

UNIT 2

Paragraphs: The Building Blocks of Writing

“I would argue that the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing—the place where coherence begins and words stand a chance of becoming more than mere words . . . Topic sentence followed by support and description insists that the writer organize his/her thoughts, and it also provides good insurance from wandering away from the topic.”

—Stephen King, novelist

Writers build meaning in extended texts with words, sentences, and paragraphs. The order of words in sentences in English determines the meaning of a single thought, and the order of sentences in paragraphs constructs the meaning of one general theme or thought with multiple levels of examples and details. To develop a long piece of writing, writers use paragraphing to guide readers through a central claim supported with various main ideas or points and levels of detail for each idea. If your writing is hard to read because the information does not contain focused paragraphs that organize the details of your claim, readers may become confused, lose interest, and not finish reading your writing. English readers expect the paragraphs to move your central claim through the whole piece with illustrative and concrete details and a clear pattern of organization.

You will need to construct each paragraph carefully based on your purpose and readers, selecting from a variety of patterns of organizations: general to specific, process, comparative, problem-solution, and cause and effect. This unit focuses on the **general to specific paragraph arrangement**, a core pattern in English writing in which the general topic is first and details become more specific as the paragraph continues. You will frequently find it in academic essays,

the introduction sections of research papers, opening paragraphs in discussions and analyses, biographical statements, research briefs, and essay exam questions—to name a few. You will learn to build **clear paragraph units** in a biographical statement, a common and important text that presents events in your life. By creating a **biographical statement** that includes interesting details and is adaptable for multiple readers throughout your studies and career, you can display your experience and attributes.

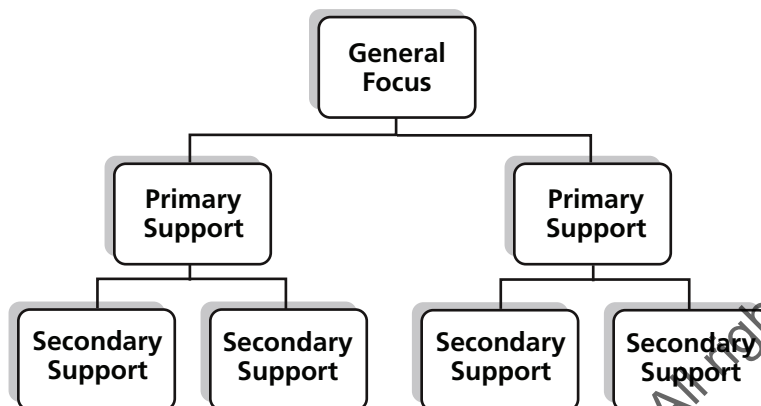
One-Paragraph Components

“Details make the difference between boring and terrific writing. It’s the difference between a pencil sketch and a lush oil painting. As a writer, words are your paint. Use all color.”

—Rhys Alexander in *Writing Gooder*

When using the general to specific paragraph arrangement you should include three components of information: a general statement or topic sentence, primary support sentences, and secondary support sentences. The general statement or topic sentence immediately creates a familiar map in the mind of the readers—general to specific information. The readers know the theme of your paragraph and expect to find concrete and understandable details to help them comprehend and visualize this general theme. Your choice of details will determine the picture you paint for the readers. Try to picture the structure of a paragraph as a top to bottom structure with different levels of generality about a theme or an assertion. Imagine a pyramid or triangle with the point at the bottom. The top level begins with the topic sentence followed by multiple levels of details and examples referred to as primary and secondary support. The primary support is more detailed and would be the middle section of the triangle or pyramid. The secondary support is even more specific and is the narrowest point of the pyramid. These primary and secondary levels of support illustrate concretely and provide credibility for the topic. The **paragraph structure chart** (Figure 2, see page 27) can help you visualize this top to bottom structure.

Figure 2: Paragraph Structure Chart



Determining the number of primary and secondary ideas in an academic paragraph is not always easy, so applying the general rule of having two to three primary ideas and at least two secondary ideas for each primary idea in a paragraph can be helpful. Read the paragraph about science (Turkle, *Falling for Science*, 2009) illustrating a general topic sentence and details that visualize the theme for the readers.

Science is fueled by passion, a passion that often attaches to the world of objects much as the artist attaches to his paints, the poet to his or her words. Putting children in a rich object world is essential to giving science a chance. Children will make intimate connections, connections they need to construct on their own. At a time when science education is in crisis, giving science its best chance means guiding children to objects they can love.

