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Chapter 5

Writing Paragraphs: Separating Ideas and Shaping Content

5.1 Purpose, Audience, Tone, and Content

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the four common academic purposes.
2. Identify audience, tone, and content.
3. Apply purpose, audience, tone, and content to a specific assignment.

Imagine reading one long block of text, with each idea blurring into the next. Even if you are reading a thrilling novel or an interesting news article, you will likely lose interest in what the author has to say very quickly. During the writing process, it is helpful to position yourself as a reader. Ask yourself whether you can focus easily on each point you make. One technique that effective writers use is to begin a fresh paragraph for each new idea they introduce.

Paragraphs separate ideas into logical, manageable chunks. One paragraph focuses on only one main idea and presents coherent sentences to support that one point. Because all the sentences in one paragraph support the same point, a paragraph may stand on its own. To create longer assignments and to discuss more than one point, writers group together paragraphs.

Three elements shape the content of each paragraph:

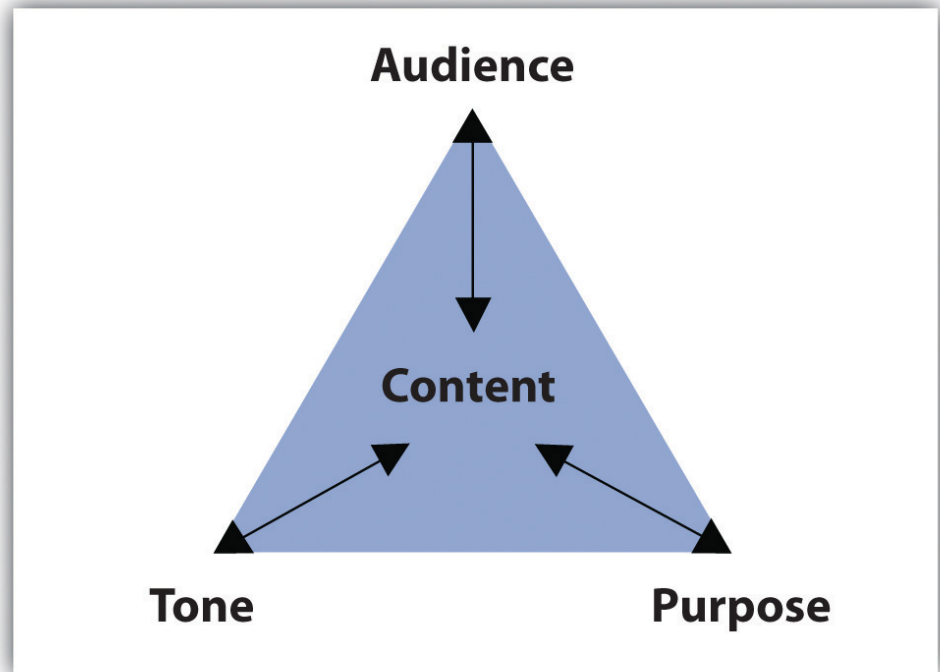
1. **Purpose**¹. The reason the writer composes the paragraph.
2. **Tone**². The attitude the writer conveys about the paragraph's subject.
3. **Audience**³. The individual or group whom the writer intends to address.

1. Identifies the reason(s) why a writer creates a document. The common academic purposes are summary, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

2. Identifies a writer's attitude toward his or her subject and audience.

3. Identifies the individual(s) or group(s) whom the writer intends to address.

Figure 5.1 Purpose, Audience, Tone, and Content Triangle



The assignment's purpose, audience, and tone dictate what the paragraph covers and how it will support one main point. This section covers how purpose, audience, and tone affect reading and writing paragraphs.

Identifying Common Academic Purposes

The purpose for a piece of writing identifies the reason you write a particular document. Basically, the purpose of a piece of writing answers the question "Why?" For example, why write a play? To entertain a packed theater. Why write instructions to the babysitter? To inform him or her of your schedule and rules. Why write a letter to your congressman? To persuade him to address your community's needs.

In academic settings, the reasons for writing fulfill four main purposes: to summarize, to analyze, to synthesize, and to evaluate. You will encounter these four purposes not only as you read for your classes but also as you read for work or pleasure. Because reading and writing work together, your writing skills will improve as you read. To learn more about reading in the writing process, see [Chapter 7 "The Writing Process: How Do I Begin?"](#).

Eventually, your instructors will ask you to complete assignments specifically designed to meet one of the four purposes. As you will see, the purpose for writing will guide you through each part of the paper, helping you make decisions about content and style. For now, identifying these purposes by reading paragraphs will prepare you to write individual paragraphs and to build longer assignments.

Summary Paragraphs

A **summary**⁴ shrinks a large amount of information into only the essentials. You probably summarize events, books, and movies daily. Think about the last blockbuster movie you saw or the last novel you read. Chances are, at some point in a casual conversation with a friend, coworker, or classmate, you compressed all the action in a two-hour film or in a two-hundred-page book into a brief description of the major plot movements. While in conversation, you probably described the major highlights, or the main points in just a few sentences, using your own vocabulary and manner of speaking.

Similarly, a summary paragraph condenses a long piece of writing into a smaller paragraph by extracting only the vital information. A summary uses only the writer's own words. Like the summary's purpose in daily conversation, the purpose of an academic summary paragraph is to maintain all the essential information from a longer document. Although shorter than the original piece of writing, a summary should still communicate all the key points and key support. In other words, summary paragraphs should be succinct and to the point.

4. A purpose for writing that condenses a long piece of writing into a smaller paragraph by extracting only the vital information. Writers use their own words to create summaries.

According to the Monitoring the Future Study, almost two-thirds of 10th-grade students reported having tried alcohol at least once in their lifetime, and two-fifths reported having been drunk at least once (Johnston et al. 2006a). Among 12th-grade students, these rates had risen to over three-quarters who reported having tried alcohol at least once and nearly three-fifths who reported having been drunk at least once. In terms of current alcohol use, 33.2 percent of the Nation's 10th graders and 47.0 percent of 12th graders reported having used alcohol at least once in the past 30 days: 17.6 percent and 30.2 percent, respectively, reported having been drunk in the past 30 days; 21.0 percent and 28.1 percent, respectively, reported having had five or more drinks in a row in the past 2 weeks (sometimes called binge drinking); and 1.3 percent and 3.1 percent, respectively, reported daily alcohol use (Johnston et al. 2006a).

