

Structuring ideas within paragraphs

Reading (before seminar)

A well-written paper is carefully structured at every level. Here we will discuss proper structuring within paragraphs, and next time we will turn to proper structuring across paragraphs.

We will begin with an argument diagram, which we will convert into a paragraph:



1. The Macallan Cask-Strength whisky has strong notes of black cherry and oak which meld seamlessly.
2. The Macallan Cask-Strength whisky is an excellent dram.
3. The Macallan Cask-Strength whisky is a fine addition to any whisky collection.
4. Anyone who appreciates whisky should try a bottle of Macallan Cask-Strength.

A well-structured paragraph is usually organized around *just one central idea*. So if you plan to write a paper explaining an argument with three evidential claims, you should typically devote at least one paragraph to each claim. If you also plan to object to one of those claims, that too will require another paragraph. Students commonly err on the side of including too many ideas in a single paragraph. What is the central idea of our argument diagram?

To begin a paragraph, you should normally write a **topic sentence**, i.e., a sentence which signposts the central idea of the paragraph. A **direct** topic sentence states the central idea outright: “I will first argue that Sellars’ conception of justification is implausibly intellectual.” An **indirect** topic sentence indicates the central idea without stating it in full: “I will first object to Sellars’ conception of justification.” Either approach is perfectly acceptable. But if you use a direct topic sentence, avoid repeating the central idea at the end of the paragraph on pain of redundancy.

You can signpost your topic sentence **explicitly**: “I will first argue that Sellars’ conception of justification is implausibly intellectual.” Here, the phrase “I will first argue” clearly indicates that the topic of the paragraph will follow. But you can also signpost your topic sentence **implicitly**: “First, Sellars’ conception of justification is implausibly intellectual.” If this is the first sentence of a paragraph, then its location will signal its status as a topic sentence. Further,

the phrase “first” suggests to the reader that you will raise additional objections in subsequent paragraphs. What topic sentence might we use for our argument diagram?

It is natural to write a paragraph by working in the opposite direction of evidential arrows. For example, in our argument diagram, it is natural to introduce claim 4, followed by claim 3, followed by claim 2, followed by claim 1. **Resist this temptation!** Succumbing to it will result in confusing paragraphs like this one:

Anyone who appreciates whiskey should try the Macallan Cask-Strength, since it is a fine addition to any whiskey collection. That’s because it is an excellent dram because it has strong notes of black cherry and oak which meld seamlessly.

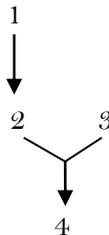
Here is a better alternative: after writing the topic sentence, start at the top of the argument diagram and follow the evidential arrows to the bottom. This is not the only good way to structure a paragraph, but it is usually an excellent option.

Practice (in seminar)

Let’s turn the argument diagram from the previous page into a paragraph.

At each step, it is crucial that you clearly signpost the relationships among your ideas. To appreciate the importance of signposting, let’s read the paragraph we have written without any signposting expressions.

Next, in small groups, convert the following diagram into a well-structured paragraph:

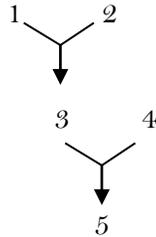


1. Martians have poisoned the human water supply.
2. Only people who stick to drinking orange juice will survive.
3. Drinking orange juice turns you into a vampire.
4. All human beings will become vampires.

Homework (after seminar)

Remember to **print two copies** of your homework, and **put your name on the back** so that I may practice anonymous grading.

Convert the diagram below into a well-structured paragraph that uses a direct topic sentence.



1. Breeding creates physically unhealthy dogs.
2. Breeding creates psychologically unbalanced dogs.
3. Dog breeding is a cruel practice.
4. The state should stop systematic forms of cruelty.
5. Dog breeding should be outlawed.