Writing Skills Helpsheet: Sentence Structure

Paragraphs: what they do and how to plan them

Paragraphs collect together the discussion of one main point in a block of text. This means that the organisation of your arguments is much clearer; it helps you to demonstrate your arguments more effectively and helps your reader appreciate the line of argument that you are taking. The length of a paragraph may vary from programme to programme, but usually it will be approximately 250-300 words.

When writing paragraphs you should ensure they contain these 4 aspects:

1. **Main Point/Argument** – a focussed point of interest that argues one way or another. The opening sentence of a paragraph is sometimes called a ‘topic sentence’ or ‘signposting sentence’ because it tells the reader what the rest of the paragraph will focus on.

2. **Include evidence and the reference(s)** – as specifically relevant to your paragraph main point as possible. Check with the Roehampton Referencing Guide on the website for the details about in-text citations and bibliographies.

3. **Explain the relevance of the evidence and reference(s)** to the main point of your paragraph. What does it show? Why is it relevant? What is its importance? This critical evaluation and analysis is where you will achieve higher marks.

4. **Link the point and reference(s) back to the essay question**; how does this affect or contribute to your argument? Checking how the paragraph’s point answers the question is essential to avoid the danger of failing to answer the question properly.

Remember: when making new points and highlighting key issues, use this guide to ensure you don’t lose marks for lack of understanding.

In longer essays you may wish to have secondary paragraphs backing up arguments or exploring points further and on these occasions you may not need to follow this 4 point model.

Variation in sentence length, using all forms of punctuation – (if relevant!) rather than a very repetitive sentence length and style, is also helpful.

Well-structured paragraphs show your understanding of the sources used and highlight the main points of your argument. By ensuring these four aspects are in each major paragraph within your essay you make sure that your argument is organised, clearly explained and you prove to your tutors that you understand the topic.