

A Primer on Paragraphs

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A paragraph in scholarly writing has a very specific purpose: it simultaneously conveys and explains a single, interpretive point. When arranged in a sequence that carries the reader logically through the author's thinking, paragraphs form themselves into an article or essay. You may find it useful to think about paragraphs as the building blocks from which we construct journal articles, theses, dissertations, and books. The sturdier and more robust we make those blocks and the more thoughtfully we arrange them, the better and more compelling those articles, theses, dissertations, and books will be. Given that as historians we are in the business of convincing other scholars that our reasoning is good, we have little choice but to master the art of writing a well-constructed paragraph. It is a foundational skill that everyone must master.

Fortunately, paragraphs are not complicated critters. They contain two parts. The first is a declarative opening sentence in which you lay out in concise language the point you want to make (which in the case of our weekly writing assignments is your answer to the question posed in the syllabus). The second part of a paragraph is what we call the body, and it is in the body that you explain the reasoning behind your opening statement and how you came to that reasoning *based on the evidence* before you. That's it. Paragraphs convey a *single* point and the reasoning/evidence that led you to believe in that point. Paragraphs that do more or do something different are paragraphs in dire need of revision.

There are a few rules you should bear in mind as you write:

- Paragraphs do not change subject midway.
- Paragraphs are not made up of a string of statements.
- The evidence you choose and the explanation you make should bear directly on the point being made in the first sentence.
- Each sentence in your explanation should follow logically from the one before it.
- Paragraphs should be written in an active (not passive) voice.

Further discussion as well as examples of well-constructed paragraphs can be found [here](#).