

## USING PARAGRAPHS TO ENHANCE READABILITY AND CLARITY

See **3.4** of the Checklist

See also **Legislation: Using paragraphs to enhance readability and clarity**

### PARAGRAPHS — GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR ALL DOCUMENTS

Paragraphs enhance the readability and clarity of everything we write (whether it is an email or legislation).

They help us to—

- group ideas into logical and manageable chunks
- arrange ideas so that the relationship between those ideas is obvious
- reduce the length and density of the text (ie, by breaking the text into manageable chunks) (*see also* 6.11 of the Checklist)
- increase the amount of white space on the page.

### PARAGRAPH FLOW

Each paragraph should lead naturally into the next, otherwise the reader will struggle to see the relationship between the ideas.

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### OLD BEFORE NEW

Readers expect a document to begin with familiar information and end with new information. They will first scan the text to confirm the “old” information, then absorb what is new, and so on as they read through the document. Readers will comfortably follow along if you build bridges between paragraphs.

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### APPROACHES TO PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

Paragraphs can be structured in the following ways:

- statement and support (eg, in reports)
- general to specific
- question and answer (eg, in help information)
- problem and solution
- cause and effect
- process or procedure (eg, in instructions)
- description
- comparison or contrast (eg, in a recommendation)

- definition
- example or analogy.

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#### TRANSITIONAL WORDS AND PHRASES

Transitional words and phrases help the flow by referring to the previous paragraph in some way:

<b>Transition type</b>	<b>Transitional words</b>
Addition	and, in addition, what's more, besides, as well as, another, next, following, or, since, so
Comparison	also, both, and, in comparison, together, each, similarly, likewise, as well as, in the same way, consistent with, equally, matching
Contrast	but, however, although, in contrast, nevertheless, on the other hand, then, while, despite, even so, still, yet, instead, opposing, unlike
Cause and effect	as a result, because, for, since, then, consequently, it follows, so, therefore, in effect, due to, owing to
Emphasis	of course, above all, indeed, surely, more important, in fact, actually, equally, significantly, increasingly, notably, by all means, without doubt
Example	for example, in particular, for instance, specifically, in other words, such as, namely, in this case
Qualification	at the same time, although, after all, and yet, certainly, even though, of course, yet, no doubt
Sequence	first, secondly (etc), before, next, later, once, presently, meanwhile, initially, after, then, finally, afterwards, in the past, during, immediately
Space	at the front, at the back, in the centre, to the right/left, nearby, above, below, beyond, far away, ahead of, close to, next to, opposite, between
Summary	in summary, in short, so, as a result, in conclusion, therefore, to sum up, in closing

#### EXAMPLE 1 — GOOD PARAGRAPH FLOW

- ✓ The paragraph is a relatively recent feature of Western writing, having evolved along with the printing press. Yet its origins go back a long way. Aristotle used a “paragraphos” to mark a break in content—probably a horizontal stroke underneath the new starting point.

The term “paragraph” first appeared in written English in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A symbol such as a [ or a § marked the start of a new point and it quickly became popular. When the printing press was invented, the paragraph was typeset to start on a new line, often indented.

The late development of the paragraph explains why it took a while for a coherent theory about effective paragraphing to emerge. In 1866, Scots logician Alexander Bain wrote that effective paragraphs met a number of simple rules, in particular, “unity”, “development”, and “coherence”.

But if paragraph theory started in Scotland, it found its real home in America. Academic John Genung reworked Bain’s rules into the 3 principles of “unity”, “proportion”, and “continuity”. Harvard professor Barrett Wendell elevated these to “unity”, “mass”, and “coherence” in 1891.

These 3 elements have remained at the core of paragraph theory ever since ...

