

CONSTRUCTING EFFECTIVE BODY PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic. This handout breaks the paragraph down into its conceptual and structural components. The conceptual components—**direction**, **movement**, and **bridges**—form the logical makeup of an effective paragraph. The structural elements—**topic sentence**, **transitions**, **evidence**, **analysis**, and **conclusion**—are identifiable parts of strong body paragraphs.

Conceptual Components

Direction – The entire paragraph should work toward proving a single idea. In other words, its analysis should move in one direction toward proving the claim laid out in the topic sentence. If a paragraph begins with one point of focus, it should not end with another or wander between different ideas. In instances where a counterclaim or rebuttal that presents a conflicting idea is introduced, it should ultimately serve to advance the direction of both the paragraph and argument.

Movement – It is useful to envision body paragraphs as links in the chain of reasoning that forms the overall argument of your essay. In order to get to the next link, each paragraph must establish a claim that moves your overall argument one step closer to its ultimate goal (i.e. proving its thesis). Though the topic sentence will announce your paragraph’s direction, the movement of your analysis within the paragraph will consist of pushing this claim from being unproven at the outset of the paragraph to logically compelling at the end.

Bridges – Bridges establish the coherence that makes the movement between your ideas easily understandable to the reader. Logical bridges are created by moving from established ideas to new ones, lending cohesion to your argument as it unfolds. Verbal bridges use language—repetition of keywords and synonyms, use of transitions, etc.—that makes the logical connections between your ideas clear to your reader.

Structural Components

Topic sentence – The first sentence in a paragraph should clearly announce the main claim that will be supported by the content of the paragraph. Effective topic sentences will often link these paragraph-level claims to material in the preceding paragraph or the overall thesis of the essay.

Transitions – Transitions are verbal bridges in which you use language to make the logical movement and structure of an essay clear to the reader. The topic sentence will often contain a transition that links the argument of the paragraph to the one made in the previous paragraph. This is most often accomplished by opening the paragraph with a prepositional phrase or by retaining some important language from the previous paragraph. The final sentence of a paragraph may also suggest a logical link to the argument to come. Transitions do not always link adjacent paragraphs. Good writers will refer back to relevant points made several paragraphs earlier. Especially long or complex papers will often contain several sentences (even entire paragraphs) of transitional material summarizing what the essay has sought to establish up to that point.

Evidence – Quotations, summaries, examples, data, testimony, etc. should be cited as evidence in support of each claim you make in your argument. In order to avoid generalization, you should strive to use evidence that is as specific as possible. Evidence should be preceded by an introduction to its source and relevance and followed by analysis of its significance within your overall argument.

Analysis – Evidence alone does not make your argument for you. Claims and evidence require analysis to turn them into an argument. Analyzing effectively requires showing or explaining how the evidence you have cited actually supports the larger claims your essay is making, both on the paragraph level and the thesis level. Because analytical sections are the places where your essay does real argumentative work, they should constitute the bulk of your paragraph (and essay).

Conclusion – Like the conclusion to the essay as a whole, the final sentence of a paragraph is a chance to sum up and solidify for your reader that your paragraph has established the claim it set out to. A concluding sentence will revisit the material from the topic sentence with an enhanced perspective.

BODY PARAGRAPH ANALYSIS

Topic Sentence – The paragraph’s opening sentence clearly establishes the claim that will be argued throughout: Swift undercuts Gulliver’s rejection of humanity by using his authorial power to turn the hero of his novel into a comical figure of pity. This topic sentence reproduces the tension at the heart of the essay’s thesis that “there is an ironic disconnect between Swift as author and Gulliver as narrator and critic of humankind.” The topic sentence also forges a subtle transition. The reference to “Gulliver’s negative view of humankind” refers back to the central claim of the previous paragraph.

Transitions (Movement) – The logical movement of this paragraph is announced by the word “devolve” in the topic sentence. As the author presents and analyzes the novelistic evidence of Gulliver’s mental unraveling, he makes the logic of his argument clear to his reader through the use of effective transitions. The author inserts sentences and phrases into his paragraph that trace Gulliver’s path from disillusionment, to sociopathia, to antisocial pathology. The author’s transitions also expose the logic of Swift’s changing attitude toward Gulliver. It is worth noting that these transitions are fully integrated into the author’s analysis, simultaneously serving as conclusions to one argument as they form introductions to the next. For example, the line “this disillusionment escalates into sociopathia” sums up the section of the author’s analysis dealing with Gulliver’s disillusionment while introducing the following section that focuses on his sociopathia.

Evidence – Note how the evidence about Gulliver’s welcome by his wife is introduced; the author tells the reader what to look for in the evidence—Gulliver’s loss of touch with human feelings, values, and priorities—before presenting it. This makes the paper easier to read because the reader is able to assess the adequacy of the evidence while reading it. In addition, the author is careful to present all of the necessary evidence—both the wife’s welcome and Gulliver’s reaction—before moving on to analysis. Note, in the use of phrases like “odious Animal,” how the author is careful to reproduce the specific pieces of Swift’s language that will be relevant for his later analysis.

Analysis – The burden on the author to analyze is lightened significantly by the way in which he introduces his evidence. However, he is still careful to reflect analytically on the material he has quoted. His assessment of “odious Animal” as a “shameful epithet for a loved one” goes beyond simply explicating the obvious meaning of this phrase; he also succinctly relates what the use of the phrase “odious Animal” says about Swift’s attitude toward Gulliver. In addition, note how the author’s analysis mingles illuminatingly with his presentation of new pieces of evidence. The “pathological withdrawal from human contact” that the author interprets from Gulliver’s reaction to his wife is reinforced by the description of Gulliver’s proclivity to socialize with his horses.

Conclusion – The author makes sure the reader understands the main argument of the paragraph by restating it before moving on. However, the author does not simply reproduce his initial contention that Swift undermines Gulliver’s antihumanism at the end of Gulliver’s Travels. He pushes his prior claim one step further by turning Swift’s rejection of Gulliver into a social commentary. This subtle addition serves as a transition to the following paragraph in which the author discusses Swift’s attitude toward human society.

Swift undermines Gulliver’s negative view of humankind by making his hero devolve, in the grip of that view, into an irrational and sadly comic character, unable to appreciate acts of genuine human goodness. Upon leaving the Houyhnhnms at the end of the story, Gulliver’s disillusionment with humanity and desire for withdrawal seem, at first, understandable, if not darkly humorous. He wants to find some “small Island uninhabited” in which to isolate himself from human society, “so horrible was the Idea...of returning to live in the Society and under the Government of Yahoos” (248). But this disillusionment escalates to sociopathia. When he returns home to his wife and children, “the Sight of them filled [him] only with Hatred, Disgust, and Contempt; and the more, by reflecting on the near alliance [he] had to them” (253). Just as Gulliver is disgusted with humanity, by this point Swift is clearly disgusted with Gulliver. Once affably curious, after departure from the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver loses touch with natural human feelings, values, and priorities. His wife welcomes him home with love, patience and, forbearance, taking him “in her arms and kiss[ing]” him (253). Instead of embracing her in return, Gulliver falls into a “Swoon” for having been touched by such an “odious Animal” (253)—a shameful epithet for a loved one. Rather than trying to integrate himself into human society, Gulliver pathologically withdraws from human contact and his time talking to a pair of stable horses (254). Here Swift shows us the danger of an excessive sensitivity to human failings.