

### An example of a structured paragraph:

[The lead sentence =] The University of Reading is an increasingly popular choice for applicants. [The middle section =] Reading receives well over 20,000 applicants each year from all over the world. Our degrees have currency in blue chip, research and educational arenas. 94.5 per cent of new graduates find employment or enter higher study within six months of graduating (CAS, 2006). Recent market research (Broad, 2006) indicates how highly University of Reading degrees are rated by a range of employers. [The concluding sentence =] Overall Reading students are highly successful in obtaining graduate jobs.

This basic outline of a paragraph can be developed when presenting a point of view, such as a line of argument for an essay. Plan one main point per paragraph which can be planned like a mini essay:

1. Sentence introducing the point
2. Sentence making the point with necessary detail.
3. Illustration of point using evidence: case study, figures, research.
4. Interpretation of the evidence – how & why it supports the point
5. Sentence summing up the point and showing how it addresses the question or contributes to your argument.

### Useful Websites:

**The Internet Grammar of English:** [www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/internet-grammar/)

**English grammar exercises:** (Higher Education Academy/Anglia Polytechnic University) [www.llas.ac.uk/materialsbank/mb061/index.htm](http://www.llas.ac.uk/materialsbank/mb061/index.htm)

**Learn English** (for adult learners whose first language is not English) [www.learnenglish.org.uk](http://www.learnenglish.org.uk)

**The Academic Phrasebank:** [www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/](http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/)

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at

[www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice](http://www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice)

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# Sentences and paragraphs



## Academic writing 2

This guide gives a summary of how to use sentences and paragraphs to structure your writing. It includes advice on:

- Common problems with sentences
- Using paragraphs

## Common problems with sentences

A simple way of describing a sentence is to say that it is "a complete thought expressed in words" (Peck & Coyle, 2005, 40). More formally, a sentence must include a verb, or it is just a phrase. So:

- Mary **paints** the chair blue  
This is a sentence, because it includes a verb ("paints")
- Mary's blue chair  
This does not include a verb, so it is a phrase

The sentence above is a **simple sentence** with just one main clause. In academic writing, you will need to write more **complex sentences** which use main and dependent clauses and phrases. The good news is that, although it sounds daunting, this is probably what you are used to doing everyday! You just need to be aware of the possible problems that can arise in academic writing.

## Writing complete sentences

There are two particular problems to watch out for with sentences. The first is to make sure the sentence is a genuine sentence - that it includes a verb, and that it is not simply a dependent clause. Take this sentence, for example:

- "The document, which had been restored by the conservator, was put on display."

This includes a main clause: "The document was put on display." This includes a verb, and doesn't depend for its meaning on any other clauses or phrases.

It also includes a dependent clause: "which had been restored by the conservator". This includes a verb, but cannot stand as a sentence in its own right because it depends on something in the main clause for its meaning ("the document").

You could make two sentences by putting the subject back into the dependent clause, so you would have:

- "The document was put on display. It had been restored by the conservator."

However, this would result in a string of simple sentences which do not feel very academic in their purpose. Academic writing is about joining up your ideas and showing how they relate to each other, rather than just describing things.

## Keep your clauses separate

The second thing to watch out for is that your clauses are carefully organised so that the reader can understand all the separate ideas and how they relate to each other. This means using punctuation carefully to separate clauses, and making sure they come in the right order in the sentence. For instance:

The results of Experiment B were comparable to but slightly different due to the different equipment which was used which was different again to the equipment used in Experiment A to those of Experiment C.

This is difficult to make sense of. Using punctuation to separate the clauses makes it easier to understand. You may need to reorganise some of the clauses as well to make it easier to follow.

The results of Experiment B were comparable to, but slightly different to, those of Experiment C, due to the different

equipment which was used (which was different again to the equipment used in Experiment A).

Reading your sentences aloud is a good way to check whether they are easy to understand. It can also show you if they're too long - if you're gasping for breath, you may need some more punctuation, or to break the sentence into two shorter ones.

## Make sure your tenses and plurals all agree

One final common problem with sentences often occurs when you are composing your writing at the computer, because it is so easy to cut and paste and move sections around. What often happens is that tenses and plurals then don't 'agree' with each other. Always read your work carefully before submitting it. Reading it aloud is helpful, as you are less likely to miss words, or assume it says what you want it to say.

## Using paragraphs

Paragraphs act as signposts in your writing, telling whoever reads your work where your ideas are going, and when you are moving on to a different point.

Since paragraphs are used to explain your argument in stages, it is important that you **only express one idea or set of ideas in each paragraph**. If you try to say too much, your reader will be confused and your argument will be clouded.

## How do I structure a paragraph?

A paragraph should contain:

1. **Lead sentence** - this tells the reader what the paragraph is going to be about.
2. **Middle section** - this can be done in two stages: A) Expand on and refine your idea if necessary, then B) provide evidence to support the idea, such as examples, dates, data, statistics, or theories. [N.B. This list is *not* exhaustive - just remember that this section is where you need to provide appropriate evidence to support the idea in the lead sentence.]
3. **Concluding sentence** - sums up the main part of the argument in that paragraph. Having written this, you should feel that everything to do with this part of the argument has been concluded, and there should be correlation between the idea in the first line and the summing up in the last sentence.