

Outlining a Multi-Point Paragraph

There are many ways to organize academic paragraphs. This resource is about one of the most basic, the multi-point paragraph. In a multi-point paragraph, the topic sentence (main idea) is supported by main points. Specific evidence and explanation are provided for each main point.

Parts of a Multi-Point Paragraph

Topic Sentence

The topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence has two parts: the topic (what the paragraph is about) and the controlling idea (what you have to say about the topic). The topic sentence is usually the first or second sentence in a paragraph.

The Main Points

The main points explain why you believe the topic sentence is true. Most often there are 2 to 4 parallel points such as a number of reasons, a number of similarities, a number of categories or a number of steps in a process. Each new point is often introduced with a transition like “first,” “second” or “third.”

Evidence and Explanation

The support for each main point is the evidence and explanation. The evidence might include facts, statistics, quotations, anecdotes, logical argument, examples, elaboration, description or definition. For a research paper, the evidence generally comes from research sources. The second part of giving support – explanation – is crucial because the reader needs to be told how the evidence supports the point that the writer is making. The purpose of the evidence and explanation is to prove the truth of the main point.

Concluding Sentence

The concluding sentence restates the topic sentence, using different words. For long paragraphs, it may also restate the main points in the paragraph. The concluding sentence is not always included, especially when the paragraph is part of a longer piece of writing.

Example of a Multi-Point Paragraph

This simple example of a multi-point paragraph shows how such a paragraph is often organized

The Learning Centre is a busy place. One reason is that many students come to the Learning Centre to get tutoring help. They come for help with writing, study skills, math and course concepts. Often there are five to ten tutoring pairs working together in the Learning Centre at any one time. Another reason the Learning Centre is so busy is that many students like to use its computers. They write papers, do research, check their email and use Blackboard. So many people want to use the computers that there are often people standing around and waiting for a free computer. Finally, the reception desk is often busy. People come to the desk to make and change appointments, to ask for resources and to ask for information about the Learning Centre. People often have to line up to get help at the reception desk, especially when classes have just ended. Taken together, then, the tutoring, the computers and the reception desk all contribute to making the Learning Centre a very active place.

Can you dissect the components of the paragraph above?

- Circle the topic sentence (or main idea) of the paragraph. Why did you choose this as the main idea?
- Underline each point that is used to support that main idea.
- Put a * by the evidence and explanation for each of the points.

You can check the next section to see how your answers compare.

Planning a Multi-Point Paragraph

A good way to plan a multi-point paragraph is to make an outline. This is the outline made before writing the example paragraph. This helps you to focus on which points to use, what evidence you have and how you can explain the connection between the evidence and the points you are making. Once you are satisfied with the organization of the outline, use it as a guide to write your paragraph.

Topic Sentence: The Learning Centre is a busy place.

Main Point 1: Many students come to get tutoring help

Evidence and Explanation:

- Help with writing, study skills, math, and course concepts
- Usually 3-5 tutoring pairs working in the LC so busy

Main Point 2: Many students want to use the computers

Evidence and Explanation:

- Write papers, do research, email, and use WebCT
- Often all computers full; students wait for a free computer

Main Point 3: Lots of people come to the reception desk

Evidence and Explanation:

- Make and change appointments; get information
- Especially between classes; often line-ups

Concluding Sentence: The concluding sentence was not used here because it is a short paragraph.

The *topic* is the Learning Centre and the *controlling idea* is that it is busy.

Three *main points* show the different ways in which the Learning Centre is busy. The main point sentences identify the things that make the Learning Centre a busy place: tutoring, computers and reception.

Each point has *evidence* which describes activities that go on in the Learning Centre. These are facts: e.g. facts about skills tutored. The *explanation* shows how those activities connect to the idea of the busyness of the Learning Centre: e.g. how many people get tutoring at a time connects the tutoring activity to the idea of busyness.

Creating a Paragraph

Use this guide to try making an outline of a paragraph with three main points on a topic of your own with these components:

Topic Sentence:

Main Point 1:

Evidence and Explanation:

Main Point 2:

Evidence and Explanation:

Main Point 3:

Evidence and Explanation: