

Understanding paragraphs in factual texts

A paragraph has two or three parts.

Structure	Paragraph example: Non-renewable fuel sources	What the writer is thinking
Topic sentence (what this is about)	Coal, crude oil and gas are non-renewable fossil fuels.	<i>I'm putting the three fossil fuels into the theme position so they're right up front.</i>
Tell us more (what is important to share)	They were formed over millions of years, from the remains of dead organisms. Coal was largely formed ... while oil and gas were formed ... Over millions of years this organic material was ... (Geoscience Australia 2000).	<i>I want the reader to know just how long it takes for fossil fuels to be produced, so that they understand why they are called 'non-renewable'.</i>
So what? (useful but not always necessary) Segue to next paragraph	Burning fossil fuels is one of the most significant causes of climate change (NASA 2020a). It produces carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that traps heat inside the atmosphere. Many alternative renewable and non-polluting energy sources are now being investigated and harnessed.	<i>I want the reader to know the reason that we cannot continue using fossil fuels. I want to link this information to the next paragraph, when I give the reader alternative fuel sources and make them feel hopeful</i>

The topic sentence

- The topic sentence should be strong but not too long: don't tell us everything in one sentence, just flag what the paragraph is going to be about.
- Try to avoid using 'there are ...'. Sometimes you need to begin a paragraph with these words, but see if you can put the topic closer to the front to give it more punch.

Compare ...

- **There are** these fuels called fossil fuels and they are coal, crude oil and gas.
- **Coal, crude oil and gas** are non-renewable fossil fuels.

Tell us more

Next is the body of the paragraph. It develops the idea that was flagged in the topic sentence. It can include:

- a more detailed description
- a sequence of events (*Coal was formed from decaying plants ...; Over millions of years ...*)
- the idea expanded with other words (*In other words ...; that is to say ...*)
- examples (*for example ...; one example is ...; this is exemplified by ...*)
- compare and contrast (*Unlike renewable fuel sources ...*)
- a challenge (*While some claim that ...*)
- proof: back up what you say with evidence or authority (*Geoscience Australia 2000, NASA 2020; research shows that ...; this is evident in the way that ...*).

So what?

This part is sometimes useful but not essential. It could be:

- a summary of the paragraph (*All of these have one characteristic in common: they are nocturnal*)
- a comment (*Burning fossil fuels is one of the most significant causes of climate change.*)
- a segue to the next paragraph (*Many alternative renewable and non-polluting energy sources ...*).

Whatever you choose, it has to be relevant to, and elaborate on, the topic sentence of the paragraph, support the purpose of the text as a whole, and make sense to your intended audience.