

The Writing Center

DLA: Narrative & Descriptive Paragraphs



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Student Name:

Important Note

To get completion credit for this DLA, make sure you complete all the required activities. If you'd like help while working on a specific DLA, you can meet with a specialist at the Writing Center. Keep in mind that you might need to schedule a second appointment to review your work, check your understanding, and get your completion credit. You can only review **ONE** DLA per appointment. (Check the last section of this DLA for information on making your appointment and receiving completion credit for your work).

Activities (approximately 1 hour)

Read the information, complete the activities that follow, and be prepared to discuss your answers when you meet with a tutor.

Note on Writing Center Paragraph DLAs

This DLA, Narrative and Descriptive Paragraphs, is for students who are writing about personal experiences or describing people and places; for example, AMLA students or students working on UC personal insight questions may need to do this kind of writing.

If you are enrolled in English 1A and writing an essay that is more analytical or argumentative in nature, please refer to the Paragraph Development: The MEAL Plan DLA for help with that type of writing.

Understanding Different Types of Paragraphs

Paragraphs come in different styles and flavors, and each type of paragraph has its own structural rules and techniques for development. When writing a standard essay, you will write an introduction paragraph, multiple body paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph. The body paragraphs for academic essays will usually be argumentative or analytical in nature. These paragraphs typically analyze a quote or idea, or they will argue for or against a certain proposition or claim.

However, sometimes you will need to write a different type of essay and body paragraph. The focus of this DLA is on the structure and development of paragraphs that are either narrative or descriptive in nature. The difference between stand-alone paragraphs and body paragraphs that are part of a longer essay will also be discussed.

Narrative Paragraphs

Narrative paragraphs and essays tell a story. This story is usually from your own personal experience, but it may also be an event that happened to someone else or a historical event. Narratives usually have a beginning, middle, and an end, but the story does not have to be told in chronological order.

Your narrative should have a purpose for being told, and the audience should gain some new insight or perspective after reading it. When writing a narrative in response to a prompt, be sure that the connection between the prompt and your narrative is clear. For example, if you are asked to write a narrative that demonstrates your leadership experience, it should be clear to the reader how the story you're writing about demonstrates this experience.

Descriptive Paragraphs

Descriptive paragraphs and essays describe someone or something. This could be a person, object, experience, or concept. Descriptive writing relies on rich detail to help the reader see and understand the topic as clearly as possible. This extensive use of detail is often described as showing instead of telling or explaining.

As with narrative writing, a descriptive paragraph or essay should have a reason for being told. Your description should clearly connect to the prompt, and there should be a theme or point to your description. This can help you decide which details to include, and which are irrelevant to your purpose.

A Note on First and Third Person

Most academic writing requires the use of third person and pronouns such as *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they*. However, when writing about a personal experience, it is appropriate to use first person and the pronoun *I*. For a piece of descriptive writing, you may use either first or third person, depending on the assignment and topic. Whether you choose to write in first or third person, it is important that you are consistent with this choice throughout your writing.

Structuring Narrative or Descriptive Body Paragraphs

Body paragraphs consist of a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence. Introduction and conclusion paragraphs are structured differently; for additional help with these types of paragraphs, please refer to the Introductions DLA and the Conclusions DLA.

Topic Sentence

Paragraphs should have a topic sentence that states the main idea of your paragraph and the point you would like to make about this idea. The topic sentence should also be connected to and expand upon an element of your thesis, making clear how this body paragraph relates to your essay as a whole.

Look at the following examples:

Thesis:	The summer I spent as an intern for a Hollywood production company taught me how to deal with difficult personalities and handle high-pressure situations.
Topic Sentence:	Mr. Gladstone wore a permanent scowl, ready to yell at anyone who failed to anticipate his every need, want, or desire.
Thesis:	The painting “The Sugar Shack” by Ernie Barnes makes bold use of color, content, and movement to portray a vibrant image of African American culture.
Topic Sentence:	Barnes uses several shades of yellow, orange, and red throughout the painting, colors that convey life and energy.

