

WRITING STRONG PARAGRAPHS

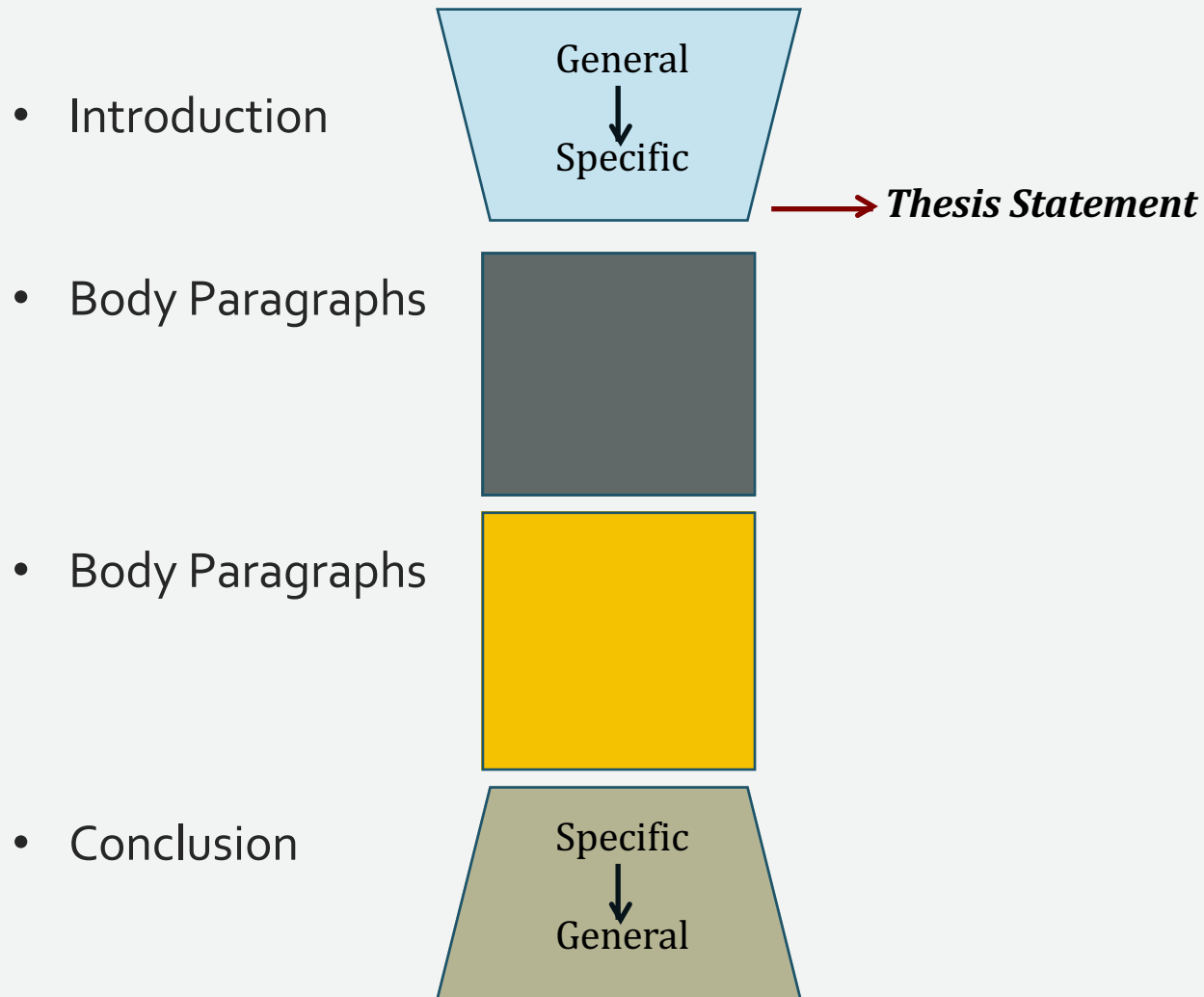
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Goals of this Workshop

