Paragraph Development

The MEAL Plan

A clear and effective paragraph is constructed like an essay. Just as an essay has a main idea (thesis statement) that is developed and supported with evidence and analysis in the body paragraphs, a paragraph needs to focus on a single idea that is developed and supported with evidence and analysis. Also, just as an essay ends with a conclusion, a paragraph should close by linking the topic sentence to the main idea in the next paragraph. The chart below illustrates the parallel structure between an essay and a paragraph:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay</th>
<th>Paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction/Thesis Statement</td>
<td>Topic Sentence/Main Idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Evidence and Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Link/Transition to Next Paragraph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To help writers understand how to craft clear and effective paragraphs, writers should remember this formula: MEAL. This stands for Main idea, Evidence, Analysis, and Link.

**Main idea**: The main idea of a paragraph is called the topic sentence. Like an arguable thesis statement, the topic sentence is a claim that requires relevant support or evidence. The topic sentence should appear near the beginning of the paragraph since that sentence states the claim or idea to be discussed and developed in the content of the paragraph. This placement assures writers that the audience will not miss the significance of anything being presented and developed in the paragraph.

**Evidence**: After the main idea (the topic sentence) is stated, relevant evidence must be provided to support the claim made in the topic sentence. The primary tools of evidence in effective writing are definitions, examples, and opposing views. These forms of evidence will typically be presented in the form of studies, reports, data, statistics, interviews, examples or illustrations. Evidence should be relevant and directly support the writer’s topic sentence and the overall thesis statement for the essay. The writer may choose to present source evidence through summary, paraphrase, or direct quotation, and the writer may also use modes of development such as description, definition, example, analogy, cause and effect, or comparison and contrast.

**Analysis**: Following the evidence, the writer must provide an analysis of the evidence that has been provided. Analysis is the writer’s evaluation, interpretation, judgment, or conclusion of how the evidence supports the paragraph’s main idea or topic. The writer should never expect the audience to interpret the evidence provided. In fact, the writer is required to explain how the audience is meant to interpret the evidence in the context of the writer’s argument. Such an explanation helps the audience to conclude that the topic sentence is a credible claim in the context of the evidence provided.

**Link**: The final sentence or sentences of the paragraph link the current paragraph’s main idea to the main idea in the next paragraph. This type of foreshadowing also prepares the audience for the next main idea. Since most body paragraphs are going to be followed by another body paragraph, the writer should consider using transitional phrases that help to link paragraphs. For example, transitional words such as however, so, thus, still, despite, nonetheless, although, but, even though or in spite of signal relationships between paragraphs and the relationship between the main ideas of all paragraphs.

Source: Northcentral University Writing Center http://learners.ncu.edu/writingprogram/writing_center.aspx?menu_id=121
Here’s an example of a paragraph drawn from an essay in *Deliberations: A Journal of First-Year Writing at Duke University*; the column on the left maps the parts of the paragraph’s “complete MEAL”

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

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

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

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

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

Source:

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