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Exercise 2A: Recognizing Top-to-Bottom Structure

Read the paragraph about good thinkers from Stephen D. Krashen's book *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use* (Heinemann, 2003). Notice the top-to-bottom structure, and answer the questions.

① Studies of "good thinkers" also give us some reason to believe that reading makes you smarter. ② Good thinkers, however they are defined, read a great deal and have read a great deal. ③ Simonton (1988) concluded that "omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success." ④ Schaefer and Anastasi (1968) reported that high school students considered to be creative read more than average students, with more creative students reporting that they read over fifty books per year. ⑤ Emery and Csikszentmihalyi (1982) compared fifteen men of very similar background who became college professors with fifteen men of very similar background who grew up to become blue-collar workers. ⑥ The future professors lived in a much more print-rich environment and did far more reading when they were young.

References

Emery, C., and M. Csikszentmihalyi. 1982. "The socialization effects of cultural role models in otogenetic development and upward mobility." *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 12: 3–19.

Schaefer, C.E., Anastasi, A. 1968. "A biographical inventory for identifying creativity in adolescent boys." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 52: 42–48.

Simonton, D.K. 1988. *Scientific genius: A psychology of science*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

1. What is the general focus (or top level) of the paragraph? _____

2. What is the primary support idea? _____

3. How many secondary support ideas are included? _____
4. Which sentences show the secondary support? _____

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Exercise 2B: Analysis of Paragraph Structure

A famous speech by John F. Kennedy on space exploration illustrates how the general focus of the paragraph (the topic sentence) guides the reader through the paragraph with brilliant detail. Read an excerpt from the speech, and use a highlighter to mark the detail that illustrates each **bolded** time span.



John F. Kennedy's Moon Speech— Rice Stadium/September 12, 1962

No man can fully grasp how far and how fast we have come, but condense, if you will, the **50,000 years** of man's recorded history in a time span of but a half-century. Stated in these terms, we know very little about the **first 40 years**, except at the end of them advanced man had learned to use the skins of animals to cover them. Then about **10 years ago**, under this standard, man emerged from his caves to construct other kinds of shelter. Only **five years ago** man learned to write and use a cart with wheels. Christianity began less than two years ago. The printing press came **this year**, and then less than **two months ago**, during this whole 50-year span of human history, the steam engine provided a new source of power. Newton explored the meaning of gravity. **Last month** electric lights and telephones and automobiles and airplanes became available. Only **last week** did we develop penicillin and television and nuclear power, and **now** if America's new spacecraft succeeds in reaching Venus, we will have literally reached the stars before midnight tonight. This is a breathtaking pace, and such a pace cannot help but create new ills as it dispels old, new ignorance, new problems, new dangers. Surely the opening vistas of space promise high costs and hardships, as well as high reward.

From *Key Documents in the History of Space Policy*. National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

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Biographical Statements

Even though the purpose of paragraphs vary, the components remain the same. For example, you will frequently create a common academic text, a biographical statement, to present yourself as a credible member of a community. These paragraphs should contain an organized structure with the three components of information. Note the outline for a biographical statement written by a math professor illustrates the components in the proper order: a topic sentence, three primary support ideas, and secondary support ideas.

Dr. James Nagy has specialized in mathematics during his extensive career. (Topic Sentence)

→ ***Education (Primary Support)***

He was awarded a BS in Mathematics in 1986 and an MS in Computational Mathematics in 1998, both from Northern Illinois University.

In 1991, he was awarded a PhD in Applied Mathematics from North Carolina State University.

→ ***Work Experience (Primary Support)***

He was a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, University of Minnesota, from 1991–1992, and a member of the faculty in the Department of Mathematics at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, from 1992–1999.

Since 1999 he has been a member of the faculty in the Mathematics and Computer Science Department at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Work Experience Detail (Secondary Support)

In 2001, he was selected to hold the Emory Professorship for Distinguished Teaching in the Social and Natural Sciences.

→ ***Publications (Primary Support)***

He has published many research papers on scientific computing, numerical linear algebra, inverse problems, and image processing.

Publication Detail (Secondary Support)

His particular research interests are in the numerical solution of large-scale structured linear systems.

Now read the same biographical statement written in paragraph form and visualize the components from the outline.