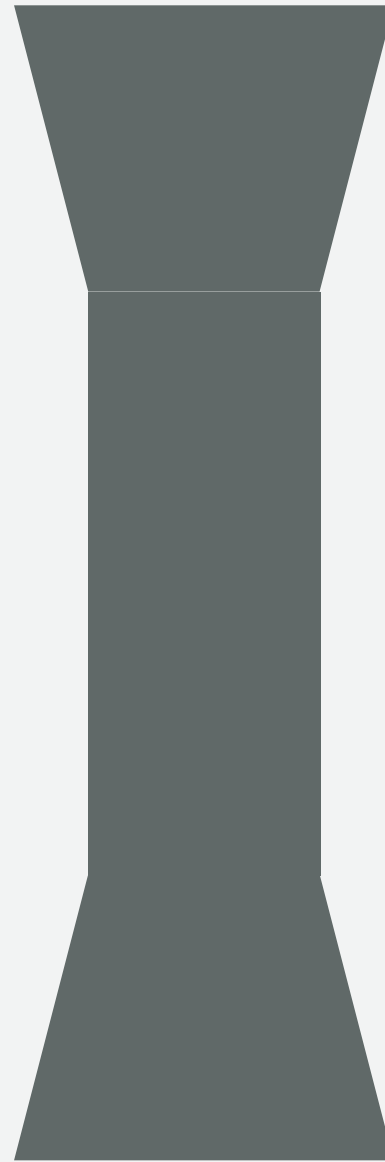
- Identify features of strong, effective paragraphs in academic writing
- Identify body paragraph structure (distinct from introductions and conclusions)
 - AXES
- Learn strategies to develop paragraphs
- Identify and apply correct body paragraph structure in writing

Shape of an Academic Essay



Shape of a Paragraph

- General – Specific – General Structure
 - Paragraph begins with an topic sentence that focuses the topic early in the paragraph.
 - The main part of the paragraph is narrower in focus
 - The concluding sentences broaden out again.



Paragraphs

- Building blocks of texts
- Elaborate on central (main) idea—also known as your thesis
- Can be developed in numerous ways, depending on the thesis:
 - Illustration
 - Exemplification
 - Description
 - Summary
 - Analysis
 - Cause
 - Effect
 - Argumentation
 - MORE

Purpose of Body Paragraphs

(one paragraph, one purpose)

- To make a sub-claim that supports your main argument or thesis
- To define, explain, describe, report or compare something to something else for your reader to better understand your position and reasoning
- To qualify your position or present a counterargument
- To rebut a counterargument or to concede that some part of the counterargument is valid

Features of Strong Paragraphs

- Focused
 - One paragraph, one idea
- Clearly related to the thesis
 - Sentences and points should all refer back to the main idea or thesis statement (no extraneous or irrelevant information)
- Amply and appropriately developed
 - Supporting evidence from credible, appropriate sources
 - Examples are explained and discussed
- Coherent
 - Points are relevant and related to the rest of the paragraph
 - Logically organized (locally and globally)

“AXES” Paragraph Structure

- AXES stands for
 - **A**ssertion
 - **E**Xamples
 - **E**xplanation
 - **S**ignificance
- and these are the specific elements that should be in your body paragraphs to fully develop them.

Assertion

- Also known as a topic sentence; usually a claim.
- Focuses the body paragraph to one main idea
 - One paragraph = one main idea
- In academic writing, assertions are often not statements of fact; rather, they are reasonably arguable statements that are specific and focused.
 - “Pollution has adverse effects to human health.”
 - “High levels of air pollution in metropolitan areas lead to increased respiratory illnesses.”
- *However*, depending on the genre of writing (such as a report or informative text), your assertions might not always be an arguable point and might function more as a *topic sentence*.
 - “The narrowness of communities of practice in academic research has been criticized by scholars.”

eXamples

- Examples refer to facts, statistics, sources, and other forms of evidentiary (or supporting) material.
- Different types of evidence have different functions and will depend on your rhetorical situation
 - Anecdotal (personal observations)
 - Analogical (comparison of similarities between two dissimilar concepts, things or ideas)
 - Statistical (figures, numbers, data)
 - Testimonial (secondary sources from expert or scholar in the field)
- In academic writing, evidence is the credible, appropriate, and strong supporting material that illustrates the validity or correctness of the assertion.

Explanation

- Explanation is the discussion of the evidence *as it pertains to the assertion*.
- "Why does that data mean your claim is true?"
 - Assertion + Evidence = Explanation
- Also referred to as "discussion" or "synthesis" of point(s).
- In academic writing, explanations serve to illuminate to the reader *how the evidence supports the claim*. Evidence does not speak for itself, so you—the writer—has to give your reader how you see the evidence working with your assertion.
 - Refer to the evidence as a starting point.
 - "This evidence shows that the claim is true because..."

