

INSTITUTE WRITING PROGRAM

THE WRITING CENTER

Paragraph Structure

While there are no hard and fast rules about what a paragraph has to look like, there are some general expectations about what a reader will find in a body paragraph of an academic paper.

Topic and/or transition sentences

This sentence (or two sentences, at most) moves your reader from the previous paragraph into the new one, and gives her an idea of what the new paragraph will be about. A **transition sentence** points the reader both backward and forward, often using transition words or phrases.

- *While Smith argues that cats are blood-thirsty killers, Jones claims they are misunderstood.* (This sentence indicates that the previous paragraph was about Smith’s argument, and the new paragraph will be about Jones’s argument. Furthermore, the use of the word “While” tells us that Smith’s and Jones’s argument are contrasting.)
- *Although kittens are very cute, there are some distinct benefits to puppies as well.* (The previous paragraph was about why kittens are cute, and the current one will be about the benefits of puppies.)
- *To address the difficulty involved in herding cats, pet owners have come up with several machines to aid in the process.* (The previous paragraph outlined the difficulties inherent in herding cats, while the current one will describe the machines that make cat-herding easier.)

A **topic sentence** gives your reader a clear idea of what the paragraph will be about. Each sentence that follows should relate to the topic sentence in some form. If a sentence does not clearly relate to the topic sentence, then it may need further explanation, or it may not belong in the paragraph at all. A topic sentence could be descriptive, or it could be the broad claim that the paragraph will support.

- *Cats often appear to be harmless, but evidence indicates that they would rip their owners to shreds if they were larger.* (The rest of the paragraph will offer the evidence that supports the claims that cats would maul their owners if they could.)
- *Experts disagree about whether cats or puppies are cuter, but the popular Schnauzer School’s defense of puppy aesthetics is often cited in support of puppy superiority.* (The rest of the paragraph will summarize the Schnauzer School’s theory of puppy aesthetics.)

Claims, evidence, and analysis

Once you have identified the topic of your paragraph, the following sentences should focus on making claims that relate to the topic and supporting those claims with evidence and analysis. A **claim** is a statement with which your reader could reasonably disagree and that needs to be proven with specific evidence. The information, facts, quotations, and citations that prove the claim are **evidence**. And the **analysis** is the sentence that explains how, exactly, the evidence supports or proves the claim.



Claim: Kittens’ soft fur and big eyes are merely clever defenses developed to brainwash unsuspecting humans.

Evidence: Biologists have found that until they began sharing domestic space with humans, most young cats had beady eyes and porcupine-like fur.

Analysis: Cats who did not repulse their human neighbors lived longer and healthier lives, and so they developed pleasing characteristics out of manipulative self-interest.

A body paragraph should follow the general order of **claim-evidence-analysis**. You might repeat that cycle more than once, depending on how many claims you need to prove in the paragraph, but each individual claim should be followed by specific evidence and analysis that explains how the evidence relates to the claim.

Putting it all together

Transition/topic sentence. The previous paragraph discussed experts who approve of cats, while this one will summarize research that raises questions about the claims in the previous paragraph.



Although many experts claim that cats make perfectly good pets, recent studies suggest that pet owners would be wise to reconsider cats’ suitability as pets.	← Claim	
Cats are manipulative, wily, and dangerous. A 2013 study by Drs. Schnauzer and Weimaraner found when a cat was placed in a room with a small child and was observed, either by a person in the same room, or by someone watching through one-way glass, the cat nuzzled the child briefly before curling up and purring. When there were no other humans in the room, only a hidden camera, the cat immediately attempted to suck the baby’s breath.		← Evidence
Cats are clever enough to identify a human’s presence, even through one-way glass, and in the presence of humans, they perform a series of actions that makes them appear harmless and lovable, but when they are not being observed, they are ruthless killers.		



Analysis. The author explains how the evidence cited proves the claim that cats are manipulative, wily, and dangerous.