



Paragraph Development: The MEAL Plan

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

Instructor: _____

Course: _____

About This DLA

Important Note

All the activities (4) in the DLA must be completed in their entirety before meeting with a tutor and receiving credit. Where indicated, complete your work on this sheet. If your instructor wants evidence of this completed DLA, return this form to him or her with the tutor's signature included.

Learning Outcomes

Through computer and other independent work, you will be able to write a cohesive, analytical paragraph using the MEAL rubric.

Activities (approximately 1.25 hours)

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

Understanding the MEAL Plan

Academic writing is often argumentative in nature; your thesis is a claim that must be supported with evidence to prove its strength and validity. The major claim of your thesis is broken down into smaller claims which are developed in your body paragraphs. All of your body paragraphs must relate directly to your thesis in order for your essay to progress logically.

Your body paragraphs, in turn, must have a coherent and logical structure so that the reader can easily follow your ideas and arguments. One way of doing this is following a template called the MEAL Plan, originally developed by a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. MEAL, which stands for **M**ain Idea, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, and **L**ink Back, is a template which helps ensure that your body paragraphs include the components necessary for clear and cohesive development.

**Introduction and conclusion paragraphs each have their own structure, which is different from that of body paragraphs. For practice with these types of paragraphs, please refer to the Introductions DLA and the Conclusions DLA.*

M: Main Idea

The main idea is the central focus of the paragraph and presents a minor claim that supports the major claim or thesis of your paper. Most professors will expect this sentence to be the first sentence of your paragraph, where it is called the "topic sentence." However, depending on the style of your paper, the main idea may occur later in the paragraph. Regardless of the main idea's location, the reader should have a clear understanding of the paragraph's purpose and how the paragraph supports your thesis.

It is also possible for a paragraph to cover several closely related ideas instead of only one main idea. If you choose to do this, it's important that the connection between these ideas is clear to the reader. The paragraph should hold together as a cohesive unit even if it contains multiple ideas, and multiple ideas still require evidence.

E: Evidence

Evidence is support for the paragraph's main idea and shows why this idea is plausible, valid, or correct. You may need to provide some context before introducing your evidence in order to create a connection to the main idea of your paragraph.

If you are writing about a text or piece of visual media, such as a novel, short story, film, or work of art, your evidence will generally come directly from the work itself. This can be in the form of quotations, brief summaries, examples, and details from the primary source.

If you are writing a paper that draws on multiple outside sources, such as a research paper, your evidence can come from any source that is credible and relevant to your topic. Evidence usually comes in the form of quotations, statistics, or description. These may be drawn from journal articles, interviews, books, or any material that supports your argument. It is a good idea to introduce your source, tell the reader where it came from, and, if necessary, establish the credibility of its author before you insert the evidence into your paragraph.

A: Analysis

Once you have introduced a piece of evidence, you then provide the analysis. *You must explain how and why this evidence supports the main idea that you introduced at the beginning of the paragraph.* Evidence should never be plopped down in a paragraph with the expectation that on their own, readers will figure out how this evidence supports your argument. The style of American academic writing does not allow anything to "speak for itself." It is the writer's job to explicitly connect the evidence to the main idea of the paragraph. This connection is what makes your paragraph cohesive and logical.

One way to develop this section of your paragraph is to anticipate questions that the reader may have regarding the evidence's connection to the main idea and then offer explanations that make those connections clear. Why is this a strong piece of evidence? How does the evidence show that the main idea is valid? Why is this evidence important? The analysis section is a great place to answer the "So what?" question – why does this matter? – and explain this significance to the reader.

For more practice identifying and writing analysis, please refer to the Analysis vs. Summary DLA.

L: Link Back to Thesis or Larger Claim

The link back is a way to show the reader how this paragraph fits into the larger scheme of your paper's thesis and argument. The link back may be subtle and implicit, or direct and explicit, but either way, the purpose of the paragraph should be clear. The reader should not be left wondering why this paragraph was included in your paper, or unclear on how the paragraph is relevant to your thesis. An effective paragraph should have a clear place and purpose in your essay.

Sample Body Paragraphs

Read the following paragraphs to see examples of the MEAL plan structure.

- The main idea is in SMALL CAPS.

- The evidence is **highlighted**.
- The analysis is in **bold**.
- The link back is *italicized*.

*Please note that each paragraph has unmarked text after the main idea and before the evidence. This text is a bridge that provides context for the evidence and connects it to the main idea.