Dr. James Nagy has specialized in mathematics during his extensive career. He was awarded a BS in Mathematics in 1986 and an MS in Computational Mathematics in 1998 both from Northern Illinois University. In 1991, he was awarded a PhD in Applied Mathematics from North Carolina State University. He was a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, University of Minnesota, from 1991–1992, and a member of the faculty in the Department of Mathematics at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, from 1992–1999. Since 1999 he has been a member of the faculty in the Mathematics and Computer Science Department at Emory University, Atlanta. In 2001, he was selected to hold the Emory Professorship for Distinguished Teaching in the Social and Natural Sciences. He has published many research papers on scientific computing, numerical linear algebra, inverse problems, and image processing. His particular research interests are in the numerical solution of large scale structured linear systems.

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Exercise 2C: Analyzing Biographical Statements

Read the biographical statement, and identify the general focus of each paragraph.

Daniel Domingues, a student in the History Department at Emory University, studies Atlantic history and Modern Age slavery. He specializes in Brazil's trans-Atlantic slave trade and the commerce of captives in the western coast of Africa.

Before studying at Emory, Daniel completed a bachelor's degree in history at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2004 with an honor's thesis on the western islands' slave trade of Africa. This research was supported by grants from the National Council for Technological and Scientific Development and the Foundation for Research Support of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Daniel's interest in historical documentation led him to work for the Brazilian Archeology Institute, where he developed research projects on colonial history of that country with a special focus on the world of the captives.

Daniel continues his research focusing on the impact of slave trade on African societies. During the summer of 2005, he traveled to Angola through a grant received from the Institute of National Archives/Tombo Tower and the Luso-American Foundation for Development in Portugal. He also traveled to Portugal during the summer of 2006 to further this research. Currently, he is contributing to a research project entitled "Voyages: the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database" that will track every slaving voyage that sailed across the Atlantic Ocean during the Modern Age.

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Writing Assignment: Brief Biographical Statement

Write a biographical statement to post on a website, in a department newsletter, or for a publication. The purpose of this writing is to showcase your academic qualities, past experiences, and research interests and to present yourself as a competent member of the community. To avoid “wandering” from your topic, follow these steps:

1. Outline your ideas using the components of a typical general to specific paragraph arrangement.
2. Write one paragraph. Include five sentences (topic, three primary ideas, and a final statement). The three primary sentences can include your education, work experience, and research interests.
3. Write the paragraph again, and expand it to 10–11 sentences. You should insert two secondary support ideas to illustrate each of the three primary ideas.

From Paragraph to Whole Text

Some biographical statements are powerful because they focus on a unique theme carried though multiple paragraphs and humanize the writer. The **theme chart** (Figure 3) can help you visualize how a theme can be used throughout the statement. By carrying a theme in the first paragraph throughout the whole text, you will draw the readers’ attention to an important central idea about you which might be critical to your receiving a fellowship, internship, or publication acceptance. If you write the same chronological statement for applications, presentations, proposals, funding, and professional positions in this competitive, academic, and professional environment, you will fail to capture the readers’ attention. Analyze the two biographical statements written by the same person.

Figure 3: Theme Chart

Theme	
Areas of Specialization and Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Past• Current
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• University Level• Specialized Training
Publications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Past• Current Interest

Student Model 1: Maintains a Central Focus

Notice how each paragraph in Student Model 1 has a central focus. Paragraph 1 focuses on educational background, Paragraph 2 on research interests, and Paragraph 3 on her career as a writer.



Margarita Pintado, a graduate student in the Spanish Department at Emory University, studied Journalism and Mass Media Communications at the University of Puerto Rico from August 1999 to May 2003. During that time, she collaborated on magazine, newspaper, “cyber-journalism,” and firm projects. After completing her Bachelor’s degree, she entered the Graduate Department of Hispanic Studies at the same institution. Before finishing her Master’s degree, she moved to Atlanta to initiate a PhD degree in Spanish.

Her current studies focus on Contemporary Latino American and Caribbean Literature. Her writing reveals a strong concern with the new and different literary styles that describe those countries. She explores the impact of post modernism on such authors as Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Fernando Vallejo, Leonardo Padura, Rita Indiana Hernández, and others. One of her most significant research areas illustrates the step between magical realism to dirty realism, or in other words, the transition from illusion and hope to disappointment and pessimism. Several of her investigative essays have been published in academic magazines such as *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, *Letras*, *Derivas* and *Claridad*.

