

The Writing Center

DLA: Paragraph MEAL



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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.

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 at Duke University. MEAL, which stands for **M**ain **I**dea, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, and **L**ink **B**ack, 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.

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. These may be sources 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 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*.

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 not 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 itself 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 there are those who can find success in the environment that is so caustic for Pecola. 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 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

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, **l**ink back.

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.

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 following paragraph and label the elements of MEAL.

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 & 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 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.

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

Body Paragraph:

Students often take a professor's honest efforts to help them as unfair criticism or even a personal attack. However, students with a growth mindset see feedback as a tool for improvement. 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 in the space provide below. 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.

Main Idea	Evidence
High housing costs contribute to homelessness	“Rental housing market factors, particularly housing costs, are the strongest predictors of homelessness” (Fargo et al. 346)
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)
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)

5. 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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