Significance

- Significance (1) refers to the **relevance** of your claim and evidence and (2) *ties your assertion to the thesis statement.*
- So what?
- Gives the reader the missing link between what you claim in the paragraph(s) and what you argue in the paper as a whole.

Other Important Parts of the Paragraph

Content Bridge

- A content bridge **connects** the idea expressed in the paragraph to the idea expressed in the *previous* paragraph
- Could function as “context” for assertion to make sense.
- Usually appears *with* the **assertion** but could be its own sentence.
 - Could be a phrase or clause at the beginning of the assertion.
 - Could be a sentence.

Signal Words or Phrases

- Guide your reader through your paragraph.

AXES Sample #1

- In addition to highlighting platform jumping practices in Zambia, our informants foregrounded different motivations for and gradients of anonymity in online environments. Anonymity is critical to online identity construction, and social media provide different possibilities for maintaining anonymity (Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Alice Marwick and danah boyd have noted that while in offline situations people know the context within which they are conversing, in social media sites there is often a “context collapse” in the sense that users are unsure who exactly is viewing their *performance of self* and are unable to restrict this performance to a particular audience segment (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Anonymity provides a way to negotiate this context collapse. The desire for anonymity depends on the user’s perception of a particular news site, blog, or social media platform and the kinds of people and social groups the user thinks will frequent the platform. As users gauge varied online contexts, they enact anonymity in the process of making their views public, and they may either critique or endorse the status quo.

AXES Sample #1

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- [Transitional Phrase] **Although** informants have different reasons to be anonymous, there are negative consequences. [ASSERTION]

AXES Sample #2

- Despite lack of research and effective policies, a number of agencies and band councils throughout the North are involved with programs aimed at increasing levels of youth employment. These programs generally fall into two categories: those aimed at extending schooling to make postsecondary education more accessible for indigenous youth and those whose mission is to prepare disadvantaged on-reserve youth to break the cycle of dependence and find stable employment (AANDC, 2013). An example of a program in the first category is the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut (TFN). This program is intended to educate and train Inuit youth so that they are qualified for government and land claims-related positions (Richardson & Blanchet Cohen, 2000). An example of a program in the second category is the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) Call for Action program, which provides unemployed Dene youth with an eight-month training program (Northlands College, 2016). Both categories of program aim to enhance the qualifications of northern indigenous youth, so they are better positioned to find employment in their region.

AXES Sample #2

- **Despite lack of research and effective policies**, a number of agencies and band councils throughout the North are involved with programs aimed at increasing levels of youth employment. These programs generally fall into two categories: those aimed at extending schooling to make postsecondary education more accessible for indigenous youth and those whose mission is to prepare disadvantaged on-reserve youth to break the cycle of dependence and find stable employment (AANDC, 2013). **An example of a program in the first category** is the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut (TFN). This program is intended to educate and train Inuit youth so that they are qualified for government and land claims-related positions (Richardson & Blanchet Cohen, 2000). **An example of a program in the second category** is the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) Call for Action program, which provides unemployed Dene youth with an eight-month training program (Northlands College, 2016). Both categories of program aim to enhance the qualifications of northern indigenous youth, so they are better positioned to find employment in their region.

Comparing Two Versions of a Paragraph

Read two versions of the paragraph on the handout and identify the following:

1. The author's purpose. Is it clear? Is it to claim, explain, report or describe something?
2. The assertion.
3. The evidence that supports the point made in the assertion.
4. The explanation & significance. Do they connect the evidence with the point made in the assertion?

