



PARAGRAPH WRITING

Formal academic writing is the kind of writing required for the IELTS academic test, whether it is the task 2 essay or, the task 1 report, process description or object description. Irrespective of the task, all pieces of academic writing require you to organise your writing into cohesive and coherent paragraphs. The **paragraph** itself, being the basic underlying unit for your writing, needs to be **cohesive** and **coherent**. It should also be structured and contain a **topic sentence** and, **supporting** and **developing sentences**.

STUDY TIPS

When writing remember the whole paragraph needs to focus on the main idea stated in your topic sentence. The remaining sentences in the paragraph support and develop the idea with examples, explanations, clarifications, illustrations or other points. The supporting and developing sentences need to be logically ordered. Together these would form a well-written paragraph.

What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of related sentences, which develop or discuss a topic or main idea. Structurally, a paragraph consists of three parts, including a **topic sentence**, **supporting** and **developing sentences**. In addition, a good paragraph is coherent, which means that the sentences are logically ordered and connected. Consider the following sample paragraph.

Environmental pollution is having a devastating effect on mankind. Firstly, water pollution reduces valuable supplies of fresh, clean water needed for daily consumption. Most of the pollutants, which enter the water come from industry, sewage systems, and agriculture. These include chemicals and harmful wastes from animals and plants. Another devastating effect is brought about by air pollution, which turns fresh, clean air into smoggy, unpleasant smelling air. The result of air pollutants is the harm it has on human health. For example, the gases, which are released into the atmosphere can cause such diseases as emphysema and cancer.

Structural parts of a paragraph

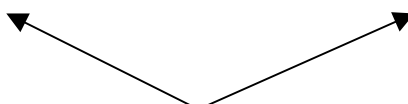
Topic Sentence (TS)

The topic sentence provides the main idea or subject of the paragraph, and further identifies a **controlling idea** restricting the topic area of discussion. It is the first sentence in the paragraph. Look at the topic sentence in the sample paragraph:

Environmental pollution is having a **devastating effect on mankind**.

topic

controlling idea



The topic of the paragraph is environmental pollution, but this topic is further limited to a discussion of the devastating effects on mankind.

Supporting Sentences (SS)

Supporting sentences (as the word 'support' indicates) support the topic by providing points, which develop the idea with an explanation, illustration, reason etc. The two supporting sentences, which explain the topic sentence about environmental pollution are:

- Firstly, water pollution reduces valuable supplies of fresh, clean water needed for daily consumption.
- Another devastating effect is brought about by air pollution, which turns fresh, clean air into smoggy, unpleasant smelling air.

Developing Sentences (DS)

Developing sentences further develop the points in the supporting sentences by providing more information or an example, a reason, a clarification etc. For example, the point about **water pollution** is further developed in the following two developing sentences:

- Most of the pollutants, which enter the water come from industry, sewage systems, and agriculture.
- These include chemicals and harmful wastes from animals and plants.

The point about **air pollution** is further developed in the following sentences:

- The result of air pollutants is the harm it has on human health.
- For example, the gases, which are released into the atmosphere can cause such diseases as emphysema and cancer.

Thus the paragraph on environmental pollution has the following structure.

TS → Environmental pollution is having a devastating effect on mankind. **SS₁** → Firstly, water pollution reduces valuable supplies of fresh, clean water needed for daily consumption. **DS_{1.1}** → Most of the pollutants, which enter the water come from industry, sewage systems, and agriculture. **DS_{1.2}** → These include chemicals and harmful wastes from animals and plants. **SS₂** → Another devastating effect is brought about by air pollution, which turns fresh, clean air into smoggy, unpleasant smelling air. **DS_{2.1}** → The result of air pollutants is the harm it has on human health. **DS_{2.2}** → For example, the gases, which are released into the atmosphere can cause such diseases as emphysema and cancer.

A paragraph can have a variety of different structures. Other good paragraph structures include:

TS
 SS₁ + DS_{1.1}
 SS₂ + DS_{2.1}

TS
 SS₁ + DS_{1.1}
 SS₂ + DS_{2.1}
 SS₃ + DS_{3.1}

TS
 SS₁ + DS_{1.1} + DS_{1.2}
 SS₂ + DS_{2.1} + DS_{2.2}

TS
 SS₁ + DS_{1.1} + DS_{1.2}

Paragraph Length

The length of a paragraph will depend on how clearly the main idea or subject is developed. A paragraph can be anywhere from 3-4 sentences or as long as 9 or 10 sentences.

Paragraph Cohesion and Coherence

Two other important features of a good paragraph are cohesion and coherence.

Cohesion

Cohesion is the agreement between the different parts of a sentence. This may include: subject-verb agreement, and the use of correct articles and pronouns to track participants in the paragraph etc. Cohesion also means that all the supporting and developing sentences must relate directly to the main point stated in the topic sentence. Discussing recycling in the paragraph on environmental pollution, for example, would be irrelevant to the topic and, therefore, disrupt the unity of the paragraph.

