

Paragraph Structure: Putting the P.I.E. Together

A paragraph is a group of sentences that work together to advance a particular idea through detail and support. You may already know how to recognize a paragraph visually; it begins with an indentation that marks it apart from the paragraph before it.

When you are writing, indent by leaving roughly two “finger spaces” before beginning your first sentence. To keep your writing looking neat and easy to read, make sure your indentations line up. When typing, hit the “Tab” key to indent each paragraph. If the paragraph before ends mid-line, hit “Enter” and then “Tab” to make sure your paragraph starts on a new line. Do not leave an additional extra space between paragraphs. Just double-space the whole document.

Now you know the format of a paragraph, you must still learn its structure. Although an effective paragraph may look randomly put together, it is far from it. A paragraph is a specific unit of thought that begins with a main idea and is followed by supporting details. One way to understand and remember paragraph structure is to think of the word P.I.E.

P = Point

I = Information

E = Explanation / Examples

Which is the most important part of a pie? The crust, the filling or the whipped cream topping? Perhaps you will agree that you need all three for it to be a really good pie. Let’s now explore each of the components of a P.I.E. paragraph to see how they fit together and create the structure of a paragraph.

Point

The point is the overall idea or opinion that gives us the topic of the paragraph. For this reason, the point is often called the “topic sentence.” The point should be stated directly rather than projected.

For example, write,

Cabrillo College offers a broad range of student services.

Don’t write,

I will tell you about the broad range of student services at Cabrillo College.

The point should also be a general idea or opinion that leaves the reader with questions or a desire for details. If you make your point too specific, there is nowhere left to go for the rest of the paragraph.

For example,

The Math Lab at Cabrillo College is open from 12 to 5pm on Sundays.
(This statement is too specific for a topic sentence; it leaves nothing to explain).

Exercise

Take each of the following topics and write it as a topic sentence so that its point is not too general or too specific.

1. Cabrillo College

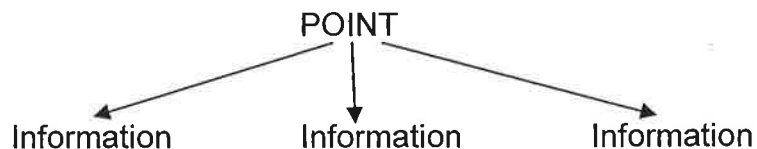
2. My English class

3. The *On Course* self-assessment test

Information

The point is followed by information that **expands** upon the main idea. Think of the information as sub-points that stem from the main point.

Example:



The information breaks the point down into a series of facts or a range of descriptions.

Example:

Cabrillo College has a broad range of student services with convenient hours. Its Writing Center is open from Monday to Thursday, 8am to 9pm, and on Fridays from 9am to 3pm. The Math Lab keeps similar hours and is even open on Sundays from 12 to 5pm. Furthermore, the Computer Technology Center on the lower campus is open through the week and on Saturdays so that students may complete their homework on school computers.

Explanation / Examples

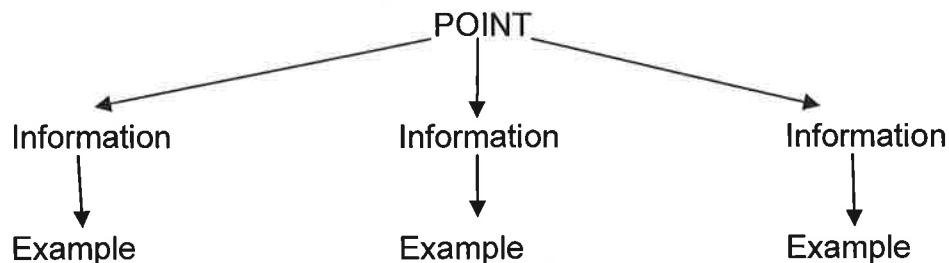
The explanation or examples further **elaborate** the information to make it absolutely clear to the reader. Without the explanation, a reader can feel overwhelmed with too much information or frustrated with information that doesn't answer some crucial questions.

Example:

Cabrillo College has a broad range of student services with convenient hours. Its Writing Center is open from Monday to Thursday, 8am to 9pm, and on Fridays from 9am to 3pm. It is a place where students can go for help with any part of the writing process. The Math Lab keeps similar hours and is even open on Sundays from 12 to 5pm. Students at the Math Lab enjoy having

peer tutors who understand many of their struggles having been through it themselves. Similarly, the Computer Technology Center on the lower campus is open through the week and on Saturdays so that students may complete their homework on school computers. It is equipped with hundreds of PC's and Macintosh computers as well as Lab Instructional Assistants and student workers. All of these places on campus, and many others, offer free services that every student should employ.

Let's review the overall structure of a paragraph:



Using the example above, write a descriptive paragraph about a favorite place—your bedroom, the beach, your friend's house, a city you like to visit. . . . Make it specific. For the point, give a general idea or feeling about the place. Follow it up with a description of the sensory memories you have of this place. Then, to clarify the sensory experience, add explanations to make it clear for the reader.

Here's another example to help you out:

When I visit Big Basin I feel like I'm transported to a place out of this world. Bathed in the scent of redwood and immersed in a sea of earth tones, I forget that there is a world of cars and computers and chaos. I walk quite literally through the trees, drink in the musky wood smell and allow my gaze to soften until it sees nothing but swirls of amber, mahogany and forest green. Time stops, and for a moment, I can forget my "to do" list and remind myself of my "do too" list: to stand in a fairy ring, holding my children's tiny hands, to look up through a cathedral of trees and know that we are blessed to behold this beauty. These are the things I must remember to "do too."

Now write a paragraph of your own.