Besides her interests in Literature, Margarita has started a career as a writer. Last year she published the short story “Negativos de arena,” from *The Anthology Cuentos de Oficio* (Terranova Editors, 2005), a compilation of new literary voices. Currently, she publishes articles for different literary magazines in the United States.

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Student Model 2: Carries a Unique Theme Throughout

Note how the writer includes a unique theme in Student Model 2 (underlining) and carries the theme through each paragraph. The writer has focused this biographical statement to readers interested in her interdisciplinary interests.



Margarita Pintado focuses her research in projects related to journalism and social issues. Currently, in a PhD program in Hispanic literature, she has discovered a new interdisciplinary perspective with writing which bridges her interests in literature and society.

Born in Puerto Rico, Ms. Pintado always loved writing and literature as a child. Evidence of literature was always present in her home, where the solicited toys were books. As a high school and college student, Ms. Pintado discovered journalism that focused her concerns on the social aspects of justice, freedom, equality, and diversity. Through journalism, her interests as a writer and as conscious citizen connected.

After she finished her Bachelor's degree in Journalism at La Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras, she moved to Atlanta to enroll in a PhD program in Hispanic Literature at Emory University continuing her research interests related to Hispanic literature and social issues. Ms. Pintado has started a career as a writer and has recently published a short story "Negativos de arena" in *The Anthology Cuentos de Oficio* (Terranova editors, 2005), a compilation of new literary voices.

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Exercise 2D: More Analyzing Biographical Statements

Answer these questions about the models. Then talk about your answers in a group.

1. Which model do you prefer? Why? _____

2. Where do you think Margarita will use Model 1? _____

3. Where might Margarita use Model 2? _____



Writing Assignment: Biographical Statement

Draft a biographical statement of 250–300 words (with at least three paragraphs) to situate you within your department or a particular field or profession. Consider the statement as part of an application packet for a travel grant to advance your research in another country. This statement should identify your current position, major accomplishments, interests, and concerns. Select a unique theme for the biographical statement, and make sure you carry the theme throughout the statement. Take notes using the outline on page 37 before starting to draft the statement.

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Outline

Audience: _____

Faculty?

Administrators?

Students?

Other?

Purpose/Theme: _____

Central Focus?

Unique Theme?

Organization: _____

Each paragraph has a focus that connects to the theme?

General to specific?

Primary Support: _____

Academic background:

Current position?

Past positions?

Research interests?

General interests?

Publications?

Awards?

Honors?

Secondary Support: _____

Details?

Examples?

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Rewrite as a Critical Thinker

Skilled writers know that the first draft is never the only or final draft. As you evaluate and rewrite your ideas, you will discover more details and often reframe your thoughts. Think of rewriting not as a chore but as an opportunity to create your claims and ideas visually with multiple levels of detail for a specific audience. You will learn how to revise in detail in Units 6 and 7, but for now you can begin the process of rewriting by focusing on the areas studied in Units 1 and 2.

Exercise 2E: Revising

Revise the first draft of your biographical statement after putting it aside for a few hours or a day. Read it again, evaluating it for audience.

1. Are your readers general readers or field expert readers?

2. How much do the readers know about you?

3. How interested are the readers in your biographical statement?

4. How can you make the readers interested?

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Based on your answers, add, delete, or move ideas, and then rewrite your statement. At this point, don't worry about grammar; individual issues will be addressed in Unit 7. Read the steps, and check them as you complete them.

Steps	Completed
1. Read the text without stopping.	
2. Insert ideas for additional content or cross out content for deletion.	
3. Highlight the central theme or focus in the first, introductory paragraph.	
4. Underline or draw lines connecting words and phrases in the second, third, and fourth supporting paragraphs that link to the theme.	
5. Highlight the central topic (or main idea) in each paragraph.	
6. Number the multi-level support sentences in each paragraph.	
7. Insert additional support, if needed.	
8. Rewrite on a separate sheet of paper.	

Using a Rubric to Assess Writing

Your instructor will grade your final draft using the biographical statement grading rubric (page 180). The rubric illustrates the importance of theme, support, and organization. Read the rubric, and ask your instructor to explain any parts that you do not understand. Complete the rubric to assess your final draft of the biographical statement. Compare your analysis to your instructor's.

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