Alcohol consumption continues to escalate after high school. In fact, eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds have the highest levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol dependence of any age group. In the first 2 years after high school, lifetime prevalence of alcohol use (based on 2005 follow-up surveys from the Monitoring the Future Study) was 81.8 percent, 30-day use prevalence was 59 percent, and binge-drinking prevalence was 36.3 percent (Johnston et al. 2006b). Of note, college students on average drink more than their noncollege peers, even though they drank less during high school than those who did not go on to college (Johnston et al. 2006a,b; Schulenberg and Maggs 2002). For example, in 2005, the rate of binge drinking for college students (1 to 4 years beyond high school) was 40.1 percent, whereas the rate for their noncollege age mates was 35.1 percent.

Alcohol use and problem drinking in late adolescence vary by sociodemographic characteristics. For example, the prevalence of alcohol use is higher for boys than for girls, higher for White and Hispanic adolescents than for African-American adolescents, and higher for those living in the north and north central United States than for those living in the South and West. Some of these relationships change with early adulthood, however. For example, although alcohol use in high school tends to be higher in areas with lower population density (i.e., rural areas) than in more densely populated areas, this relationship reverses during early adulthood (Johnston et al., 2006 a,b). Lower economic status (i.e., lower educational level of parents) is associated with more alcohol use during the early high school years; by the end of high school, and during the transition to adulthood, this relationship changes, and youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds consume greater amounts of alcohol.

A summary of the report should present all the main points and supporting details in brief. Read the following summary of the report written by a student:

Brown et al. inform us that by tenth grade, nearly two-thirds of students have tried alcohol at least once, and by twelfth grade this figure increases to over three-quarters of students. After high school, alcohol consumption increases further, and college-aged students have the highest levels of alcohol consumption and dependence of any age group. Alcohol use varies according to factors such as gender, race, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.

Some of these trends may reverse in early adulthood. For example, adolescents of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to consume alcohol during high school years, whereas youth from higher socioeconomic status are more likely to consume alcohol in the years after high school.

Notice how the summary retains the key points made by the writers of the original report but omits most of the statistical data. Summaries need not contain all the

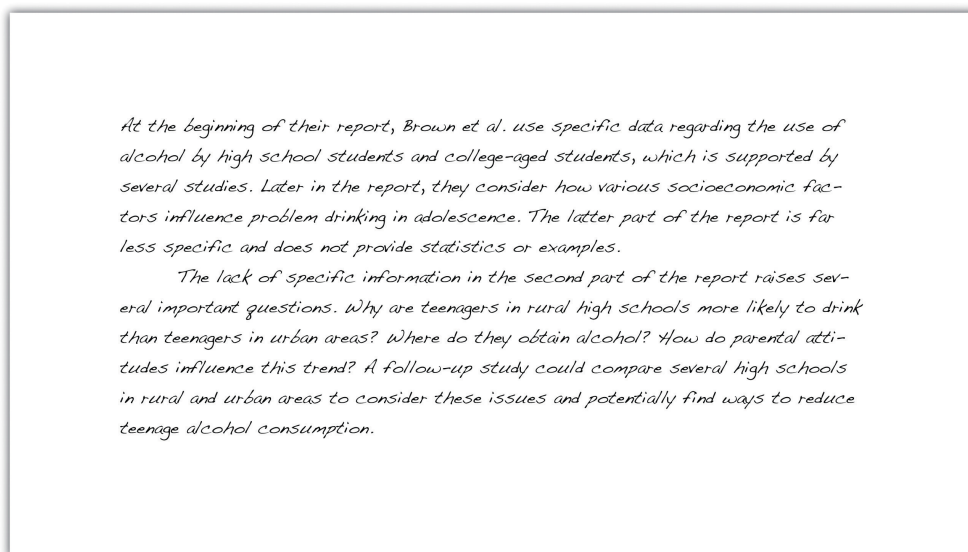
specific facts and figures in the original document; they provide only an overview of the essential information.

Analysis Paragraphs

An **analysis**⁵ separates complex materials in their different parts and studies how the parts relate to one another. The analysis of simple table salt, for example, would require a deconstruction of its parts—the elements sodium (Na) and chloride (Cl). Then, scientists would study how the two elements interact to create the compound NaCl, or sodium chloride, which is also called simple table salt.

Analysis is not limited to the sciences, of course. An analysis paragraph in academic writing fulfills the same purpose. Instead of deconstructing compounds, academic analysis paragraphs typically deconstruct documents. An analysis takes apart a primary source (an essay, a book, an article, etc.) point by point. It communicates the main points of the document by examining individual points and identifying how the points relate to one another.

Take a look at a student's analysis of the journal report.



5. A purpose for writing that separates the individual points in a piece of writing and studies how the points relate to one another.

Notice how the analysis does not simply repeat information from the original report, but considers how the points within the report relate to one another. By doing this, the student uncovers a discrepancy between the points that are backed up by statistics and those that require additional information. Analyzing a document involves a close examination of each of the individual parts and how they work together.

Synthesis Paragraphs

A **synthesis**⁶ combines two or more items to create an entirely new item. Consider the electronic musical instrument aptly named the synthesizer. It looks like a simple keyboard but displays a dashboard of switches, buttons, and levers. With the flip of a few switches, a musician may combine the distinct sounds of a piano, a flute, or a guitar—or any other combination of instruments—to create a new sound. The purpose of the synthesizer is to blend together the notes from individual instruments to form new, unique notes.

The purpose of an academic synthesis is to blend individual documents into a new document. An academic synthesis paragraph considers the main points from one or more pieces of writing and links the main points together to create a new point, one not replicated in either document.

Take a look at a student's synthesis of several sources about underage drinking.

In their 2009 report, Brown et al. consider the rates of alcohol consumption among high school and college-aged students and various sociodemographic factors that affect these rates. However, this report is limited to assessing the rates of underage drinking, rather than considering methods of decreasing these rates. Several other studies, as well as original research among college students, provide insight into how these rates may be reduced.

One study, by Spoth, Greenberg, and Turrisi (2009) considers the impact of various types of interventions as a method for reducing alcohol consumption among minors. They conclude that although family-focused interventions for adolescents aged ten to fifteen have shown promise, there is a serious lack of interventions available for college-aged students who do not attend college. These students are among the highest risk level for alcohol abuse, a fact supported by Brown et al.

I did my own research and interviewed eight college students, four men and four women. I asked them when they first tried alcohol and what factors encouraged them to drink. All four men had tried alcohol by the age of thirteen. Three of the women had also tried alcohol by thirteen and the fourth had tried alcohol by fifteen. All eight students said that peer pressure, boredom, and the thrill of trying something illegal were motivating factors. These results support the research of Brown et al. However, they also raise an interesting point. If boredom is a motivating factor for underage drinking, maybe additional after school programs or other community measures could be introduced to dissuade teenagers from underage drinking. Based on my sources, further research is needed to show true preventative measures for teenage alcohol consumption.

