

Writing allows us to communicate with the world around us. It is a mode of expression, a vehicle for information, and a means of persuasion. You probably produce at least one piece of writing every day, but in your college courses, you will practice different modes of writing to strengthen your skills and fine-tune your writing process. As you progress through your program of study, this practice will help you grow not only as a writer, but also as a reader and critical thinker.

Effective Paragraph Development

You may have noticed that for your Discussion Board and your paper assignments in this class, you are asked to write in well-developed paragraphs. In order to do well on these assignments, then, it helps to know what a strong paragraph is and how to write one.

- A paragraph is an organized group of closely related sentences.
- A paragraph can exist by itself, in a one paragraph email from your child's teacher letting you know about your child's progress in school.
- A paragraph can be part of a larger document. It might be one paragraph among many in an essay, for example, in which you analyze the impact that a change like the growing use of police body cameras might have.
- A strong paragraph is organized around a specific point about a topic and that specific point is itself well developed through examples, explanation, analysis, details, research information, among many other writing strategies.
- Each sentence should be clearly relevant to the main point of the paragraph, connected to the sentences before and after, and help the audience to see or understand the point you are making.

Take a look at this paragraph from a student discussion board post that doesn't do that:

My biggest writing problem is that I can't stay focused when I write. My ideas go all over the place and my grammar is really bad. I have trouble with punctuation and I have never liked reading at all anyway. In high school, I had trouble paying attention in all my English class and I never liked the assignments.

Notice that the paragraph at first seems to focus the paragraph on the topic of writing problems and specifically staying focused when writing. The next sentence tries to clarify that idea but then the paragraph loses focus and discusses several other writing issues and problems with paying attention in class and not liking assignments. Those details are not relevant to the main point about staying focused, leaving the reader unsure of why this writer has trouble with staying focused and how this is a problem, for example.

Now, compare that sample to this paragraph:

My biggest problem with writing is that I tend to lose focus. I will begin to write an essay on a topic and then thousands of ideas will pop into my head and I will want to get them all down on the page. For example, I once wrote a paper in high school on the Electoral College and I found myself throwing in every fact I had found in my research, from what it is, to its origins, to my first experience voting and why I voted for the local sheriff because he was a friend of the family. I didn't do very well on that paper, turns out, because of this problem. I just find it hard to stick to that one point. I have found that what helps me with this problem is revising because I can always take out things that don't necessarily belong in the paragraph, but sometimes I also find that it's hard deciding what is relevant and what needs taking out. Hopefully this class will teach me how to stay more focused.

This paragraph does stay focused. It has a clear main point or controlling idea. The example of the high school paper helps to clarify how this problem manifests itself, while the analysis of why this happens is connected to the main point as well.

CM107M1 – Part 3

Strengthening Your Reading Comprehension Skills

In order to be an effective writer, you also need to be an effective reader and thinker. You learn to do things in life by watching and modeling your behavior after other people and what they do, and reading and writing are the same. Reading good writers helps you to see how to write well, how to establish a clear purpose, how to write to and for a specific audience, how to organize and develop ideas, and how to craft effective sentences that are readable and error-free.

Additionally, understanding what you read is important to your college and career success. You will spend a lot more time reading information than you may realize, both on the job and in your college courses, so comprehension skills are vital to doing well in both areas. In addition, a lot of the writing in both your college courses will involve finding and incorporating sources to support and validate your ideas. Being able to understand what you read is an important skill.

Applying Reading Strategies

What does it take to do well in your classes? Many students will say such things as “a good instructor,” or “hard work,” or “you have to like the course.” All of these things are important, but developing good reading habits can make all the difference when we talk about academic success.

Annotating