Paragraph 1

The following paragraph is an example of the MEAL plan used to analyze a literary text.

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

Body Paragraph:

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 marigold seeds. The marigold seeds had no chance of thriving due to the harsh soil in which they were planted. Similarly, Pecola cannot flourish in the hostile environment where she finds herself, an environment which she did not choose. However, the soil mentioned in the quote is "bad for certain kinds of flowers," meaning that the environment is caustic for someone with Pecola's temperament. This gives the reader a sense of Pecola's powerlessness in the face of an oppressive injustice that continually undermines her. The quote goes so far as to say that if the seeds can't survive, they don't have the "right to live." This is a disheartening commentary on the community's view of Pecola's worth as a person because it shows that her community completely disregards her dignity as a human being. *Pecola Breedlove is a seed planted in a hostile environment, an environment which does not nurture her and in which she cannot survive.*

Adapted from the [Goshen College Literary Guide](https://www.goshen.edu/academics/english/literary-analysis-guide/), <https://www.goshen.edu/academics/english/literary-analysis-guide/>

Paragraph 2

The following paragraph is an example of the MEAL plan used for a research paper.

Thesis: Heavy use of social media is detrimental to adolescent romantic relationships because excessive monitoring of a partner's social media accounts can lead to jealousy, controlling behaviors, bullying, and shaming.

Body Paragraph:

TEENAGERS FEAR THAT SOCIAL MEDIA MAKES IT EASY FOR THEIR PARTNERS TO BE UNFAITHFUL, AND THIS, IN TURN, CAN RESULT IN ONE PARTNER ENGAGING IN CONTROLLING BEHAVIORS TOWARDS THE OTHER. Often in relationships that are high in emotion, one partner has the feeling of being more committed to the relationship. According to Baker and Carreno, "Such perceptions may result in insecurity by the more invested partner, as well as an attempt by this partner to preserve the exclusivity of the relationship by ensuring that the other partner does not have the opportunity to cheat" (316). **The partner who feels more insecure about the relationship may begin to monitor the other partner's social media activity to check for signs of infidelity. Such surveillance can occur with or without the other partner's knowledge and is a violation of the other partner's boundaries and privacy. The insecure partner may even try to isolate the other partner by restricting or even preventing communication to other people through social media. This isolation causes the other partner to be even more vulnerable to the controlling behaviors of the insecure partner because the other partner's support network erodes away.** *Controlling behaviors are not only detrimental to the relationship but can cause long-term emotional damage to the partner being controlled.*

Note: Using Multiple Pieces of Evidence

A well-organized paragraph will need at least one piece of evidence to support the main idea. However, you are free to add as many pieces of relevant evidence as necessary to develop your ideas. For example, some professors may ask that you use three quotes or pieces of evidence per paragraph. In this case, the paragraph will have a structure of MEAEAEAL: **m**ain idea, **e**vidence, **a**nalysis, **e**vidence, **a**nalysis, **e**vidence, **a**nalysis, **l**ink back. In some cases, it may be effective to cite multiple pieces of evidence together and then follow up with the analysis. This can be particularly effective with statistics and would give you an MEEEEAL pattern.

The important thing to remember about the MEAL plan is that for every piece of evidence you introduce, you must provide analysis that shows how the evidence supports the main idea. Evidence without analysis leads to poorly developed paragraphs that in turn result in a weak essay. The MEAL plan is designed to add structure to your paragraphs but should in no way limit the number of quotes or amount of analysis you include.

MEAL As a Revision Tool

In addition to guiding the construction of paragraphs, the MEAL rubric can also aid you during the revision process. Ask yourself the following questions as you review each body paragraph in your essay:

- Can you identify the main idea?
- What evidence is provided to support the main idea?
- Is there sufficient analysis of the evidence?
- Do you link back to the main idea? How?

Use your answers to these questions to help you revise the paragraph as necessary.

Activities

Check off each box once you have completed the activity.

1. **DLA Review**

What does MEAL stand for?

2. **Label a Paragraph**

Read the paragraph below and label the elements of MEAL using different colored pens or highlighters.

Besides causing health problems due to insufficient rest, insomnia can cause those who suffer from this condition to make poor decisions. A well-functioning working memory is important for making sound decisions. However, according to Catrett and Gaultney, "Because of the potential effect of insomnia on working memory . . . , simultaneously weighing multiple considerations may overwhelm reduced working memory and produce a sort of tunnel vision (301)." Insomnia causes the brain's working memory to operate at a lower capacity, which inhibits the working memory's ability to hold and evaluate several different factors when comparing choices. This ability is necessary for making a good decision. A limited working memory leads the brain to only focus on the most noticeable aspect of a situation, and without the evaluation of multiple factors, a poorly-reasoned decision is the result. Insomnia can cause great damage to quality of life when these poor decisions in turn harm the personal and professional life of those who suffer from this disorder.

