

## Unit One

### Writing Paragraphs that Say Something

You are probably familiar with some version of the basic paragraph model:

1. Topic sentence that announces the main idea of the paragraph.
2. Body sentences that support the topic sentence
3. Concluding sentence(s) that sum up or restate the topic sentence

While there is nothing inherently wrong with this model, it can sometimes serve to produce paragraphs that are stale and list-like.

Saying something in a paragraph involves seeing paragraph construction as a matter of *advancing* one's claim. Whether we are writing an analytical essay, a summary, an argumentative essay, or a personal essay like a literacy narrative, good paragraphs always contain ideas that offer a new way of looking at a problem, and then provide detailed evidence and analysis to support those ideas.

Here's a revised version of the basic paragraph model:

1. **Claim:** A topic sentence that announces a claim, or main idea, that is arguable, and thus requires the reader to continue reading through the paragraph in order to understand it fully.
2. **Evidence:** Body sentences that support that claim by providing specific, detailed evidence. This evidence might be textual – e.g., a quotation – or if it is a narrative essay, personal details.
3. **Analysis:** Explanation of that evidence that explains its significance.
4. **Refined Claim:** Closing sentences that offer a *refined* version of the original claim – a new way of expressing or articulating the main idea with which the paragraph began. By the end of the paragraph, the paragraph should have said *more* than it originally did in the topic sentence.

**Example:**

When we consider his speech at the Tucson Memorial Service in January 2011, Barack Obama's rhetoric of hope and unity looks more like a complex message about the nature of citizenship. In the 2008 election, Obama's campaign mantra was "change." We all recall how "Change We Can Believe In" adorned bumper stickers, front yard signs, and billboards, leading Obama's critics to complain that his message of unity was a hollow one. In his Arizona speech, however, Obama specified the meaning of change in his description of the political aftermath of the Tucson shooting by redefining the meaning of "civility." Speaking of those who died in the shootings, the president warned his listeners that "if, as has been discussed in recent days, their deaths help usher in more civility in our public discourse, let's remember that it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy, but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to our challenges as a nation, in a way that would make them proud." Against those that sought to use the shootings for political gain, Obama was warning, in other words, that no political party or "lack" of good will caused the event; the event was a call to renew our political good will. What Obama seems to have meant by "civility," in this context, was a new way of talking – an "honest public discourse" that could overcome the kinds of discord that leads to shootings in the first place. His speech, thus, suggested that we need to change how we speak about political differences, and to transform how we define political participation as a result. For Obama in 2011, true citizenship has come to mean the capacity to change and evolve our view of American identity itself.

Dodson, Joel M. 7/17/12 12:34 PM

**Comment:** Topic sentence sets out the main claim of the paragraph.

Dodson, Joel M. 1/27/12 9:53 AM

**Comment:** The next few sentences provide evidence – detailed information about the background of the Tucson speech, its main ideas, and a quotation to show those ideas.

Dodson, Joel M. 1/27/12 9:54 AM

**Comment:** The writer provides analysis of the quotation, not leaving it "dangling." In this analysis, the writer both explains the quotation in his or her own words, and then focuses on the key ideas and words *within* the quotation.

Dodson, Joel M. 1/27/12 9:55 AM

**Comment:** The paragraph has led to a *refined claim* – an idea that *builds* off of the topic sentence but now says *something more* than the paragraph said at the beginning!

**Example:**

**Try to spot where the following paragraph makes a claim, provides evidence for that claim, analyzes the evidence, and refines the original claim.**

It wasn't until college that I discovered what my teacher called "long-form" reading, the ability to sit with and struggle over a book for hours on end. In my sophomore year of college, we had to read a novel a week – something I had never done before in my life as a reader. I recall, in particular, the long hours in my dorm room reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck's novel tells the story of the Joad families long trek from the dust bowl of depression era Oklahoma to California, and I followed that trek for hours at a time. I remember, sitting on my couch, feeling the pain in my knees of the characters squatting and muttering to each other in each chapter. Most importantly, I remember the final episode of the novel, in which the Joad's eldest daughters nurses an old man in an abandoned train car after her own baby has died. These hours taught me how to identify with characters by living through their own lengthy experiences through lengthy bouts of reading. I saw how characters in a novel like Steinbeck's underwent subtle changes of motive that one might miss reading only in 15 minute spurts. "Long-form" reading, I discovered, was about learning to identify the struggles of literary plot and character with one's own struggles as a reader.