



GRADUATE WRITING CENTER

How to Organize a Paragraph — The MEAL Method

The MEAL paragraph method is an approach to organizing paragraphs. It is especially helpful for longer academic writing projects (literature reviews, research statements, etc.) that require the synthesis of ideas across multiple paragraphs. The MEAL method uses four components: *Main Idea*, *Evidence*, *Analysis*, and *Link*.

What does a MEAL paragraph look like in a publication?

While not every paragraph needs to follow the MEAL structure, we can often find examples of this approach in the literature within our fields. Consider this example from the introduction of Demuth, et al. (2022):

[A] In the last several years, some scholars have focused on investigating false alarms as a theorized cause of complacency. [B] The research about the effect of false alarms on protective behaviors, which primarily has been based on cross-sectional surveys and experiments, has shown mixed results in the tornado context. [C] Lindell et al. (2016) found no effect of false alarms on sheltering intentions. [D] Trainor et al. (2015) found that higher false alarm ratios where study participants lived were associated with decreased sheltering intentions. [E] Ripberger et al. (2015) found that higher false alarm ratios led to greater perceptions of false alarms, which reduced trust in the National Weather Service, which reduced intentions to respond to hypothetical warnings. [F] And, Lim et al. (2019, p. 560) found that higher perceptions of false alarm ratios by study participants counterintuitively were associated with greater reported likelihood of taking protective action, leading them to conclude that “concerns about false alarms generating a complacent public may be overblown.” [G] These mixed results suggest that the notion of complacency may be oversimplified or unfounded. [H] Indeed, despite named concerns about complacency and research to explore its causes, noticeably absent from the research is a focus on the phenomenon itself—that is, whether people are actually complacent when faced with a tornado risk rather than making inferences that they are. (p. E1554-1555).

Main idea (A-B)

Notice how the first two sentences show the relevance of the upcoming **evidence** (in this case, citations). The first sentence introduces the idea, and the second makes a claim.

Evidence (C-F)

Each of these sentences provide a concise description of research findings that are relevant to the **main idea**. In this example, the literature includes mixed results, which the reader was prepared for by the **main idea** sentences.

Analysis (G)

This sentence synthesizes the **evidence** in a way that supports the main idea.

Link (H)

This sentence clearly reinforces the relationship of the **main idea** and **the analysis** to the larger topic of the paper, creating a connection that the next paragraph can build on.

Source: Demuth, J. L., Vickery, J., Lazrus, H., Henderson, J., Morss, R. E., & Ash, K. D. (2022). Rethinking warning compliance and complacency by examining how people manage risk and vulnerability during real-world tornado threats. *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*, 103(6), E1553-E1572.

What goes into a good MEAL paragraph?

Main idea

The **main idea** of a paragraph makes a claim that distinguishes its paragraph from other paragraphs within your paper. This claim establishes the perspective that you would like your reader to use to make sense of the sentences that follow. The main idea can be 1-2 sentences depending on how much introductory work your paragraph is doing in the larger organization of your paper. When writing your main idea,

- ✓ *Establish the focus of the paragraph.*
- ✓ *Limit each paragraph to one core argument.*
- ✓ *Reflect the complexity of the paragraph in the main idea.*
- ✓ *Cite any relevant sources that your main idea uses.*
- ⊗ *Don't mistake important evidence for the main idea.*
- ⊗ *Don't use the main idea to make broader claims than your paragraph supports.*

Evidence

The **evidence** section of your paragraph supports the main idea using concrete information from your or others' research. It is important to use evidence that your audience will find compelling and to cite all information that comes from an outside source. When writing your evidence,

- ✓ *Be concise and relevant.*
- ✓ *Cite your evidence, using paraphrases or quotations appropriately.*
- ✓ *For any evidence from your own research, clearly label where the reader may find this information within your paper. (See your citation style guide for details.)*
- ✓ *Use evidence that is appropriate for your field (e.g., peer-reviewed journals, the results from the experiment your paper is describing, historical documents).*
- ⊗ *Don't include unnecessary details.*
- ⊗ *Don't mistake your own logic or inferences for evidence that others can reference.*

Analysis

One of the most important skills in graduate writing is effective synthesis of information. The **analysis** section of your paragraph helps create cohesion between the main idea and the evidence you provide. Use this portion of your paragraph to show the implications of the evidence in light of your main idea. When writing your analysis,

- ✓ *Reflect the implications of the evidence.*
- ✓ *Highlight how the overall evidence ties together the topic of the main idea.*
- ⊗ *Don't speculate beyond the evidence you have included.*
- ⊗ *Don't rush your argument. Stick to the synthesis of this paragraph's information.*

Link

The **link** is one of the most complex aspects of paragraph organization to master, because it requires understanding the flow of your argument across paragraphs. Use this portion of your paragraph to prepare the reader for the next stage of your argument. When writing your link,

- ✓ *Consider how your current paragraph supports and connects to the next paragraph.*
- ✓ *Use the information in your current paragraph as context as you build your argument.*
- ⊗ *Don't try to force a link. It is better to have no distinct link than to make a weak or misleading connection for your reader.*