

# Constructing Paragraphs

## Narrate

Use narration to recall an event or explain how a process works. A narrative is a story. It arranges information in chronological (time) order; one event in a story or one step in a process follows another just as it happened.

Narratives contain action words—verbs and adverbs—that help move the story or process along and make it more interesting. They also use transitions such as first, then, soon, after, and suddenly, which maintain coherence and show movement from one event to the next.

Read this paragraph from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It recalls a childhood incident when neighborhood children mocked her and her grandmother:

Before the girls got to the porch, I heard their laughter crackling and popping like pine logs in a cooking stove. I suppose my lifelong paranoia was born in those cold, molasses-slow minutes. They came finally to stand on the ground in front of Momma. At first they pretended seriousness. Then one of them wrapped her right arm in the crook of her left, pushed out her mouth and started to hum. I realized that she was aping my grandmother.

## Describe

Use description when you need to explain the nature of people, places, and things. It's always a good idea to start a physical description by relying on your five senses to gather details about what your subject looks, sounds, feels, smells, or even tastes like.

Unlike narration, which presents information from beginning to end, description can be arranged in any pattern you think best. Usually, the pattern is spatial, presenting things as they appear in space. But each writer chooses his or her own perspective—the position from which to view a subject. And each decides where to begin and where to end.

Read this paragraph from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou doesn't simply describe her subjects' appearance; she uses description to explain their characters. She also uses it to reveal her emotional reaction to their behavior.

The dirt of the girls' cotton dresses continued on their legs, feet, arms, and faces to make them all of a piece. Their greasy uncolored hair hung down, uncombed, with a grim finality. I knelt to see them better, to remember them for all time. The tears that had slipped down my dress left unsurprising dark spots, and made the front yard blurry and even more unreal. The world had taken a deep breath and was having doubts about continuing to revolve.

## Explain, Convince, and Persuade

Narration and description can also be used to explain an idea or statement, to convince readers that an opinion is correct, or to persuade them to do something. But such purposes also lend themselves to other methods.

Depending on what you want to accomplish, you can choose one or more methods to develop your central idea:

- Illustration: Uses examples.
- Comparison or contrast: Points out similarities or differences.
- Definition: Explains what a term means.
- Classification: Distinguishes between types or classes.
- Cause and effect: Explains why something happens.

### Illustration

Illustration explains abstract ideas by providing clear, specific, and concrete examples. Take this paragraph from "A Few Kind Words for Superstition" by Robertson Davies:

Many superstitions are so widespread and so old that they must have risen from a

depth of human mind that is indifferent to race or creed. Orthodox Jews place a charm on their doorposts; so do (or did) the Chinese. Some peoples of Middle Europe believe that when a man sneezes, his soul, for that moment, is absent from his body, and they hasten to bless him, lest he should be seized by the Devil. How did the Melanesians come by the same idea? Superstition seems to have a link with some body or belief that far antedates the religions we know—religions which have no place for such comforting little ceremonies and charities.

There are two concrete examples here: (1) orthodox Jews place a charm... and (2) some peoples of Middle Europe believe...

### Comparison/Contrast

A comparison explains similarities. A contrast explains differences. The first half of the following paragraph compares a harpsichord and a piano. The second half contrasts these instruments.

The harpsichord and the piano are closely related. Both are keyboard instruments, and both produce sound when jacks or hammers attached to keys strike metal strings. The piano is a direct descendant of the harpsichord and takes its shape from that instrument. In fact, many musical compositions played on one can be adapted to the other. However, today the piano is the more popular of the two instruments. It is capable of producing greater volume and variety of tone, and it is more versatile than its predecessor. Pianos provide accompaniment for vocalists both classical and popular, and they are used in every instrumental group from the small dance band to the grandest symphony orchestra.

### Definition

A definition identifies a term and sets it apart from all other terms that may be related to it. Often, definitions begin by mentioning the general class to which a term belongs. Then they provide specifics to distinguish the term from other members of that class. For example, if you were to define whale, you might start by saying it is an aquatic mammal. Then you could talk about its size, shape, varieties, environment, breeding habits, and so on. Read this paragraph. Try to determine the general class to which the subject belongs; then find specifics that distinguish it from other members of that class.

The viola is a stringed instrument in the violin family. It is only slightly larger than the violin and is tuned at a lower pitch. Like its smaller relative, the viola is held on the shoulder under the chin and is played with a bow. While the violin has many uses, the viola is used mainly in orchestral and chamber music.