6. A purpose for writing that considers the main points from one or more pieces of writing and links them together to create a new point.

Notice how the synthesis paragraphs consider each source and use information from each to create a new thesis. A good synthesis does not repeat information; the writer uses a variety of sources to create a new idea.

Evaluation Paragraphs

An **evaluation**⁷ judges the value of something and determines its worth. Evaluations in everyday experiences are often not only dictated by set standards but also influenced by opinion and prior knowledge. For example, at work, a supervisor may complete an employee evaluation by judging his subordinate's performance based on the company's goals. If the company focuses on improving communication, the supervisor will rate the employee's customer service according to a standard scale. However, the evaluation still depends on the supervisor's opinion and prior experience with the employee. The purpose of the evaluation is to determine how well the employee performs at his or her job.

An academic evaluation communicates your opinion, and its justifications, about a document or a topic of discussion. Evaluations are influenced by your reading of the document, your prior knowledge, and your prior experience with the topic or issue. Because an evaluation incorporates your point of view and reasons for your point of view, it typically requires more critical thinking and a combination of summary, analysis, and synthesis skills. Thus evaluation paragraphs often follow summary, analysis, and synthesis paragraphs. Read a student's evaluation paragraph.

Throughout their report, Brown et al. provide valuable statistics that highlight the frequency of alcohol use among high school and college students. They use several reputable sources to support their points. However, the report focuses solely on the frequency of alcohol use and how it varies according to certain sociodemographic factors. Other sources, such as Spoth, Greenberg, and Turrisi's study (2009) and the survey I conducted among college students, examine the reasons for alcohol use among young people and offer suggestions as to how to reduce the rates. Nonetheless, I think that Brown et al. offer a useful set of statistics from which to base further research into alcohol use among high school and college students.

Notice how the paragraph incorporates the student's personal judgment within the evaluation. Evaluating a document requires prior knowledge that is often based on additional research.

7. A purpose for writing that communicates a writer's opinion about a document or a topic and the justifications for that opinion.

Tip

When reviewing directions for assignments, look for the verbs *summarize*, *analyze*, *synthesize*, or *evaluate*. Instructors often use these words to clearly indicate the assignment's purpose. These words will cue you on how to complete the assignment because you will know its exact purpose.

EXERCISE 1

Read the following paragraphs about four films and then identify the purpose of each paragraph.

1. This film could easily have been cut down to less than two hours. By the final scene, I noticed that most of my fellow moviegoers were snoozing in their seats and were barely paying attention to what was happening on screen. Although the director sticks diligently to the book, he tries too hard to cram in all the action, which is just too ambitious for such a detail-oriented story. If you want my advice, read the book and give the movie a miss.
2. During the opening scene, we learn that the character Laura is adopted and that she has spent the past three years desperately trying to track down her real parents. Having exhausted all the usual options—adoption agencies, online searches, family trees, and so on—she is on the verge of giving up when she meets a stranger on a bus. The chance encounter leads to a complicated chain of events that ultimately result in Laura getting her lifelong wish. But is it really what she wants? Throughout the rest of the film, Laura discovers that sometimes the past is best left where it belongs.
3. To create the feeling of being gripped in a vice, the director, May Lee, uses a variety of elements to gradually increase the tension. The creepy, haunting melody that subtly enhances the earlier scenes becomes ever more insistent, rising to a disturbing crescendo toward the end of the movie. The desperation of the actors, combined with the claustrophobic atmosphere and tight camera angles create a realistic firestorm, from which there is little hope of escape. Walking out of the theater at the end feels like staggering out of a Roman dungeon.
4. The scene in which Campbell and his fellow prisoners assist the guards in shutting down the riot immediately strikes the viewer as unrealistic. Based on the recent reports on prison riots in both Detroit and California, it seems highly unlikely that a posse of hardened criminals will intentionally help their captors at the risk of inciting future revenge from other inmates. Instead, both news reports and psychological studies indicate that prisoners who do not actively participate in a riot will go back to their cells and avoid conflict altogether. Examples of this lack of attention to detail occur throughout the film, making it almost unbearable to watch.

Collaboration

Share with a classmate and compare your answers.

Writing at Work

Thinking about the purpose of writing a report in the workplace can help focus and structure the document. A summary should provide colleagues with a factual overview of your findings without going into too much specific detail. In contrast, an evaluation should include your personal opinion, along with supporting evidence, research, or examples to back it up. Listen for words such as *summarize*, *analyze*, *synthesize*, or *evaluate* when your boss asks you to complete a report to help determine a purpose for writing.

EXERCISE 2

Consider the essay most recently assigned to you. Identify the most effective academic purpose for the assignment.

My assignment: _____

My purpose: _____

Identifying the Audience

Imagine you must give a presentation to a group of executives in an office. Weeks before the big day, you spend time creating and rehearsing the presentation. You must make important, careful decisions not only about the content but also about your delivery. Will the presentation require technology to project figures and charts? Should the presentation define important words, or will the executives already know the terms? Should you wear your suit and dress shirt? The answers to these questions will help you develop an appropriate relationship with your audience, making them more receptive to your message.

Now imagine you must explain the same business concepts from your presentation to a group of high school students. Those important questions you previously answered may now require different answers. The figures and charts may be too sophisticated, and the terms will certainly require definitions. You may even

reconsider your outfit and sport a more casual look. Because the audience has shifted, your presentation and delivery will shift as well to create a new relationship with the new audience.

In these two situations, the audience—the individuals who will watch and listen to the presentation—plays a role in the development of presentation. As you prepare the presentation, you visualize the audience to anticipate their expectations and reactions. What you imagine affects the information you choose to present and how you will present it. Then, during the presentation, you meet the audience in person and discover immediately how well you perform.

Although the audience for writing assignments—your readers—may not appear in person, they play an equally vital role. Even in everyday writing activities, you identify your readers' characteristics, interests, and expectations before making decisions about what you write. In fact, thinking about audience has become so common that you may not even detect the audience-driven decisions.

For example, you update your status on a social networking site with the awareness of who will digitally follow the post. If you want to brag about a good grade, you may write the post to please family members. If you want to describe a funny moment, you may write with your friends' senses of humor in mind. Even at work, you send e-mails with an awareness of an unintended receiver who could intercept the message.

In other words, being aware of “invisible” readers is a skill you most likely already possess and one you rely on every day. Consider the following paragraphs. Which one would the author send to her parents? Which one would she send to her best friend?

