



The Writing Center



Paragraphing: The MEAL Plan

Effective paragraphing is a central skill in academic writing, and grasping the general form of a paragraph provides a good foundation for strong writing. **One way to envision a body paragraph is as a “complete MEAL,” with the components being the paragraph’s Main idea, Evidence, Analysis, and Link back to the larger claim.**

The Main Idea

The *main idea* is the paragraph’s central thrust. Often the main idea/thrust appears in the paragraph’s first sentence, where it is sometimes called the “**topic sentence.**” However, some paragraphs offer their main idea in the second or third sentence. Also, some paragraphs may cover several related topics. Regardless of whether the paragraph covers one idea or multiple related ideas, your reader should have a clear idea of the paragraph’s main point at the beginning of the paragraph.

Evidence and Analysis

Evidence and analysis are a paragraph’s main course, the meat (or tofu); they are what allow you to prove that your paragraph’s main idea is plausible. Your evidence could be information from a variety of sources, including journal articles, research or interviews, a quotation or paraphrase from a work of literature, an image, a chain of logical reasoning you have developed, or an anecdote or personal experience. However, evidence shouldn’t be plopped down in a paragraph and left to “speak for itself.” If you leave your evidence unexplained, your reader may interpret it differently than you intended, and if that happens, your main idea doesn’t get the support it needs. Therefore your paragraph should carefully *analyze* the evidence it provides; it should, in other words, explain exactly how the evidence you’ve cited proves what you think it proves. **Often a paragraph’s “E” and “A” are hard to separate: you might provide some evidence, analyze it, and then provide more evidence and analysis.** Sometimes individual sentences will contain both evidentiary and analytic elements. Think about it like this: a paragraph with no evidence and analysis is like a grilled cheese sandwich with no cheese. No one likes a bread sandwich or a paragraph with no evidence and/or analysis.

Link Back to the Larger Claim

A paragraph’s *link back to the larger claim* can be implicit or explicit, depending on how thoroughly you have proved your point. Nevertheless your reader should get a good sense of how your paragraph fits into the larger scheme of your paper’s argument. He or she shouldn’t finish reading the paragraph and think, “Why did the writer put this paragraph in this paper? I don’t see how this idea is relevant!” An effective paragraph will clarify its own place in the essay’s (or section’s) larger claim.

MEAL Paragraph Examples

*This handout has been adapted from [Duke University's handouts](#).

Main idea is underlined.

Examples and Analysis are **bold**.

Link to thesis is *italicized*.

Thesis of Essay #1: Even with the best planning, however, tent camping can be an extremely frustrating experience due to uncontrolled factors such as bad weather, wildlife encounters, and equipment failures.

Another problem likely to be faced during a camping trip is run-ins with wildlife, which can range from mildly annoying to dangerous. **Minor inconveniences include mosquitoes and ants. The swarming of mosquitoes can literally drive annoyed campers indoors. If an effective repellent is not used, the camper can spend an interminable night scratching, which will only worsen the itch. Ants do not usually attack campers, but keeping them out of the food can be quite an inconvenience. Although these insects cause minor discomfort, some wildlife encounters are potentially dangerous. There are many poisonous snakes in the United States, such as the water moccasin and the diamond-back rattlesnake. When hiking in the woods, the camper must be careful where he steps. Also, the tent must never be left open. Snakes, searching for either shade from the sun or shelter from the rain, can enter a tent. An encounter between an unwary camper and a surprised snake can prove to be fatal.** *Run-ins can range from unpleasant to dangerous, but the camper must realize that they are sometimes inevitable.*

*Paragraph adapted from: http://www.sandhills.edu/english/essaybasics/5_paragraph_essay.html

Thesis of Essay #2: In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove struggles to find her place in her community because of its hostile environment, uncaring neighbors, and lack of interaction with those uncaring neighbors.

Main idea is underlined.

Examples are **bold**.

Analysis is **bold** and underlined.

Link to thesis is *italicized*.

The negative effect the environment can have on the individual is shown in Morrison's comparison of marigolds in the ground to people in the environment. Early in the novel, Claudia and Frieda are concerned that the marigold seeds they planted that spring never sprouted. At the end of the novel, Claudia reflects on the connection to Pecola's failure:

I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, our land, our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. (206)

Morrison obviously views the environment as a powerful influence on the individual when she suggests that the earth itself is hostile to the growth of the marigold seeds. In a similar way, people

cannot thrive in a hostile environment. *Pecola Breedlove is a seed planted in the hostile environment, and, when she is not nurtured in any way, she cannot thrive.*

*Paragraph adapted from: [Goshen College's website](#).