### Classification

Classification—distinguishing types or classes—can help you explain a great deal of seemingly unrelated information in an organized and easy-to-follow manner. Take this paragraph that explains stringed instruments:

There are many types of stringed instruments. The violin family is made up of the violin, viola, cello, and double bass. Fretted instruments (frets are strips that show players where to put their hands) include the banjo, mandolin, lute, ukulele, and guitar. Related to these instruments are the lyre and the harp. The dulcimer, zither, and psaltery form another family, whose strings are stretched over flat sound boxes. Finally, there are the keyboard stringed instruments such as the piano, clavichord, and harpsichord.

### Using Cause and Effect

The cause-and-effect method is useful in explaining why something happens. Take this paragraph on the causes of avalanches:

An avalanche is a huge snow slide that rushes down the side of a mountain,

carrying large trees, rocks, and other debris in its path. Avalanches are similar to landslides but can be more dangerous and destructive. Avalanches can occur when huge amounts of new snow fall on layers of snow and ice that have become unstable because of melting. They can also be triggered by explosions or earthquakes.

## **Patterns Of Arrangement**

As you have learned, there are several ways to develop details in a paragraph. These methods—narration, description, comparison/contrast, definition, classification, illustration, and cause and effect—relate to the paragraph's purpose. You should also learn patterns of arrangement—ways to organize details in a paragraph.

There are four basic patterns, but there are as many variations on such patterns as there are writers who use them. Study these four patterns of arrangement. You can use any of them regardless of the method of development you choose.

### General-to-Specific Pattern

The pattern that begins with a general statement followed by specific supporting details can be used to argue a point or make an abstract idea clear. In the next paragraph, the writer starts with the idea that living with an alcoholic parent is difficult. This is the topic sentence. She then gives details to explain how difficult this problem is.

The nights that my mother was home were nightmares. She sat on the living room couch with a case of Budweiser, just drinking, listening to music, and talking to herself. On many occasions, she turned up the record player so high that the police stopped by our house late at night to ask that she lower the volume. I spent those evenings sitting up with my crying sister reassuring her that everything would be all right, while the sounds of Paul Anka vibrated into her bedroom. My brother went for long walks and sometimes didn't return until school was dismissed the next afternoon. The day after, I would find my mother sitting on the couch surrounded by beer cans and slumped over one corner of the couch. The record player would still be running, with the needle in the center of the record, playing nothing. (Author anonymous, "Mom")

### Specific-to-General Pattern

This pattern can help you create suspense or build to an emotional high point. The following paragraph starts with a specific detail that leads to a more general topic sentence.

I was too cold now. My teeth were chattering, my feet frozen like lifeless stumps. I looked up to the heavens and screamed in agony, damning the fates. I lit another cigarette and expressed my dismay over the two friends who had accompanied me on this pilgrimage. Suddenly, I spotted them walking back to the car, their heads down, shoulders hunched, and hands buried deep within their coat pockets. I knew there was no need to talk. I understood immediately that they had found no help. I handed the keys and the lighter to Jason. He fumbled with them for a few minutes, but with no luck. Robert walked to the park bench and sat down. I looked away from them. My own frustration was compounded by the pain in their eyes. I felt another surge of self-pity. The dull agony of the cold, the biting pain of the wind, the guilt of endangering the lives of my friends: it was all too much to bear. (Bill McGlynn, "Taking the Blame")

### Question-to-Answer Pattern

Beginning with a question can capture the reader's attention. It is also an easy way to arrange information. After asking the question, you can fill the rest of the paragraph or essay with details that answer or relate to it.

What's so bad about junk food? A great deal. For example, it usually contains artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives—additives that pose serious health

hazards and, over the long run, may cause cancer. In addition, much junk food is packed with sugar, fats, or cholesterol. It adds inches to our waistlines, clogs our arteries, and disturbs our metabolism. Most important, junk food contains few nutrients. Eating cotton candy, potato chips, and chocolate bars may satisfy our hunger, but for that very reason it keeps us from eating the foods we need to stay healthy. (Nicholas Cannino, "The Junk-Food Junkie")

#### Order-of-Importance Pattern

Fiction writers often save the most important or startling information for last. This technique helps them maintain suspense and create emphasis. You can use this pattern whether your purpose is to tell a story, describe a scene, explain an idea, or defend an opinion. The next paragraph is a good example.

I am divorced now, free and alone, a woman of 45 with children who have gone off to finish school, to start families, and to spin out lives of their own. I got married when I was nineteen. Back then, some young people got married because they were genuinely in love, but too many of those I knew tied the knot for the wrong reasons. Some sought security; some, companionship, romance, or sex. A few even "had to" get married. But the most compelling reason to wed in those days was that everyone else was doing it, and nobody wanted to be left behind. (Lena Schmidt, "Time to Grow Up")

(Adapted from *Writing Intensive: Essentials for College Writers* (2007) by Elaine P. Maimon & Janice H. Peritz)