Example A

Last Saturday, I volunteered at a local hospital. The visit was fun and rewarding. I even learned how to do cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR. Unfortunately, I think I caught a cold from one of the patients. This week, I will rest in bed and drink plenty of clear fluids. I hope I am well by next Saturday to volunteer again.

Example B

OMG! You won't believe this! My advisor forced me to do my community service hours at this hospital all weekend! We learned CPR but we did it on dummies, not even real peeps. And some kid sneezed on me and got me sick! I was so bored and sniffing all weekend; I hope I don't have to go back next week. I def do NOT want to miss the basketball tournament!

Most likely, you matched each paragraph to its intended audience with little hesitation. Because each paragraph reveals the author's relationship with her intended readers, you can identify the audience fairly quickly. When writing your own paragraphs, you must engage with your audience to build an appropriate relationship given your subject. Imagining your readers during each stage of the writing process will help you make decisions about your writing. Ultimately, the people you visualize will affect what and how you write.

Tip

While giving a speech, you may articulate an inspiring or critical message, but if you left your hair a mess and laced up mismatched shoes, your audience would not take you seriously. They may be too distracted by your appearance to listen to your words.

Similarly, grammar and sentence structure serve as the appearance of a piece of writing. Polishing your work using correct grammar will impress your readers and allow them to focus on what you have to say.

Because focusing on audience will enhance your writing, your process, and your finished product, you must consider the specific traits of your audience members. Use your imagination to anticipate the readers' demographics, education, prior knowledge, and expectations.

- **Demographics.** These measure important data about a group of people, such as their age range, their ethnicity, their religious beliefs, or their gender. Certain topics and assignments will require these kinds of considerations about your audience. For other topics and assignments, these measurements may not influence your writing in the end. Regardless, it is important to consider demographics when you begin to think about your purpose for writing.
- **Education.** Education considers the audience's level of schooling. If audience members have earned a doctorate degree, for example, you may need to elevate your style and use more formal language. Or, if audience members are still in college, you could write in a more relaxed style. An audience member's major or emphasis may also dictate your writing.
- **Prior knowledge.** This refers to what the audience already knows about your topic. If your readers have studied certain topics, they may already know some terms and concepts related to the topic. You may decide whether to define terms and explain concepts based on your audience's prior knowledge. Although you cannot peer inside the brains of your readers to discover their knowledge, you can make reasonable assumptions. For instance, a nursing major would presumably know more about health-related topics than a business major would.
- **Expectations.** These indicate what readers will look for while reading your assignment. Readers may expect consistencies in the assignment's appearance, such as correct grammar and traditional formatting like double-spaced lines and legible font. Readers may also have content-based expectations given the assignment's purpose and organization. In an essay titled "The Economics of Enlightenment: The Effects of Rising Tuition," for example, audience members may expect to read about the economic repercussions of college tuition costs.

EXERCISE 3

On your own sheet of paper, generate a list of characteristics under each category for each audience. This list will help you later when you read about tone and content.

1. Your classmates

◦ Demographics

◦ Education -----

◦ Prior knowledge

◦ Expectations

2. Your instructor

◦ Demographics

◦ Education -----

◦ Prior knowledge

◦ Expectations

3. The head of your academic department

◦ Demographics

◦ Education -----

◦ Prior knowledge

◦ Expectations

4. Now think about your next writing assignment. Identify the purpose (you may use the same purpose listed in [Note 5.12 "Exercise 2"](#)), and then identify the audience. Create a list of characteristics under each category.

My assignment:

My purpose: -----

My audience: -----

- Demographics

- Education -----

- Prior knowledge

- Expectations

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

Keep in mind that as your topic shifts in the writing process, your audience may also shift. For more information about the writing process, see [Chapter 7 "The Writing Process: How Do I Begin?"](#).

Also, remember that decisions about style depend on audience, purpose, and content. Identifying your audience's demographics, education, prior knowledge, and expectations will affect how you write, but purpose and content play an equally important role. The next subsection covers how to select an appropriate tone to match the audience and purpose.

Selecting an Appropriate Tone

Tone identifies a speaker's attitude toward a subject or another person. You may pick up a person's tone of voice fairly easily in conversation. A friend who tells you about her weekend may speak excitedly about a fun skiing trip. An instructor who means business may speak in a low, slow voice to emphasize her serious mood. Or, a coworker who needs to let off some steam after a long meeting may crack a sarcastic joke.

Just as speakers transmit emotion through voice, writers can transmit through writing a range of attitudes, from excited and humorous to somber and critical. These emotions create connections among the audience, the author, and the subject, ultimately building a relationship between the audience and the text. To stimulate these connections, writers intimate their attitudes and feelings with useful devices, such as sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and formal or informal language. Keep in mind that the writer's attitude should always appropriately match the audience and the purpose.

Read the following paragraph and consider the writer's tone. How would you describe the writer's attitude toward wildlife conservation?

Many species of plants and animals are disappearing right before our eyes. If we don't act fast, it might be too late to save them. Human activities, including pollution, deforestation, hunting, and overpopulation, are devastating the natural environment. Without our help, many species will not survive long enough for our children to see them in the wild. Take the tiger, for example. Today, tigers occupy just 7 percent of their historical range, and many local populations are already extinct. Hunted for their beautiful pelt and other body parts, the tiger population has plummeted from one hundred thousand in 1920 to just a few thousand. Contact your local wildlife conservation society today to find out how you can stop this terrible destruction.

EXERCISE 4

Think about the assignment and purpose you selected in [Note 5.12 "Exercise 2"](#), and the audience you selected in [Note 5.16 "Exercise 3"](#). Now, identify the tone you would use in the assignment.

My assignment: _____

My purpose: _____

My audience: _____

My tone: _____

Choosing Appropriate, Interesting Content

Content⁸ refers to all the written substance in a document. After selecting an audience and a purpose, you must choose what information will make it to the page. Content may consist of examples, statistics, facts, anecdotes, testimonies, and observations, but no matter the type, the information must be appropriate and interesting for the audience and purpose. An essay written for third graders that summarizes the legislative process, for example, would have to contain succinct and simple content.

Content is also shaped by tone. When the tone matches the content, the audience will be more engaged, and you will build a stronger relationship with your readers. Consider that audience of third graders. You would choose simple content that the audience will easily understand, and you would express that content through an enthusiastic tone. The same considerations apply to all audiences and purposes.

8. All the written substance in a document.

EXERCISE 5

Match the content in the box to the appropriate audience and purpose. On your own sheet of paper, write the correct letter next to the number.

