

MEAL Paragraphs

Just as an effective paper is comprised of an introduction with a thesis statement, a body, and a conclusion, effective paragraphs should follow similar logic. One easy tool to use when writing paragraphs is to think of the acronym **MEAL**—**main idea, evidence, analysis, and link**.

Main Idea

The first component of a paragraph should be its main idea—the M in MEAL. While the main idea is often found in a paragraph's first sentence, sometimes it's found in the second or third sentence. Just because MEAL describes four components doesn't mean the paragraph should be limited to four sentences; just keep these components in mind when constructing your paragraphs. Note that some paragraphs will discuss several topics, but the initial sentences within the paragraph must give the reader a clear idea of all the ideas that the paragraph will discuss.

Evidence & Analysis

The next components of a paragraph should be evidence and analysis—the E and A in MEAL. This will be the bulk of your paragraph, in which you support or prove your paragraph's main idea. We're discussing evidence and analysis together here because they work together: evidence is provided, and then analyzed, but not necessarily in that order. And, one paragraph may contain more than one set of evidence + analysis: that is, you might provide some evidence and analyze it, and then provide more evidence and analyze that. You might also offer some analysis, and then provide evidence to support it, which reverses the order of E and A, but that's okay, as long as your paper flows logically.

For instance, if you provide a direct quote, and then an explanation of that quotation's meaning, the direct quote is evidence, and your explanation is analysis. Your evidence will come from a variety of sources, such as journal articles, interviews, a quotation or paraphrase, an image, or even an anecdote or personal experience. In every case, your evidence should not stand alone. In their tools on MEAL paragraphing, the folks at Duke University's Writing Center describe this situation very well. They say, "If you leave your evidence unexplained, your reader may interpret it differently than you intended, and if that happens, your main idea doesn't get the support it needs."¹

Link

Some schools writing about MEAL paragraphs note that "L" means "link back to the larger claim," as in, *use the final sentences in your paragraph to articulate how this paragraph fits into the broader context of the paper—or how it supports your thesis*. A reader should never finish a paragraph and wonder why it's in your paper. This is very good advice, and it's something you should be thinking about while constructing all the sentences in your paragraphs—not just the final ones.

Other schools note that "L" means "link," as in "transition." In this sense, the final sentences within a paragraph should link to the topic sentence, or main idea, of the next paragraph—so it acts as a bridge. This sets the reader up to anticipate what the next paragraph will be about. This is a good place to use transitional phrases, such as *finally* or *however*. These phrases help the reader understand relationships between paragraphs, as well as your logical flow.

¹ "[Paragraphing: The MEAL Plan](#)," Writing Studio, Duke University