

Develop with Unity in Mind

In the last video, I told you that a paragraph should develop around a topic sentence. An inexperienced writer will often make a statement and feel that it stands on its own—I've said what I think and that's that.

That's not enough for the reader, who cannot see into your mind and recreate the details of your thinking process.

You need to develop your idea by putting it out where the reader can see it. And the process of doing this will often show you where you haven't thought something through or gathered enough evidence to support your statement, which is good. It's important to know what you don't know.

That's why we say writing is thinking! And here's an important thought: develop no more than one idea, or topic, per paragraph. That is to say, strive for unity.

If you haven't yet downloaded a copy of the example essay given on the link above the videos, you can click on the pause button and do that now.

Okay. When you have the example essay, look at paragraph 2.

The topic sentence reads “The most prominent argument as to why the legalization of gambling has been so popular is the enormous revenue it generates for governments.” The entire paragraph talks about how much revenue gambling brings in; therefore, we can say it is unified or has the quality of unity. The only reason to introduce a new idea is to link this paragraph to other parts of the text, usually the next paragraph. This paragraph cleverly segues from talking about gambling revenues to tourism in its last sentence, connecting directly to the topic of the next paragraph.

So what is the best way to develop a unified paragraph? We've seen it already: Start with a topic sentence, and, going back to the bee metaphor, think about what job your paragraph is *doing*.

Remember that the paragraph is working for the thesis statement, the idea that controls the entire essay, in the case of our example essay, that the benefits of legalized gambling outweigh the problems it creates.

Let's practice. We might decide that the essay is too short and we need to add more information. What are the options? We could beef up existing paragraphs with more detail or we could develop one or more new paragraphs. The important thing is to keep each paragraph unified by sticking to one topic per paragraph.

I'm going to take the second option and look for some new information to support the thesis. I have Google Scholar set to search the Athabasca University Library. Let's enter

the search terms “benefits” and “gambling” Several articles come up. Hmm...not too many benefits...

Here’s one that looks promising: Gambling Participation and Social Support Among Older Adults: A Longitudinal Community Study. The abstract says that the results of this study revealed that gambling may offer social support to older adults who are often isolated as they age.

I can download the article and review it as a possible information source. I need to be able to give credit to this source if I use it, so I’ll make a note of all the information I need to cite it in my paper. This includes the names of the authors, the year of publication, the name of article, the name of the journal in which it appeared, the volume and issue number, and the page numbers.

The article was published in 2004, so the information is fairly current. The study looked at older adults in a rural, low socio-economic status, area of Pennsylvania. It’s important to make sure that information from studies is relevant to your argument both in terms of time and place. I think this will work. I’ll add this information to the Works Cited list at the end of the paper.

Here is a second article with similar information: Health Correlates of Recreational Gambling in Older Adults. This article concludes that “Recreational gambling patterns of older adults differ from those of younger adults. In contrast to findings in younger adults, recreational gambling in older adults is not associated with negative measures of health and well-being.” And I’ve also found Golden-Age Gambling: Psychological Benefits and Self-Concept Dynamics in Aging Consumers’ Consumption Experiences.

So, I’ve found some information from three sources that emphasizes the potential benefits of gambling to older people. Now I’ll draft a paragraph similar in tone and length to the others in the essay with a transitional sentence that links my new information to the rest of the essay.

How does this sound?

¶7a Not only is the strain on the health sector minimal, but recent studies have found that for older people, gambling is much less likely to be problematic (Desai et al., 2003), and it actually provides important social and psychological support. In 2003, Vanderbilt and others conducted a study of the effects of gambling on older adults in a rural, low socio-economic status, area of Pennsylvania. They found that “Gambling behavior in this cohort was associated with both reports of current and future social support, suggesting that gambling in certain forms and contexts can have benefits (387).” A 2004 study by Peggy Sue Loroz suggests that gambling provides a form of “experiential consumption” that may have a positive effect on the self-concept of older individuals (346). Thus as the population ages, the benefits of legalized gambling will be even more likely to come to the fore.

When I used the second piece of information, I quoted exactly as it was in the source article, so I've used quotation marks to show that. And here is where I cite the author, date, and page numbers. This citation refers to the full listing that I added to the Works Cited section of the paper. The other two sources are mostly rephrased in my own words, but of course I still need to cite them.

That is one way to develop a unified paragraph. What kind of detail you provide will depend on the purpose of your essay. It also depends on the assignment and the discipline you are writing in.

You might be wondering, "How do I know when to start a new paragraph?" or "how long should a paragraph be?" It depends. In extreme cases, you might find a paragraph as short as one sentence or as long as a page if it achieves the writer's purpose. However, most paragraphs fall somewhere between these two extremes, and while there are no hard and fast rules, there are a few principles you can use to determine proper paragraph length:

- The paragraph should be long enough to fully develop your topic.
- The paragraph should focus on one topic
- The paragraph length should support the effect you are trying to create. Keep in mind that longer paragraphs slow readers down and shorter paragraphs are easier and quicker to read.
- A paragraph of more than 12 sentences in an academic essay *probably* needs to be divided.
- A paragraph of 5 or fewer sentences in an academic essay *probably* needs to be developed further or combined with another paragraph.
- Paragraph length can vary greatly from discipline to discipline.

Three ways to ensure that your paragraphs are fully developed are to

1. provide the right level of supporting detail,
2. choose the right kind of evidence, and
3. choose the right pattern of development for your purpose.

In the next video, we'll look at the patterns you can use to develop paragraphs with a specific purpose.

Before you go on, you may want to try the self-test directly below this video to see what you remember about developing with unity.