

How to Construct Research Paragraphs

Paragraphing in a paper as large as the extended essay is a much greater challenge than in a shorter essay. There are two basic laws when paragraphing for your extended essay that are not unlike other papers: every paragraph should express one main idea and that idea should in some way relate back to your thesis statement/research question. Before reading further, it is extremely critical that you print and study the structure of a high-scoring Extended Essay in your subject matter or field of study. I cannot possibly recreate that experience for you here outside of giving you some basics. It is important that you learn from the best: those students who earned A's on their extended essays. Note what they include in paragraphs and how they decided when to move on to a new one as you read through the rest of this explanation.

A. Elements of a Paragraph

To be as effective as possible, a paragraph should contain each of the following: Unity, Coherence, A Topic Sentence, and Adequate Development. As you will see, all of these traits overlap. Using and adapting them to your individual purposes will help you construct effective paragraphs.

B. Unity

The entire paragraph should concern itself with a single focus. If it begins with a one focus or major point of discussion, it should not end with another or wander within different ideas.

C. Coherence

Coherence is the trait that makes the paragraph easily understandable to a reader. You can help create coherence in your paragraphs by creating logical bridges and verbal bridges.

D. Logical bridges

The same idea of a topic is carried over from sentence to sentence. So, if topic "A" is discussed in sentence #1, topic "A" is discussed throughout the entire paragraph. For example, in an English paper, the diction of a poem may be its own paragraph. However, if the diction creates positive images in the first three stanzas and negative imagery in the last three stanzas, it would be best to have two separate body paragraphs. The logical bridge would be the turn in imagery. The organization of the paragraphs would also be discussed chronologically, as a poem might.

E. Verbal bridges

Key words can be repeated in several sentences

Synonymous words can be repeated in several sentences

Pronouns can refer to nouns in previous sentences (his, their, this, its)

Transition words can be used to link ideas from different sentences (Furthermore, Additionally, Second, Finally)

F. A topic sentence

A topic sentence is a sentence that indicates in a general way what idea or thesis the paragraph is going to deal with. Although not all paragraphs have clear-cut topic sentences, and despite the fact that topic sentences can occur anywhere in the paragraph (as the first sentence, the last sentence, or somewhere in the middle), an easy way to make sure your reader understands the topic of the paragraph is to put your topic sentence near the beginning of the paragraph. (This is a good general rule for less experienced writers, although it is not the only way to do it). Regardless of whether you include an explicit topic sentence or not, you should be able to easily summarize what the paragraph is about.

G. Adequate development

The topic (which is introduced by the topic sentence) should be discussed fully and adequately. Again, this varies from paragraph to paragraph, depending on the author's purpose, but writers should beware of paragraphs that only have two or three sentences. It's a pretty good bet that the paragraph is not fully developed if it is that short.

Some methods to make sure your paragraphs are well-developed in a research paper:

Use examples and illustrations

Cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others)

Examine testimony (what other people say such as quotes and paraphrases)

Use an anecdote or story

Define terms in the paragraph

Compare and contrast

Evaluate causes and reasons

Examine effects and consequences

Analyze the topic

Describe the topic

Offer a chronology of an event (time segments)

How do I know when to start a new paragraph?

You should start a new paragraph when:

1. When you begin a new idea or point. New ideas should always start in new paragraphs. If you have an extended idea that spans multiple paragraphs, each new point within that idea should have its own paragraph.
2. To contrast information or ideas. Separate paragraphs can serve to contrast sides in a debate, different points in an argument, or any other difference.
3. When your readers need a pause. Breaks in paragraphs function as a short "break" for your readers—adding these in will help your writing more readable. You would create a break if the paragraph becomes too long or the material is complex.
4. When you are ending your introduction or starting your conclusion. Your introductory and concluding material should always be in a new paragraph. Many introductions and conclusions have multiple paragraphs depending on their content, length, and the writer's purpose.

H. Your Best Strategy

Again, the best option for you outside this general list of guidelines is to take a great extended essay and analyze a few paragraphs in a row for the writer's: topic sentences, pacing/length, methods of development that seem to work best for your subject matter (see above list), and bridges and transitions. See if you can mimic that style in your own writing since it is an obvious formula that works. **Where your supervisor tells you that you need work on your draft, come back to this handout and re-examine your organizational strategy.**

Finally, verify that your paragraphs align with your outline and consistently refer back to your thesis and research question. **Remember that the biggest mistake IB students make in writing their Extended Essay is that they forget to answer their actual research question!**