1. Whereas economist Holmes contends that the financial crisis is far from over, the presidential advisor Jones points out that it is vital to catch the first wave of opportunity to increase market share. We can use elements of both experts' visions. Let me explain how.
2. In 2000, foreign money flowed into the United States, contributing to easy credit conditions. People bought larger houses than they could afford, eventually defaulting on their loans as interest rates rose.
3. The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, known by most of us as the humungous government bailout, caused mixed reactions. Although supported by many political leaders, the statute provoked outrage among grassroots groups. In their opinion, the government was actually rewarding banks for their appalling behavior.

1. Audience: An instructor

Purpose: To analyze the reasons behind the 2007 financial crisis

Content: _____

2. Audience: Classmates

Purpose: To summarize the effects of the \$700 billion government bailout

Content: _____

3. Audience: An employer

Purpose: To synthesize two articles on preparing businesses for economic recovery

Content: _____

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

EXERCISE 6

Using the assignment, purpose, audience, and tone from [Note 5.18 "Exercise 4"](#), generate a list of content ideas. Remember that content consists of examples, statistics, facts, anecdotes, testimonies, and observations.

My assignment: _____

My purpose: _____

My audience: _____

My tone: _____

My content ideas: _____

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Paragraphs separate ideas into logical, manageable chunks of information.
- The content of each paragraph and document is shaped by purpose, audience, and tone.
- The four common academic purposes are to summarize, to analyze, to synthesize, and to evaluate.
- Identifying the audience's demographics, education, prior knowledge, and expectations will affect how and what you write.
- Devices such as sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and formal or informal language communicate tone and create a relationship between the writer and his or her audience.
- Content may consist of examples, statistics, facts, anecdotes, testimonies, and observations. All content must be appropriate and interesting for the audience, purpose and tone.

5.2 Effective Means for Writing a Paragraph

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify characteristics of a good topic sentence.
2. Identify the three parts of a developed paragraph.
3. Apply knowledge of topic sentences and parts of a developed paragraph in an assignment.

Now that you have identified common purposes for writing and learned how to select appropriate content for a particular audience, you can think about the structure of a paragraph in greater detail. Composing an effective paragraph requires a method similar to building a house. You may have the finest content, or materials, but if you do not arrange them in the correct order, then the final product will not hold together very well.

A strong paragraph contains three distinct components:

1. **Topic sentence**⁹. The topic sentence is the main idea of the paragraph.
2. **Body**¹⁰. The body is composed of the supporting sentences that develop the main point.
3. **Conclusion**¹¹. The conclusion is the final sentence that summarizes the main point.

9. The sentence in a paragraph that controls the point of the paragraph. A topic sentence is most often located at the beginning of a paragraph, and it makes the structure of a text and the writer's basic arguments easy to locate and comprehend.

10. The middle part of a paragraph containing supporting sentences. The body of the paragraph provides additional information about the topic sentence.

11. The final sentence in a paragraph that summarizes the main point.

The foundation of a good paragraph is the topic sentence, which expresses the main idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence relates to the thesis, or main point, of the essay (see [Chapter 8 "Writing Essays: From Start to Finish"](#) for more information about thesis statements) and guides the reader by signposting what the paragraph is about. All the sentences in the rest of the paragraph should relate to the topic sentence.

This section covers the major components of a paragraph and examines how to develop an effective topic sentence.

Developing a Topic Sentence

Pick up any newspaper or magazine and read the first sentence of an article. Are you fairly confident that you know what the rest of the article is about? If so, you

have likely read the topic sentence. An effective topic sentence combines a main idea with the writer's personal attitude or opinion. It serves to orient the reader and provides an indication of what will follow in the rest of the paragraph. Read the following example.

Creating a national set of standards for math and English education will improve student learning in many states.

This topic sentence declares a favorable position for standardizing math and English education. After reading this sentence, a reader might reasonably expect the writer to provide supporting details and facts as to why standardizing math and English education might improve student learning in many states. If the purpose of the essay is actually to evaluate education in only one particular state, or to discuss math or English education specifically, then the topic sentence is misleading.

Tip

When writing a draft of an essay, allow a friend or colleague to read the opening line of your first paragraph. Ask your reader to predict what your paper will be about. If he or she is unable to guess your topic accurately, you should consider revising your topic sentence so that it clearly defines your purpose in writing.

Main Idea versus Controlling Idea

Topic sentences contain both a **main idea**¹² (the subject, or topic that the writer is discussing) and a **controlling idea**¹³ (the writer's specific stance on that subject). Just as a thesis statement includes an idea that controls a document's focus (as you will read about in [Chapter 7 "The Writing Process: How Do I Begin?"](#)), a topic sentence must also contain a controlling idea to direct the paragraph. Different writers may use the same main idea but can steer their paragraph in a number of different directions according to their stance on the subject. Read the following examples.

12. The topic discussed throughout the paragraph.
13. Indicates the writer's stance on the main idea of a paragraph. The controlling idea appears in the paragraph's topic sentence.

- Marijuana is a destructive influence on teens and causes long-term brain damage.
- The antinausea properties in marijuana are a lifeline for many cancer patients.
- Legalizing marijuana would create a higher demand for Class A and Class B drugs.

Although the main idea—marijuana—is the same in all three topic sentences, the controlling idea differs depending on the writer’s viewpoint.

EXERCISE 1

Circle the main idea and underline the controlling idea in each of the following topic sentences.

1. Exercising three times a week is the only way to maintain good physical health.
2. Sexism and racism are still rampant in today’s workplace.
3. Raising the legal driving age to twenty-one would decrease road traffic accidents.
4. Owning a business is the only way to achieve financial success.
5. Dog owners should be prohibited from taking their pets on public beaches.

Characteristics of a Good Topic Sentence

Five characteristics define a good topic sentence:

1. A good topic sentence provides an accurate indication of what will follow in the rest of the paragraph.

Weak example. People rarely give firefighters the credit they deserve for such a physically and emotionally demanding job. (The paragraph is about a specific incident that involved firefighters; therefore, this topic sentence is too general.)

Stronger example. During the October riots, Unit 3B went beyond the call of duty. (This topic sentence is more specific and indicates that the

paragraph will contain information about a particular incident involving Unit 3B.)

2. A good topic sentence contains both a topic and a controlling idea or opinion.

Weak example. In this paper, I am going to discuss the rising suicide rate among young professionals. (This topic sentence provides a main idea, but it does not present a controlling idea, or thesis.)

Stronger example. The rising suicide rate among young professionals is a cause for immediate concern. (This topic sentence presents the writer's opinion on the subject of rising suicide rates among young professionals.)

3. A good topic sentence is clear and easy to follow.

Weak example. In general, writing an essay, thesis, or other academic or nonacademic document is considerably easier and of much higher quality if you first construct an outline, of which there are many different types. (This topic sentence includes a main idea and a controlling thesis, but both are buried beneath the confusing sentence structure and unnecessary vocabulary. These obstacles make it difficult for the reader to follow.)

Stronger example. Most forms of writing can be improved by first creating an outline. (This topic sentence cuts out unnecessary verbiage and simplifies the previous statement, making it easier for the reader to follow.)

4. A good topic sentence does not include supporting details.

Weak example. Salaries should be capped in baseball for many reasons, most importantly so we don't allow the same team to win year after year. (This topic sentence includes a supporting detail that should be included later in the paragraph to back up the main point.)

Stronger example. Introducing a salary cap would improve the game of baseball for many reasons. (This topic sentence omits the additional supporting detail so that it can be expanded upon later in the paragraph.)

5. A good topic sentence engages the reader by using interesting vocabulary.

Weak example. The military deserves better equipment. (This topic sentence includes a main idea and a controlling thesis, but the language is bland and unexciting.)

Stronger example. The appalling lack of resources provided to the military is outrageous and requires our immediate attention. (This topic sentence reiterates the same idea and controlling thesis, but adjectives such as *appalling* and *immediate* better engage the reader. These words also indicate the writer's tone.)

EXERCISE 2

Choose the most effective topic sentence from the following sentence pairs.

1. a. This paper will discuss the likelihood of the Democrats winning the next election.

b. To boost their chances of winning the next election, the Democrats need to listen to public opinion.
2. a. The unrealistic demands of union workers are crippling the economy for three main reasons.

b. Union workers are crippling the economy because companies are unable to remain competitive as a result of added financial pressure.
3. a. Authors are losing money as a result of technological advances.

b. The introduction of new technology will devastate the literary world.
4. a. Rap music is produced by untalented individuals with oversized egos.

b. This essay will consider whether talent is required in the rap music industry.

EXERCISE 3

Using the tips on developing effective topic sentences in this section, create a topic sentence on each of the following subjects. Remember to include a controlling idea as well as a main idea. Write your responses on your own sheet of paper.

1. An endangered species

2. The cost of fuel

3. The legal drinking age

4. A controversial film or novel

Writing at Work

When creating a workplace document, use the “top-down” approach—keep the topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph so that readers immediately understand the gist of the message. This method saves busy colleagues precious time and effort trying to figure out the main points and relevant details.

Headings are another helpful tool. In a text-heavy document, break up each paragraph with individual headings. These serve as useful navigation aids, enabling colleagues to skim through the document and locate paragraphs that are relevant to them.

Developing Paragraphs That Use Topic Sentences, Supporting Ideas, and Transitions Effectively

Learning how to develop a good topic sentence is the first step toward writing a solid paragraph. Once you have composed your topic sentence, you have a guideline for the rest of the paragraph. To complete the paragraph, a writer must support the topic sentence with additional information and summarize the main point with a concluding sentence.

This section identifies the three major structural parts of a paragraph and covers how to develop a paragraph using transitional words and phrases.

Identifying Parts of a Paragraph

An effective paragraph contains three main parts: a topic sentence, the body, and the concluding sentence. A topic sentence is often the first sentence of a paragraph. This chapter has already discussed its purpose—to express a main idea combined with the writer’s attitude about the subject. The body of the paragraph usually follows, containing supporting details. **Supporting sentences**¹⁴ help explain, prove, or enhance the topic sentence. The **concluding sentence**¹⁵ is the last sentence in the paragraph. It reminds the reader of the main point by restating it in different words.

14. A sentence in the middle part of the paragraph that helps explain, enhance, or prove the topic sentence.

15. The final sentence of a paragraph that summarizes the topic sentence using different words.

Figure 5.2 Paragraph Structure Graphic Organizer

Paragraph Structure Graphic Organizer

Topic Sentence
(main idea + personal opinion)

Body

Supporting Sentence

Supporting Sentence

Supporting Sentence

Supporting Sentence

Conclusion
(summary of main idea + personal opinion)

Concluding Sentence

Read the following paragraph. The topic sentence is underlined for you.

After reading the new TV guide this week I had just one thought—why are we still being bombarded with reality shows? This season, the plague of reality television continues to darken our airwaves. Along with the return of viewer favorites, we are to be cursed with yet another mindless creation. *Prisoner* follows the daily lives of eight suburban housewives who have chosen to be put in jail for the purposes of this fake psychological experiment. A preview for the first episode shows the usual tears and tantrums associated with reality television. I dread to think what producers will come up with next season, but if any of them are reading this blog—stop it! We’ve had enough reality television to last us a lifetime!

The first sentence of this paragraph is the topic sentence. It tells the reader that the paragraph will be about reality television shows, and it expresses the writer's distaste for these shows through the use of the word *bombarded*.

Each of the following sentences in the paragraph supports the topic sentence by providing further information about a specific reality television show. The final sentence is the concluding sentence. It reiterates the main point that viewers are bored with reality television shows by using different words from the topic sentence.

Paragraphs that begin with the topic sentence move from the general to the specific. They open with a general statement about a subject (reality shows) and then discuss specific examples (the reality show *Prisoner*). Most academic essays contain the topic sentence at the beginning of the first paragraph.

Now take a look at the following paragraph. The topic sentence is underlined for you.

Last year, a cat traveled 130 miles to reach its family, who had moved to another state and had left their pet behind. Even though it had never been to their new home, the cat was able to track down its former owners. A dog in my neighborhood can predict when its master is about to have a seizure. It makes sure that he does not hurt himself during an epileptic fit. Compared to many animals, our own senses are almost dull.

The last sentence of this paragraph is the topic sentence. It draws on specific examples (a cat that tracked down its owners and a dog that can predict seizures) and then makes a general statement that draws a conclusion from these examples (animals' senses are better than humans'). In this case, the supporting sentences are placed before the topic sentence and the concluding sentence is the same as the topic sentence.

This technique is frequently used in persuasive writing. The writer produces detailed examples as evidence to back up his or her point, preparing the reader to accept the concluding topic sentence as the truth.

Sometimes, the topic sentence appears in the middle of a paragraph. Read the following example. The topic sentence is underlined for you.

For many years, I suffered from severe anxiety every time I took an exam. Hours before the exam, my heart would begin pounding, my legs would shake, and sometimes I would become physically unable to move. Last year, I was referred to a specialist and finally found a way to control my anxiety—breathing exercises. It seems so simple, but by doing just a few breathing exercises a couple of hours before an exam, I gradually got my anxiety under control. The exercises help slow my heart rate and make me feel less anxious. Better yet, they require no pills, no equipment, and very little time. It's amazing how just breathing correctly has helped me learn to manage my anxiety symptoms.

In this paragraph, the underlined sentence is the topic sentence. It expresses the main idea—that breathing exercises can help control anxiety. The preceding sentences enable the writer to build up to his main point (breathing exercises can help control anxiety) by using a personal anecdote (how he used to suffer from anxiety). The supporting sentences then expand on how breathing exercises help the writer by providing additional information. The last sentence is the concluding sentence and restates how breathing can help manage anxiety.

Placing a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph is often used in creative writing. If you notice that you have used a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph in an academic essay, read through the paragraph carefully to make sure that it contains only one major topic. To read more about topic sentences and where they appear in paragraphs, see [Chapter 7 "The Writing Process: How Do I Begin?"](#).

Implied Topic Sentences

Some well-organized paragraphs do not contain a topic sentence at all. Instead of being directly stated, the main idea is implied in the content of the paragraph. Read the following example:

Heaving herself up the stairs, Luella had to pause for breath several times. She let out a wheeze as she sat down heavily in the wooden rocking chair. Tao approached her cautiously, as if she might crumble at the slightest touch. He studied her face, like parchment; stretched across the bones so finely he could almost see right through the skin to the decaying muscle underneath. Luella smiled a toothless grin.

Although no single sentence in this paragraph states the main idea, the entire paragraph focuses on one concept—that Luella is extremely old. The topic sentence is thus implied rather than stated. This technique is often used in descriptive or narrative writing. Implied topic sentences work well if the writer has a firm idea of what he or she intends to say in the paragraph and sticks to it. However, a paragraph loses its effectiveness if an implied topic sentence is too subtle or the writer loses focus.

Tip

Avoid using implied topic sentences in an informational document. Readers often lose patience if they are unable to quickly grasp what the writer is trying to say. The clearest and most efficient way to communicate in an informational document is to position the topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph.

EXERCISE 4

Identify the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence in the following paragraph.

The desert provides a harsh environment in which few mammals are able to adapt. Of these hardy creatures, the kangaroo rat is possibly the most fascinating. Able to live in some of the most arid parts of the southwest, the kangaroo rat neither sweats nor pants to keep cool. Its specialized kidneys enable it to survive on a miniscule amount of water. Unlike other desert creatures, the kangaroo rat does not store water in its body but instead is able to convert the dry seeds it eats into moisture. Its ability to adapt to such a hostile environment makes the kangaroo rat a truly amazing creature.

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

Supporting Sentences

If you think of a paragraph as a hamburger, the supporting sentences are the meat inside the bun. They make up the body of the paragraph by explaining, proving, or enhancing the controlling idea in the topic sentence. Most paragraphs contain three to six supporting sentences depending on the audience and purpose for writing. A supporting sentence usually offers one of the following:

- **Reason**

Sentence: The refusal of the baby boom generation to retire is contributing to the current lack of available jobs.

- **Fact**

Sentence: Many families now rely on older relatives to support them financially.

- **Statistic**

Sentence: Nearly 10 percent of adults are currently unemployed in the United States.

- **Quotation**

Sentence: “We will not allow this situation to continue,” stated Senator Johns.

- **Example**

Sentence: Last year, Bill was asked to retire at the age of fifty-five.

The type of supporting sentence you choose will depend on what you are writing and why you are writing. For example, if you are attempting to persuade your audience to take a particular position you should rely on facts, statistics, and concrete examples, rather than personal opinions. Read the following example:

There are numerous advantages to owning a hybrid car. **(Topic sentence)**

First, they get 20 percent to 35 percent more miles to the gallon than a fuel-efficient gas-powered vehicle. **(Supporting sentence 1: statistic)**

Second, they produce very few emissions during low speed city driving. **(Supporting sentence 2: fact)**

Because they do not require gas, hybrid cars reduce dependency on fossil fuels, which helps lower prices at the pump. **(Supporting sentence 3: reason)**

Alex bought a hybrid car two years ago and has been extremely impressed with its performance. **(Supporting sentence 4: example)**

“It’s the cheapest car I’ve ever had,” she said. “The running costs are far lower than previous gas powered vehicles I’ve owned.” **(Supporting sentence 5: quotation)**

Given the low running costs and environmental benefits of owning a hybrid car, it is likely that many more people will follow Alex’s example in the near future. **(Concluding sentence)**

To find information for your supporting sentences, you might consider using one of the following sources:

- Reference book
- Encyclopedia
- Website
- Biography/autobiography
- Map
- Dictionary
- Newspaper/magazine
- Interview
- Previous experience
- Personal research

To read more about sources and research, see [Chapter 10 "Writing Preparation"](#).

Tip

When searching for information on the Internet, remember that some websites are more reliable than others. Websites ending in .gov or .edu are generally more reliable than websites ending in .com or .org. Wikis and blogs are not reliable sources of information because they are subject to inaccuracies.

Concluding Sentences

An effective concluding sentence draws together all the ideas you have raised in your paragraph. It reminds readers of the main point—the topic sentence—without restating it in exactly the same words. Using the hamburger example, the top bun (the topic sentence) and the bottom bun (the concluding sentence) are very similar. They frame the “meat” or body of the paragraph. Compare the topic sentence and concluding sentence from the previous example:

Topic sentence: There are numerous advantages to owning a hybrid car.

Concluding sentence: Given the low running costs and environmental benefits of owning a hybrid car, it is likely that many more people will follow Alex’s example in the near future.

Notice the use of the synonyms *advantages* and *benefits*. The concluding sentence reiterates the idea that owning a hybrid is advantageous without using the exact same words. It also summarizes two examples of the advantages covered in the supporting sentences: low running costs and environmental benefits.

You should avoid introducing any new ideas into your concluding sentence. A conclusion is intended to provide the reader with a sense of completion. Introducing a subject that is not covered in the paragraph will confuse the reader and weaken your writing.

A concluding sentence may do any of the following:

- Restate the main idea.

Example: Childhood obesity is a growing problem in the United States.

- Summarize the key points in the paragraph.

Example: A lack of healthy choices, poor parenting, and an addiction to video games are among the many factors contributing to childhood obesity.

- Draw a conclusion based on the information in the paragraph.

Example: These statistics indicate that unless we take action, childhood obesity rates will continue to rise.