3. **Improve a Paragraph**

Read the following sample paragraph and decide which parts of the paragraph need revision. Then rewrite the paragraph on a separate sheet of paper or in a Word document, making sure that the revised paragraph contains all elements of the MEAL plan. Be prepared to explain your revisions and the reasons for them to your tutor.

To assist in writing the analysis, think of your educational experience or other situations in which feedback has led to improvement. Alternatively, you can use an example in which you didn't accept feedback and lost a chance to get better.

**Tip: Most writing assignments do not permit the use of first person (the pronoun I) or personal experience. However, for the purposes of this DLA, you can use events from your life in your analysis.*

Thesis: Students with a growth mindset have better chances of success in college because these students understand that feedback means a chance to improve, they believe that knowledge and skills can improve with hard work, and they see failure as an opportunity to learn.

Body Paragraph:

Students with a growth mindset see feedback as a tool for improvement. Some students may take a professor's honest efforts to help them as unfair criticism or even a personal attack; however, these students are missing out on a valuable chance to learn. Dweck observes that if the reader has a growth mindset, "you're open to accurate information about your current abilities, even if it's unflattering. What's more, . . . you *need* accurate information about your current abilities in order to learn effectively" (11). This is why students with a growth mindset see feedback from professors as a way to improve their learning.

Choose 4a or 4b Below **4a. Work with Your Own Writing**

Find a paragraph in an essay you are currently working on or from essay that you have previously written. **DO NOT** choose the introduction or conclusion paragraphs because these do not follow the MEAL format. Label the parts of the MEAL plan in your paragraph. If the paragraph is missing any elements or is weak in any area, revise the paragraph. Bring both the original and revised paragraph, and be ready to discuss the revisions with your tutor.

If you do not have your own writing to work with, complete activity 4b.

 4b. Write a Paragraph following the MEAL plan

Choose **ONE** of the three topics below and write a body paragraph on another paper or in Word. The main idea and evidence have been provided. Write the main idea in your own sentence, incorporate the evidence, provide analysis, and link back to the main idea of the paragraph. For the purposes of this exercise, feel free to use your personal experience or the experience of people you know. Use the **Questions to Consider** to help you get started with your analysis.

Main Idea	Evidence	Questions to Consider
Children with controlling parents feel insecure about their academic abilities	"Parents who adopt psychologically controlling behaviors . . . will restrict the children's opportunities to solve academic problems independently, and will render their children doubtful about their own ability to deal with academic challenges successfully" (Xu et al. 1581).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think controlling parents cause children to doubt themselves? • How did you feel when you parents took over and solved your academic problems? • How did you feel when you solved academic problems on your own?
Clique members strengthen their bond with each other by rejecting outsiders	"Turning people against an outsider solidified the group and asserted the power of the strong over the vulnerability of the weak" (Adler and Adler 145).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think it's important for group members to reject outsiders? • What is your experience with being a member of a group or clique? • What is your experience with being rejected by a group or clique?

Main Idea	Evidence	Questions to Consider
Students who must work while enrolled in community college suffer in their academic performance.	"Of the students employed 12 or fewer hours per week, 75% completed the course and passed the final exam, whereas only 40% of the students employed more than 12 hours per week experienced the same positive outcome" (Wolff et al. 172).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think work has a negative impact on a student's ability to finish a course? • What kinds of academic experiences and opportunities do working students miss out on? • What is your experience of working while in school? If you don't work, think of working students you know.

□ 5. Review the DLA

Go to <https://mtsac2.mywconline.com> and use the [Mt. SAC Writing Center Appointment System](#) to make a DLA appointment, or sign-up to see a tutor on the "**DLA Walk-in**" list in the Writing Center. During your session with a tutor, refer to your own graded writing (or the completed activity) and explain your work to demonstrate your understanding of the MEAL plan.

Student's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Tutor's Signature _____

Date: _____

If you are an individual with a disability and need a greater level of accessibility for any document in The Writing Center or on The Writing Center's website, please contact the Mt. SAC Accessible Resource Centers for Students, access@mtsac.edu, (909) 274-4290.

Revised 09/03/2019