The topic sentence is typically the first sentence of the paragraph but, depending on the style of writing, can sometimes occur later.

Supporting Details

Three important concepts that help with the writing of body paragraphs are paragraph development, coherence, and unity. Paragraph development means using sufficient supporting details to expand upon and develop the idea introduced in your topic sentence. These sentences should follow some type of logical order and use appropriate transitional signals; this is called paragraph coherence. Supporting details should also be immediately relevant to your topic sentence; this is called paragraph unity.

Paragraph Development

The details you provide after your topic sentence are crucial in ensuring that the reader clearly understands your narrative or descriptive writing. Writers often err by giving too few details, forcing the audience to fill in gaps on their own. The following techniques can help you generate sufficient support for your topic sentence.

Five W’s and One H

These basic journalistic questions – *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* – can assist you in providing foundational information for your topic. Imagine that the reader is asking these questions, and your paragraph is providing the answers. The exact nature of these questions will depend on your topic.

The following chart provides some ideas.

Question Word	Possible Questions
Who	Who are the people involved? Who is affected? Who is interested in this topic or event?
What	What story are you telling? What are you describing? What is most significant about your topic?
Where	Where did the event occur?
When	When did the event happen?
Why	Why is your topic important? Why did the event happen? Why does the reader need to know about this topic?
How	How did the event happen? How does the event impact you or others? How do you feel about your topic?

FRIEDs

FRIEDs, developed by Dr. Karen Russikoff of Cal Poly Pomona, is a mnemonic device that can help you add a variety of supporting details to your paragraphs. The letters stand for:

- **F:** Facts
- **R:** Reasons
- **I:** Incidents
- **E:** Examples
- **D:** Details

You do not need to add all of these elements to your paragraph, nor do you need to use them in any particular order. The topic of your paragraph will dictate which of these supporting details will be appropriate.

The following table offers some suggestions.

FRIEDs	Questions to Ask Yourself
Facts	Are there any facts I can add about my topic that will add interest and depth?
Reasons	Can I include any reasons that help explain my topic?
Incidents	Is there an incident that demonstrates something about my topic?
Examples	Can I add examples that help clarify my topic?
Details	Are there additional details that will help my topic come alive for the reader?

Five Senses

You can add details to your narrative or description by using the traditional five senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. You can also use the sense of interoception by describing internal states of the body. Try to go beyond immediately obvious and superficial observations. Incorporate details that give the reader a different or unexpected perspective.

The following chart provides examples of descriptive writing that incorporates these senses.

Sense	Examples
Sight	“He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines.” --Mark Twain, <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>
Sound	“When at last he began to speak, it sounded almost as though he were singing, sadly, in a dream.” -- Hugh Lofting, <i>The Story of Doctor Dolittle</i>
Touch	I’ll flip the vegetables as they sear, and as usual, the tongs won’t be long enough to keep my hands from scorching like bare feet on the beach parking lot. --Peter Wells, “Cooking with Dexter: Bait and Wish,” <i>The New York Times Magazine</i>

Sense	Examples
Smell	“The smell of good bread baking, like the sound of lightly flowing water, is indescribable in its evocation of innocence and delight.” --MFK Fisher, <i>The Art of Eating</i>
Taste	“Mr. Willy Wonka can make marshmallows that taste of violets, . . . and little feathery sweets that melt away deliciously the moment you put them between your lips.” --Roald Dahl, <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i>
Interoception	“But I am here, my legs blocks of concrete, my lungs empty of air, my throat burning. There will be no floating away.” --Khaled Hosseini, <i>The Kite Runner</i>

Paragraph Coherence

Your paragraph should have a logical order that enables readers to effortlessly follow your ideas. Some organizational patterns work better than others for a given topic, but there often isn't a right or wrong method. Different writers can take the same information and organize it in a myriad of ways, depending on the stylistic choices they make.