- Make a prediction, suggestion, or recommendation about the information in the paragraph.

Example: Based on this research, more than 60 percent of children in the United States will be morbidly obese by the year 2030 unless we take evasive action.

- Offer an additional observation about the controlling idea.

Example: Childhood obesity is an entirely preventable tragedy.

EXERCISE 5

On your own paper, write one example of each type of concluding sentence based on a topic of your choice.

Transitions

A strong paragraph moves seamlessly from the topic sentence into the supporting sentences and on to the concluding sentence. To help organize a paragraph and ensure that ideas logically connect to one another, writers use transitional words and phrases. A **transition**¹⁶ is a connecting word that describes a relationship between ideas. Take another look at the earlier example:

There are numerous advantages to owning a hybrid car. First, they get 20 percent to 35 percent more miles to the gallon than a fuel-efficient gas-powered vehicle. Second, they produce very few emissions during low speed city driving. Because they do not require gas, hybrid cars reduce dependency on fossil fuels, which helps lower prices at the pump. Alex bought a hybrid car two years ago and has been extremely impressed with its performance. “It’s the cheapest car I’ve ever had,” she said. “The running costs are far lower than previous gas-powered vehicles I’ve owned.” Given the low running costs and environmental benefits of owning a hybrid car, it is likely that many more people will follow Alex’s example in the near future.

Each of the underlined words is a transition word. Words such as *first* and *second* are transition words that show sequence or clarify order. They help organize the writer’s ideas by showing that he or she has another point to make in support of the topic sentence. Other transition words that show order include *third*, *also*, and *furthermore*.

The transition word *because* is a transition word of consequence that continues a line of thought. It indicates that the writer will provide an explanation of a result. In this sentence, the writer explains why hybrid cars will reduce dependency on fossil fuels (because they do not require gas). Other transition words of consequence include *as a result*, *so that*, *since*, or *for this reason*.

To include a summarizing transition in her concluding sentence, the writer could rewrite the final sentence as follows:

16. Words and phrases that show how the ideas in sentences and paragraphs are related.

In conclusion, given the low running costs and environmental benefits of owning a hybrid car, it is likely that many more people will follow Alex's example in the near future.

The following chart provides some useful transition words to connect supporting sentences and concluding sentences. See [Chapter 7 "The Writing Process: How Do I Begin?"](#) for a more comprehensive look at transitional words and phrases.

Table 5.1 Useful Transitional Words and Phrases

For Supporting Sentences					
above all	but	for instance	in particular	moreover	subsequently
also	conversely	furthermore	later on	nevertheless	therefore
aside from	correspondingly	however	likewise	on one hand	to begin with
at the same time	for example	in addition	meanwhile	on the contrary	
For Concluding Sentences					
after all	all things considered	in brief	in summary	on the whole	to sum up
all in all	finally	in conclusion	on balance	thus	

EXERCISE 6

Using your own paper, write a paragraph on a topic of your choice. Be sure to include a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence and to use transitional words and phrases to link your ideas together.

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

Writing at Work

Transitional words and phrases are useful tools to incorporate into workplace documents. They guide the reader through the document, clarifying relationships between sentences and paragraphs so that the reader understands why they have been written in that particular order.

For example, when writing an instructional memo, it may be helpful to consider the following transitional words and phrases: *before you begin, first, next, then, finally, after you have completed*. Using these transitions as a template to write your memo will provide readers with clear, logical instructions about a particular process and the order in which steps are supposed to be completed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A good paragraph contains three distinct components: a topic sentence, body, and concluding sentence.
- The topic sentence expresses the main idea of the paragraph combined with the writer's attitude or opinion about the topic.
- Good topic sentences contain both a main idea and a controlling idea, are clear and easy to follow, use engaging vocabulary, and provide an accurate indication of what will follow in the rest of the paragraph.
- Topic sentences may be placed at the beginning, middle, or end of a paragraph. In most academic essays, the topic sentence is placed at the beginning of a paragraph.
- Supporting sentences help explain, prove, or enhance the topic sentence by offering facts, reasons, statistics, quotations, or examples.
- Concluding sentences summarize the key points in a paragraph and reiterate the main idea without repeating it word for word.
- Transitional words and phrases help organize ideas in a paragraph and show how these ideas relate to one another.

5.3 Writing Paragraphs: End-of-Chapter Exercises

EXERCISES

1. Select one of the following topics or choose a topic of your choice:

- Drilling for oil in Alaska
- Health care reform
- Introducing a four-day work week
- Bringing pets to work
- Charging airline passengers to use the in-flight bathroom

Create a topic sentence based on the topic you chose, remembering to include both a main idea and a controlling idea. Next, write an alternative topic sentence using the same main idea but a different controlling idea. Explain how each fully developed paragraph might differ in tone and content.

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

2. At some point during your career, you may be asked to write a report or complete a presentation. Imagine that you have been asked to report on the issue of health and safety in the workplace. Using the information in [Section 5.1.2 "Identifying the Audience"](#), complete an analysis of your intended audience—your fellow office workers. Consider how demographics, education, prior knowledge, and expectations will influence your report and explain how you will tailor it to your audience accordingly.

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate and compare your answers.

3. **Group activity.** Working in a group of four or five, assign each group member the task of collecting one document each. These documents might include magazine or newspaper articles, workplace documents, academic essays, chapters from a reference book, film or book reviews, or any other type of writing. As a group, read through each document and discuss the author's purpose for writing. Use the information you

have learned in this chapter to decide whether the main purpose is to summarize, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate. Write a brief report on the purpose of each document, using supporting evidence from the text.

4. **Group activity.** Working in a small group, select a workplace document or academic essay that has a clear thesis. Examine each paragraph and identify the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. Then, choose one particular paragraph and discuss the following questions:

- Is the topic sentence clearly identifiable or is it implied?
- Do all the supporting sentences relate to the topic sentence?
- Does the writer use effective transitions to link his or her ideas?
- Does the concluding sentence accurately summarize the main point of the paragraph?

As a group, identify the weakest areas of the paragraph and rewrite them. Focus on the relationship among the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence. Use transitions to illustrate the connection between each sentence in the paragraph.

5. **Peer activity.** Using the information you have learned in this chapter, write a paragraph about a current event. Underline the topic sentence in your paragraph. Now, rewrite the paragraph, placing the topic sentence in a different part of the paragraph. Read the two paragraphs aloud to a peer and have him or her identify the topic sentence. Discuss which paragraph is more effective and why.

Collaboration

Please share with a classmate, compare your answers, and discuss the contrasting results.