

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE RESEARCH PARAGRAPH

Writing in all disciplines requires a researcher to place his or her ideas in conversation with other positions in the field. In order to do this, the writer is responsible for making a claim about the field and then persuasively defending that claim using evidence from published research on the same topic. This is the goal of a research paragraph. A successful research paragraph will effectively convey both the *scope of the investigation* and the *state of the field*. Each paragraph will consist of a topic sentence, evidence taken from sources, stitching that effectively links those sources to one another, a citation for each source, and a conclusion.

Conceptual Components

State of the field – In order to make a claim about how your argument contributes to a given field, you must first demonstrate to your reader what the scholarly conversation in that field looks like: settled arguments, unresolved debates, gaps in investigation, etc. Establishing the state of the field early in your essay will allow you to motivate your argument by showing how your ideas expand or challenge our current understanding of the topic your paper addresses.

Scope – Any argument will be more meaningful to some fields than it is to others. The range of sources you include in your research paragraph conveys which fields your argument is most relevant to. A broad collection of sources will suggest that your argument has a wide scope, that it engages and contributes to a variety of subject areas. A narrow set of sources will suggest a more limited—though not necessarily less important—contribution to the field.

Structural Components

Topic sentence (summary of the field) – The goal of any topic sentence is to make a claim that you will defend in the body of the paragraph. Since the goal of a research paragraph is to offer a summary of the field, the topic sentence should assert a clear position about the state of current research.

Evidence – In order to persuade a reader, any claim about the state of a particular field must be supported using evidence from published work in that field. In the sciences and social sciences, this evidence often takes the form of summaries of major positions (often backed up with multiple citations). The humanities, on the other hand, tend to rely more on direct quotation of relevant sources.

Stitching – Simply quoting a variety of sources in succession will not produce a persuasive argument about the state of your field of research. You must convey how the ideas in each source are related to one another. This type of argument demands the use of active verbs, clear explanation of each author's key terms, and nuanced description of the conceptual links between each source's ideas.

Citation – Citing the evidence you offer conveys the source of your ideas and saves you from the dishonest practice of passing others' ideas off as your own. In-text parenthetical citations are conventional in most fields (history, which uses footnotes, is one exception). In this method of citation the source author's name and the page number where the idea appears are included in your text and refer the reader to a full entry in your list of works cited should they want to seek out more information. In the sciences and social sciences, in-text citations also include the source's date of publication.

Conclusion (evolved summary) – As you approach the end of your research paragraph, your evidence will have supported the claim made in your topic sentence about the larger field from which those sources were drawn. As a result, you will want to revisit that initial claim at the end of the paragraph for some additional discussion. Returning to the ideas in your topic sentence at the conclusion of your paragraph serves two primary purposes: 1. to state an evolved—more nuanced or specific—version of your initial claim in light of the evidence you have offered and 2. to remind your reader of this claim as you move into the next paragraph that will, presumably, build upon these ideas in some way.

ANALYSIS OF A SAMPLE RESEARCH PARAGRAPH

Evidence – The author quotes three different sources as evidence for her claim that traditional ethnic humor relies on assertions of cultural superiority. However, she does not simply cite three roughly identical quotes. She evolves her ideas, thereby broadening the reader's perspective and giving herself more source material to work with in the later stages of her argument. She begins by citing a broad version of the superiority theory before turning to a second quote that situates that theory within her more specific context of ethnic humor. In the final quotation, she increases the specificity of her ideas yet again by introducing a version of the same theory that identifies “polar opposite adjectives” as the linguistic mechanism of superiority-based ethnic humor. The trajectory of ideas in this paragraph moves from broad to specific, establishing an initial overview and then working toward additional clarity.

Stitching – In the lead-ins to her quotes, the author is careful not only to prepare her reader to understand each idea but also to link those ideas to the ones that came before. Having just introduced a theory of humor based on superiority, the author forges a conceptual link by telling her reader that the ensuing quote will apply this concept to the more specific case of ethnic humor. After using that quote to establish that ethnic humor conventionally relies on assertions of cultural superiority, she indicates that her next quote “further clarifies” the issue, which it does by identifying opposed adjectives as the precise mechanism of superiority-based ethnic humor.

Citation – The author uses in-text parenthetical citations, which are conventional in most academic fields (history tends to be the exception). She identifies the name of each source before quoting it so that the reader knows who is speaking when the source's voice enters her argument. Because she has been careful to give each source's name in her text, she only needs to note the page number in the parentheses. Citing the name of each source allows the reader to locate its title in this essay's list of works cited (alphabetized by author's last name), and the page numbers allow the reader to locate the specific quote within that text.

Topic Sentence (summary of the field) – This essay's thesis is: “Taking advantage of their multi-ethnic identities, [Margaret] Cho and [Carlos] Mencia introduce a new version of ethnic humor that does not promote a cultural hierarchy, combining traditional superiority humor with comic correction by mocking the majority and the minority in the same routine.” Since the author seeks to argue that Cho and Mencia create “a new version of ethnic humor,” she is committed to demonstrating agreement about the old version in order to show how their routines work differently. This scholarly consensus is what she seeks to establish in this, her first body paragraph. As a result, the topic sentence makes a straightforward claim about traditional approaches to the field that she can then support in the body of the paragraph using material from her secondary sources.

Commentators have conventionally approached ethnic jokes

using the superiority theory of humor, which claims that people laugh when a joke makes them feel above the object of ridicule.

Thomas Hobbes characterizes this emotion as “sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly”

(47). Applying this concept to ethnic humor, John Morreall states that people derive this “sudden glory” from “mocking [immigrants] in great detail about their race, accent, clothing, ugliness, etc.” (10).

Leon Rappoport further clarifies how stereotypes and ethnicity-based mockery embody the superiority theory by explaining that these disparaging jokes often employ “polar opposite adjectives...[so that] only [the] negative end of the pair is emphasized [and] the positive end always remains implicitly understood as characteristic of the ‘superior’ joke teller” (33). With these jokes, the overt

debasement of immigrants simultaneously elevates the person

making the joke. Consequently, the opposing adjectives noted by

Rappoport suggest a hierarchy between the person who tells the joke

and the people at the butt of the joke.

Conclusion (evolved summary) – Having worked through a context of carefully chosen sources, the author does not end her paragraph with the final quote. Instead, she returns to the claim she established in the first sentence, this time in an evolved form. The sources she has quoted throughout her paragraph allow her to move beyond a simple restatement of her initial claim that conventional ethnic humor asserts the superiority of the joke teller's ethnicity. In her discussion of the adjectives that allow for simultaneous elevation of one culture and debasement of another, the author furthers her initial claim that ethnic humor establishes a cultural hierarchy by demonstrating how.