The following are some commonly used paragraph and essay organizational patterns.

Chronological Order

Writing in chronological order means writing about events in the order they occurred. Writers of narratives often use this choice to organize their essays or paragraphs, but it is not the only choice available. You may choose to tell the events of a story out of order for greater emotional impact.

Reverse Order of Importance

You can choose to organize your paragraph or essay by beginning with the least important point and ending with what is most significant. For example, if you are writing a descriptive essay about an important person from your childhood, you may begin with less significant details, such as appearance and mannerisms, and end with more important information, such as a description of this person's character or why she is so important to you.

Spatial Order

If you are describing a physical object or space, you may choose some kind of spatial framework to organize your writing. For example, if you are describing a painting, you could describe the work from left to right, from top to bottom, from the center outwards, or in a clockwise direction. Usually, readers will not have access to a photo of what you are describing, so it's important to keep them well oriented. Readers can easily get lost in your description if you introduce details in random order.

Transitional Signals

Regardless of the organizational pattern you choose, it's important to use transitional words and phrases that smoothly connect one idea to the next. Writing that lacks transitional signals is disjointed and hard to understand. Refer to the Transitions DLA for more practice on this topic.

Paragraph Unity

All sentences in your body paragraph should be relevant to your topic sentence and help support, explain, or describe the paragraph's main idea. These sentences should be specifically related to your main idea, not just generally or tangentially relevant. You also want to avoid the repetition of ideas.

Sometimes, there may be just one or two sentences that are off topic, and these can easily be cut out of the paragraph or moved to another part of the essay. On the other hand, sometimes writers begin to ramble because the main idea lacks development. Feeling that the paragraph is too short, writers begin to pad their ideas or veer off onto another topic.

During the revision process, carefully examine the sentences in your paragraph and ask yourself how they expand on the topic sentence. If your paragraph is close to the length of a page or longer, be sure that you are only discussing one topic in the paragraph. If your paragraph is too short, review the section above on paragraph development and use some of those techniques to expand your ideas.

Concluding Sentence

Paragraphs should have some kind of concluding sentence which either summarizes the ideas in the paragraph, connects the ideas in the paragraph to the thesis, or provides a transition to the next paragraph. Often with narrative or descriptive writing, the last sentence of a body paragraph will help propel the reader forward, so this sentence will connect the current paragraph to the following one.

Stand-Alone Paragraphs

Stand-alone paragraphs follow the same general pattern as a body paragraph for an essay. However, a stand-alone paragraph may be longer than a body paragraph for an essay. Additionally, stand-alone paragraphs will usually cover several points instead of just one. You should begin with a topic sentence that states the purpose of your paragraph, but you may have mini topic sentences throughout the paragraph that introduce your main points. Finally, instead of a single concluding sentence, you may need to write two or three sentences to sufficiently wrap up the paragraph. You might have one sentence that serves as a summary or synthesis of the paragraph's main ideas and one or two more sentences that explain the significance of what you wrote in the paragraph.

Activities

Check off each box once you have completed the activity.

☐ 1. Narrative and Descriptive Paragraphs Review

Write answers to the questions below.

What is the difference between narrative writing and descriptive writing?

What is paragraph development?

What is paragraph coherence?

What is paragraph unity?

□ 2. Identify Paragraph Elements

Read the following sample narrative and descriptive paragraphs. Underline the topic sentence, **highlight** transition words, and identify which type of organizational pattern is used.

