Writing an Essay: Body Paragraphs

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines

A body paragraph discusses, analyzes, and elaborates on one of the claims in your thesis statement. Body paragraphs should start with a topic sentence and contain supporting details with corresponding examples and evidence. Paragraphs are then concluded with a statement or a transitional sentence wrapping up the paragraph and introducing the next idea.

While the length of your paragraphs will ultimately depend upon the type of essay you are writing and the information you are covering, a good baseline length for a paragraph is 5 – 7 sentences.

Organizing your Body Paragraphs

While the content of body paragraphs will depend on the type of essay you are writing and what your topic is, how you structure them will remain relatively the same across most essay types. Below is a quick breakdown of a typical body paragraph:

- Topic Sentence – The topic sentence works like a miniature thesis statement for the paragraph. It should relate back to one of the claims made within your thesis and set up the supporting details provided within the paragraph.
- Supporting Details – These are sentences that both relate to the topic sentence and further its claim. These sentences might include information, data, or definitions pulled from your sources; details of personal experiences; or quotes from interviews, as well as your analysis of any cited material.
- Transition Sentence – The last sentence in your body paragraph should bring all the points made in the paragraph together and either begin to hint at the claim covered in the following paragraph or move the essay towards the conclusion.

Example Paragraph

Below is an example paragraph, which is explained in more detail on the back of this handout. The paragraph is from a paper using the following thesis:

> Dragons are an excellent alternative to more "traditional" types of pet-animals because they can be friendly and affectionate, are capable of fulfilling many of the same service roles that traditional pets fill, and can be trained to complete tasks that traditional pets cannot do.

> Despite longstanding beliefs about dragons being evil, unfriendly creatures, dragons are actually capable of becoming affectionate, life-long pets. According to famed dragon expert Alexandria Ayala, "dragons are the victims of a poor public image, brought on by overblown stories of kidnapped princesses and stolen sheep" (Ayala, 2004, p. 75). This bad image, which makes dragons look more vicious and mean than they actually are, has made it difficult for most people to look past the stereotypes and see dragons for the loving pets that they can be. In a 2013 study conducted by students at Florida Gulf Coast University, researchers asked participants to spend about an hour playing with a variety of different animals, which included cats, dogs, dragons, raccoons, and garden snakes. At the end of the play-time, the participants were asked to rank the animals from most to least friendly. A whopping 74% of participants ranked the dragons as the "most friendly" or "second most friendly" animal in the group (Fischell & Kolman, 2013, p. 56). Results like these suggest that not only are dragons capable of being as good a companion as traditional pets, like dogs and cats, but that they may even be *better* pets. It is this new understanding of dragons as friendly companions that has allowed for these creatures to begin to shed their monstrous image, and is paving the way for the introduction of dragons into service animal positions once typically restricted to traditional pets.

Topic Sentences

Here is the topic sentence from the previous paragraph:

"Despite longstanding beliefs about dragons being evil, unfriendly creatures, dragons are actually capable of becoming affectionate, life-long pets."

This sentence does a couple of different things for the paragraph. First, it ties it back to the first point from the thesis: that dragons can be good pets "because they can be friendly and affectionate." Second, it sets the reader up for the main claim that the paragraph is going to support and discuss.

A strong topic sentence *is specific*, *relates directly to the thesis*, and *establishes the claim right at the beginning of the paragraph*.

Supporting Details

Here is one of the supporting details from the previous paragraph:

"In a 2013 study conducted by students at Florida Gulf Coast University, researchers asked participants to spend about an hour playing with a variety of different animals, which included cats, dogs, dragons, raccoons, and garden snakes. At the end of the play-time, the participants were asked to rank the animals from most to least friendly. A whopping 74% of participants ranked the dragons as the "most friendly" or "second most friendly" animal in the group (Fischell & Kolman, 2013, p. 56). Results like these suggest that not only are dragons capable of being as good a companion as traditional pets, like dogs and cats, but that they may even be better pets."

This supporting detail is using data pulled from one of the author's sources to directly support the claim made in the topic sentence, which the author treats in three ways. First, the author introduces the source, summarizing only the key points necessary for the reader to understand how the source relates to the paragraph as a whole. Second, the author cites the specific data that supports his or her claim. Lastly, the author explains what this data means in his or her own words (sometimes called "unpacking the quote," or "metacommentary"), and relates it back to the paragraph's overall claim. How much space you need to accomplish each of these is going to depend on the source you are citing. For example, the supporting detail that cites dragon expert Alexandria Ayala only needs two sentences to establish the source, introduce the cited material, and unpack the quote.

A strong supporting detail *relates directly to the topic of the paragraph*, *is cited correctly*, and *is explained, or unpacked, in the author's own words*.

Transition Sentence

Here is the transition sentence from the previous paragraph:

"It is this new understanding of dragons as friendly companions that has allowed for these creatures to begin to shed their monstrous image, and is paving the way for the introduction of dragons into service animal positions once typically restricted to traditional pets."

In this sentence, the author is now treating the idea of dragons being good companions as a fully argued claim that can now support the next claim to be introduced. The claim of dragons as service animals is the second point in the thesis, and we know that this sentence is leading towards that next claim, and the next body paragraph.

A strong transition sentence *takes the idea from the preceding paragraph and links it to the idea that is going to be introduced in the following topic sentence*.