Coherence

A paragraph is coherent when the reader can easily understand and follow the information/message conveyed in the text. Coherence can be achieved in several different ways:

- arranging ideas logically
- using transition signals

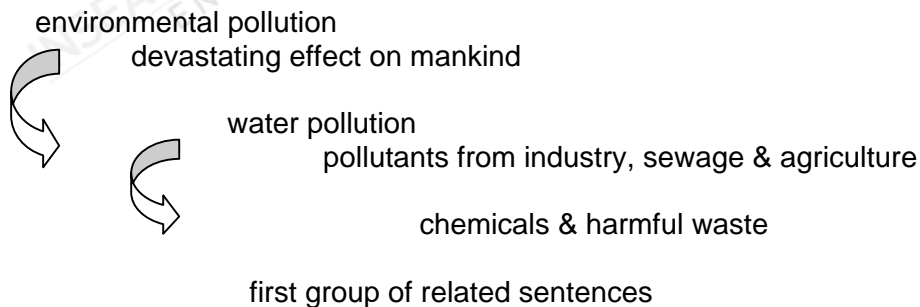
Arranging ideas logically

Depending on the topic and purpose of the paragraph, ideas and sentences can be organised in different ways, for example, chronologically, spatially or according to some logical order of ideas.

When a paragraph is organised *chronologically*, the sentences would be connected using time expressions such as: ‘after that’, ‘then’, ‘as soon as’, ‘while’, ‘before’, ‘in 2005’ and others.

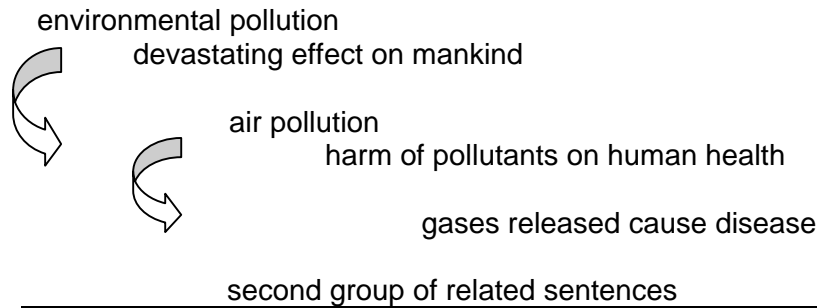
When a paragraph is organised *spatially*, the sentences would be connected using spatial order words such as: ‘to the left’, ‘on the right’, ‘above’, ‘below’, ‘behind’ ‘at the centre’, ‘between’ and others.

When a paragraph is organised according to some *logical order of ideas*, sentences discussing a specific idea are grouped together. In the sample paragraph on environmental pollution, water pollution is presented as one of the devastating effects. The group of sentences discussing the specific idea of water pollution begins with the transition word ‘firstly’. This is further supported by two developing sentences, which in turn directly relate back to the main idea of environmental pollution. The order of ideas grouped together can be illustrated as follows:



Firstly, water pollution reduces valuable supplies of fresh, clean water needed for daily consumption. Most of the **pollutants**, which enter the water come from **industry, sewage** systems, and **agriculture**. These include **chemicals** and **harmful wastes** from animals and plants.

The second devastating effect, which is discussed is air pollution. The group of sentences relating to this specific idea is introduced using the transition word 'another'. This is followed by two developing sentences, which directly relate back to the main idea of environmental pollution. The relationship of sentences in this group is illustrated as follows:



Another devastating effect is brought about by **air pollution**, which turns fresh, clean air into smoggy, unpleasant smelling air. The result of air pollutants is the harm it has on human health. For example, the gases, which are released into the atmosphere can cause such diseases as emphysema and cancer.

Using transition signals

Transition signals connect one idea to the next, guiding the reader through the paragraph. To indicate an opposite idea is being presented in your paragraph the transition signal 'however' is used, for example. If another idea is being presented, 'furthermore' can be used to introduce it.

There are a variety of different transition signals. Here is a list of some of the more common sentence and clause connectors which function as transition signals.

Transition Signals			
Sentence Connectors	Clause Connectors	Coordinating Conjunctions	Subordinating Conjunctions
giving more information	in addition, furthermore, moreover, also	and	
introducing a contrasting idea	in contrast, however, on the other hand, nevertheless	but, yet	although, though, whereas, while
describing a result/consequence	as a result, consequently, as a consequence, accordingly, therefore	so	
giving an example	for example, for instance		
listing ideas	first, firstly, second, secondly, finally, last, last of all		

Notice the transition signals used in the paragraph on environmental pollution.



Environmental pollution is having a devastating effect on mankind. **Firstly**, water pollution reduces valuable supplies of fresh, clean water needed for daily consumption. Most of the pollutants, which enter the water come from industry, sewage systems, and agriculture. These include chemicals and harmful wastes from animals and plants. **Another** devastating effect is brought about by air pollution, which turns fresh, clean air into smoggy, unpleasant smelling air. The result of air pollutants is the harm it has on human health. **For example**, the gases, which are released into the atmosphere can cause such diseases as emphysema and cancer.