, so be sure to cross-check your facts. If you search an academic library database rather than the entire Web, you are more likely to come up with something appropriate for an academic paper.

Click on the link to the left for a sample of a paragraph developed by giving examples.

Comparison and contrast is a useful pattern of development when you want to help readers understand a concept by pointing out the similarities and differences between it and another concept.

The comparison is usually developed either by analyzing all features of one concept and then comparing them to the features of the other—a block comparison method—or by analyzing each point of comparison—a point-by-point method. Keep in mind that the comparison is simply a means to an end and that the conclusion of the paragraph should be *drawn from* your comparison.

A paragraph of definition aims to give a complete, working definition of a term, concept or idea in your paper. One of the central features of this pattern is that it tells both what the term is and what it isn't; that is, it defines the boundaries of a term so your readers can better understand it.

This pattern is useful when you are introducing new or specialized terms to your readers, or when you need to define a key concept in your thesis. For example, if you were writing a paper on the role that propaganda played in the Nazi takeover of Germany, you might want to begin by defining the features of propaganda *as they relate to the thesis of the paper.*

A classical approach to defining terms names the term and determines the class to which it belongs. Then, the differences between the term and others in its class are named. Thus, if you were defining *propaganda,* you might place it in a larger class of communication acts, which would include advertisements, reports, and magazine articles and then try to determine what differentiates propaganda from these other types of communication. Through this analysis, you could come up with a definition of the term that might look like this: *Propaganda is mass communication that deceives or distorts truth to further political goals.*

Click on the link to the left for a sample of a paragraph developed by definition.

Cause-and-effect paragraphs analyze the causes and effects of something or the relationship between both. As I mentioned earlier, one of the definitions of 'synthesis' is deduction, or, reasoning from the general to the particular, or from cause to effect. If you want to know the "why" of something—a process, an event, a concept—then this is a useful pattern.

This pattern requires transitions of logic, for example, *thus, therefore, consequently, as a result,* and words and phrases of cause and effect, for example, *because, for the reason that, given that, in effect.*

Be careful, though, when you're making statements about cause and effect. There may be more than one cause to a particular effect. On the other hand, if there is more than one effect, don't assume they all arose from the same cause. To be sure there is a connection between the causes and effects you are analyzing, ask questions like "Is this the only thing that could cause this effect?" and "Is this the only possible effect this cause can have?" and "Was this cause sufficient to result in this effect?"

For example, if we find information that correlates gambling and satisfaction with life for people over 65, that doesn't mean that gambling causes the satisfaction. Other factors, such

as money, time, and good health to travel to casinos and socialize, are more likely to account for general satisfaction with life. If you use published academic studies as sources of information, they will usually present their findings in very cautious language. Be sure you aren't claiming any causal relationships that your sources aren't claiming. It's always important to keep in mind the difference between correlation and cause.

Click on the link to the left for a sample of cause-and-effect paragraphs.

Before you go on, you may want to try the self test directly below this video to see what you remember about the patterns of paragraph development.