From University of Saskatchewan Graduate Writing Videos

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VERSION ONE

The first sighting of the platypus was reported in Australia in 1798. Preserved specimens were sent back to England, where they caused much scientific excitement. The platypus had a bill like a duck and laid eggs, but, instead of having feathers, it had hair. The platypus is now considered a mammal, even though it lays eggs. The platypus has hair, which, when examined in detail, is structurally similar to that of non-egg-laying mammals. These features of the hair were most fully described by the famous biologist Leon Augustus Hausman. Hausman died in 1966. His scholarly expertise on the topic of mammalian hair often brought him into the public arena, and once he was even called on to provide expert opinion on a sacred "yeti" scalp kept in a Himalayan monastery. Hausman showed that the hair scales of the shaft of the platypus exhibit the typical mammalian shift in shape between the base and the tip. The platypus also produces a milky secretion that is used to suckle the newborns. The milk is produced not from teats but from pores in the ventral abdominal skin. The milk has a much higher concentration of iron than that of the eutherian mammals. Hair and suckling of the young are features now universally acknowledged as definitive characteristics of mammals. The long and often controversial involvement of so many scientists in the documentation of platypus biology indicates the value of a socio-historical study of the engagement of the scientific community with this animal.

VERSION TWO

The classification of the platypus was first debated in 1798 when specimens of this newly-discovered animal were sent to England from its native Australia, causing British scientists to puzzle over its combination of mammalian and avo-reptilian features. Today, despite sharing some features with the birds and reptiles, the platypus is classified as a mammal. First, the platypus has hair which, when examined in detail, is structurally similar to that of non-egg-laying mammals. These features of the hair were most fully described by Leon Hausman, the pre-eminent mammalian hair expert of the twentieth century. Hausman showed that the shafts of the hair of the platypus exhibit the typical mammalian shift in shape between the base and the tip. Second, like other mammals, the platypus suckles its newborns by secreting (from pores on its ventral abdominal skin) an iron-rich milk. The engagement of scientists with the platypus has been a long one and is deserving of a study in itself, but today scientists concur that the presence of hair and suckling of the young are sufficient to definitively place this animal in the Mammalian class.

Version One	Version Two
Purpose unclear	Purpose clear
Assertion not identifiable	Assertion early in the paragraph reveals author's purpose
Too many extraneous points (e.g. the sentence on the "yeti" scalp in the Himalayan monastery)	Extraneous points removed or combined with sentences that contain essential points
No signal words to guide the reader through the paragraph	Signal words (<i>first, second</i>) guide the reader
Concluding sentence, but one that does not effectively wrap up the paragraph	Explanation and Significance statements that connect evidence to assertion.

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Identifying *AXES* in Articles

- **ASSERTION:**
 - Look for argumentative language
 - Introducing new idea: “The current debate about X *illustrates* ...”
 - Expanding on a previous idea: “To further understand X, ...”
 - Introducing contrasting point: “However,”
- **EVIDENCE:**
 - Look for signal phrases like “for example” or any type of citation.
- **EXPLANATION:**
 - Look for signal phrases that refer back to the evidence.
 - **This evidence** shows/means/suggests that...
 - Any sentence that shows an elaboration of a point or idea
- **SIGNIFICANCE:**
 - Look for language that refers back to the thesis.
 - Look for signal phrases like “thus” or “ultimately.”

Common Paragraph Issues

1. The paragraph is too short.

- Possible Solution: Revisit the AXES to ensure that the claim is arguable, you have sufficient evidence, and you have discussed the example sufficiently.

2. I don't know how to elaborate on a point/I've run out of things to say.

- Possible Solution: Consider other questions that might come up about your claim and rebut them (Counterclaim/Rebuttal) to show that you're critically thinking about the point by anticipating counterarguments.

3. I feel like I have too much summary (claims appear later in the paper).

- Possible Solution: Move directly to the claim and provide whatever details are needed to support the claim in that same paragraph. Avoid summarizing material for later discussion; **show** as you argue your claim.

4. I'm making too many points in one paragraph.

- Group related points together (if possible) to include in one paragraph. Develop using AXES.
- Select points that are immediately relevant and develop them accordingly.

Resources

- **Argumentation:**

- OWL Purdue. "Organizing Your Arguments."
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/03/>

- **AXES Structure:**

- UCSD Thurgood Marshall College. "AXES Method of Paragraph Development."
<https://marshall.ucsd.edu/doc/doc3/AXESMethodParagraphDevelopment.pdf>

- **Paragraphs:**

- The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill. "Paragraphs."
<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/paragraphs/>
- University of Saskatchewan Graduate Writing Videos. "Writing Well Organized Paragraphs." Student Learning Services.
https://library.usask.ca/studentlearning/resources/graduate_writing_videos.php

- **Transitions**

- <https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Transitions.html#clarification>

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