Narrative Paragraph: Topic – An Act of Kindness

I will always remember my first day of junior high school because of the kindness a fellow student showed towards me. It was a scary day because I had gone to elementary school in a different city, so when I started junior high, I didn't know anyone at my new school. I woke up especially early that morning, and after getting ready and eating breakfast, I walked to the bus stop. Other students were there, but I didn't know them. I was too shy and nervous to introduce myself, and none of them talked to me. When the bus came, we all boarded. Stop after stop, the bus doors opened, more students got on, but nobody sat next to me. We finally arrived at school, and I looked nervously at my printed schedule. I found my first class, then went to the next, and the next. At 12:00, it was time for lunch. The outdoor tables were all full, and I couldn't bring myself to sit at a table full of students who all knew each other. Instead, I sat on a bench by myself and began to eat my sandwich. Suddenly, I noticed that another girl was sitting next to me. Her name was Mya, and she was also a new student. We talked during the entire lunch period, and after lunch, it turned out that we had English class together. I was so relieved to have made a new friend, and it turned out that Mya would be my good friend through junior high and high school. She is still my friend now in college. Her small yet kind act of friendship towards me is something I will never forget. Now, when I see someone alone and with no one to talk to, I always make an effort to give that person a friendly smile and start up a conversation.

What kind of organizational pattern is used?

Descriptive Paragraph: Topic – A Special Childhood Place

My grandparents' home in Calexico, California, is a very special place from my childhood. I haven't been there in decades, yet I still remember so many details of the small white clapboard house on Blair Avenue. There was no lawn in front of the house; instead, an expanse of small, smooth rocks filled the space where the grass would have been. Past the lawn of rocks was the front porch, where two rocking chairs with faded red cushions sat off to the side. The front door opened into the living room, which always felt cool and inviting despite the withering desert climate. My grandparents were from Mexico, so art from their home country hung above the floral yellow sofa and matching armchairs. Past the living room was the kitchen, then the dining room, and finally the guest room, which is where my family and I stayed when we visited. It was a cozy room with a tiled floor, foldout sofa, and knick-knacks on every possible surface. A sliding door from the guest room led to my favorite place of all, the backyard. Colorful flowers lined the edges of the yard, and I inhaled their fragrance whenever I played outside. In the back half of the yard was my grandfather's workshop. It was a small shed where he made toys, clocks, and lamps, all out of wood. I still have some of the things that he made for me, and whenever I hold them, I remember the happy times I spent at that house. I'll never visit the house again because my grandparents sold it long ago and have since passed away, but the memories of their house will always live in my heart.

What kind of organizational pattern is used?

Choose 3a or 3b Below

☐ 3a. Revise Your Own Writing

Review a narrative or descriptive paragraph that you have previously written and that needs revision. Using the techniques described in this DLA, improve the paragraph's development, use transition signals to improve paragraph coherence, and check that all of the sentences are related to the topic.

When you meet with a DLA tutor, bring the original draft and revised draft. Be prepared to point out the changes you made and explain how they improve the paragraph.

☐ 3b. Write Your Own Paragraph

Read the four topics below and **choose one**. In a word processing program or on a separate sheet of paper, write one paragraph about your chosen topic. Use the techniques from this DLA for paragraph development and cohesion, and check for paragraph unity when you edit your writing.

- Describe your greatest talent or skill.
- Describe a peaceful place that you like to visit.
- Write a narration about a challenging class you have taken at Mt. SAC.
- Write a narration about a special trip or vacation you have taken.

□ 4. Review the DLA/Receive Completion Credit

1. Go to [EAB Navigate](#) and make an appointment (online or in-person).
2. Attend your session and be prepared to explain your understanding of the information you've learned in the DLA. Consider the main concept you learned and how you might use this in your future assignments/classes.
3. If your professor asks you to provide proof, you can review the "appointment summary report" through EAB Navigate (app or desktop). You will find all Writing Center appointments under "appointment summary reports" (app or desktop). Look for the summary report for your DLA appointment. This is where your writing specialist will indicate the title of your DLA and state whether it is "completed" or "not completed." If it is marked as "not completed," book a follow up appointment to complete.

Note: Appointment summary reports are also sent weekly to your instructor on record. If there is an issue, please contact us at writingcenter@mtsac.edu or (909) 274-5325.

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