

Expository Paragraph Patterns

The Three Organizational Patterns of Paragraphs

Most paragraphs found in textbooks or other explanatory (expository) readings are written in very predictable patterns. These patterns are determined by the placement of the topic sentences in the paragraphs. “Topic sentences” are declarative sentences that control the development or state the main idea of the paragraph.

Pattern 1

“Pattern 1” paragraphs place the topic sentence at the beginning. The body of the paragraph clarifies, develops, or argues on behalf of the topic sentence. These paragraphs are sometimes called “deductive” paragraphs because the topic sentence is offered as a “truth statement” that will be “proven” or “supported” by evidence found in the body of the paragraph that immediately follows.

Pattern 2

“Pattern 2” paragraphs place the topic sentence at the end. The body of the paragraph introduces first one, then two, and often more pieces of related information. Together, these ideas share common concepts that lead to a usually predictable conclusion or observation at the end. This conclusion or observation constitutes the topic sentence. This paragraph pattern is sometimes called the “inductive” or “exploratory” paragraph, because it explores related information and then draws a conclusion about it, much the way “scientific reasoning” develops hypotheses (possible answers) in the fields of science.

Pattern 3

A third kind of expository paragraph has no stated topic sentence. Rather, the main or controlling idea is implied; the author relies on the reader to understand the point he or she is making. Like “Pattern 2” paragraphs, the paragraph with an implied topic sentence requires very careful concentration to the exact words in each sentence and their relationship with concepts introduced in the sentences that come immediately before and after them.

Both “Pattern 2” paragraphs and paragraphs with implied main ideas are difficult to follow and somewhat tedious to read. Thankfully, most paragraphs are “Pattern 1” paragraphs.

Placement of Main Ideas in Controlling Statements

Each topic sentence will include a word or phrase that is the main idea of the paragraph. For greatest emphasis, the main idea is best placed at the end of the sentence (periodic development); a reader is most likely to remember the idea stated last. The second most emphatic position in a sentence is the beginning—in the grammatical subject position of the sentence. Avoid placing the main idea in the middle of the sentence; you take the risk of obscuring the main idea and the focus for the paragraph.

Sample of a “Pattern 1” Paragraph

If controversy signifies relevancy, one of the most important works in all of American literature remains Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Originally published in London in December, 1884, and two months later in the United States, from its first appearance, the novel has sparked both negative and positive reactions. Disturbed by its dialectical language and its adult themes, the directors of the Concord Public Library in Concord, Massachusetts, banished it from its shelves, chastising it as the “veriest of trash.” Even today, some readers find its use of offensive terms (the “n” word appears more than 200 times) unacceptable in a more “politically correct” generation. Aside the visceral reactions and concerns about its discussion in public school classrooms, other readers and critics have placed the work in the highest ranks of the whole canon of American literature. Not the least of its contributors, Ernest Hemingway once noted that “all modern American literature begins with one work by Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.”

Sample of a “Pattern 2” Paragraph

First, it was the switch from programs to high-profile advertising that prompted cancelled contracts. I remember the difficulty I had trying to frame an appropriate response to the manager of Mervyn’s department store who wanted to know how my display of Chinese children’s art was going to help him sell “Jordache” jeans. Not too long after that, the economic recession resulted in the closure of one franchise establishment after another and the boarding up of some of the nation’s most glitzy shopping centers, expelling their marketing directors to the ranks of the thousands of unemployed Americans. Clearly, exhibitors whose incomes have relied primarily on the “mall circuits” are facing some difficult times.

Sample of a Paragraph with an Implied Topic Sentence

Many students assume that their college professors are nothing short of repositories of absolute truth, that their responsibility is to take careful notes and to demonstrate mastery of that same truth periodically by repeating it verbatim on mid-term and final exams. Other students accept the obvious that many esteemed professors disagree among themselves, even on some of the most profound subjects in their respective disciplines. Education for these students means charting a careful course between positions, noting the similarities and the dissimilarities between authorities. Still other students understand that education is not so much a library of content to be learned as it is a lifestyle to be practiced, a lifestyle that places the challenges and implications of inquiry among its highest values. These students are willing to float among the academic ambiguities, suspending judgment, turning to their own strengths for reassurance and direction.