

Paragraph Development in 5 Steps*

Step 1: Decide on a guiding idea for the paragraph and create a topic sentence.

Paragraph development begins with the formulation of the guiding idea or question. This idea or question directs the paragraph's development. Often, the guiding idea of a paragraph will appear in the form of a topic sentence. In some cases, you may need more than one sentence to express a paragraph's guiding idea or question.

- Sample guiding idea and topic sentence — To define what it means to be a feminist and thus determine if Taylor Swift is a feminist, we might start with what a feminist does.
How should someone who calls herself a feminist act?

Step 2: Explain the guiding idea.

Paragraph development continues with an expression of the rationale or the explanation that the writer gives for how the reader should interpret the information presented in the guiding idea statement or topic sentence of the paragraph. The writer explains her thinking about the main topic, idea, or focus of the paragraph.

- Sample explanation — Those who want a more inclusive definition say a feminist simply advocates for women. Those who want a more rigid definition believe that a feminist should speak out on certain things in a certain way.

Step 3: Give an example (or multiple examples).

Paragraph development progresses with the expression of some type of support or evidence for the idea and the explanation that came before it. The example serves as a sign or representation of the relationship established in the topic sentence and explanation portions of the paragraph.

- Sample example A — According to Guardian columnist Jessica Valenti, feminism means nothing if everyone is a feminist. “Without some boundaries for claiming the word feminist, it becomes meaningless,” she declared in 2014. The first boundary she had in mind? Abortion politics. “So once and for all: Can you be an anti-choice feminist? No.”

- Sample example B — Likewise, January’s anti-Trump Women’s March, claiming to represent “all women” of “all backgrounds” in statements to the media and in its branding, argued as much with regard to abortion. While the group initially approved pro-life groups led by women as partners, it removed them after a feminist uproar—and apologized “for this error.” That uproar included Valenti, who tweeted that she was “horrified.”

Step 4: Explain the example(s).

The next movement in paragraph development is an explanation of each example and its relevance to the topic sentence and rationale that were stated at the beginning of the paragraph. This explanation shows readers why you chose to use this/or these particular examples as evidence to support the major claim, or focus, in your paragraph.

Continue the pattern of giving examples and explaining them until all points/examples that the writer deems necessary have been made and explained. NONE of your examples should be left unexplained. You might be able to explain the relationship between the example and the topic sentence in the same sentence which introduced the example. More often, however, you will need to explain that relationship in a separate sentence.

- Sample explanation for example A — The consensus seems clear: Pro-life women are not welcome in the feminist movement. Their definition of what it means to be a feminist is restricted to people who speak out with the “correct” set of political views or morals. Their attacks reveal something very ugly about modern feminism: While today’s feminists claim to champion the rights of all women, they speak only for women who agree with them.
- Sample explanation for example B — [The relationship between examples A and B is made with the word “consensus” and a separate explanation is not needed. Yay for synthesis!]

Step 5: Complete the paragraph’s idea or draw a conclusion.

The final movement in paragraph development involves tying up the loose ends of the paragraph and reminding the reader of the relevance of the information in this paragraph to your thesis. At

this point, you can remind your reader about the relevance of the information that you just discussed in the paragraph or draw a conclusion from the example(s).

Do not transition to your next paragraph here. Transitions are more effective at the beginning of paragraphs.

- Sample sentence for completing a paragraph — Is speaking out with certain “correct” political views the test for what it means to be a feminist? If so, then Taylor Swift is not a feminist.

Let’s put it all together! Here’s what the full paragraph looks like:

To define what it means to be a feminist and thus determine if Taylor Swift is a feminist, we might start with what a feminist does. How should someone who calls herself a feminist act? Those who want a more inclusive definition say a feminist simply advocates for women. Those who want a more rigid definition believe that a feminist should speak out on certain things in a certain way. According to Guardian columnist Jessica Valenti, feminism means nothing if everyone is a feminist. “Without some boundaries for claiming the word feminist, it becomes meaningless,” she declared in 2014. The first boundary she had in mind? Abortion politics. “So once and for all: Can you be an anti-choice feminist? No.” Likewise, January’s anti-Trump Women’s March, claiming to represent “all women” of “all backgrounds” in statements to the media and in its branding, argued as much with regard to abortion. While the group initially approved pro-life groups led by women as partners, it removed them after a feminist uproar—and apologized “for this error.” That uproar included Valenti, who tweeted that she was “horrified.” The consensus seems clear: Pro-life women are not welcome in the feminist movement. Their definition of what it means to be a feminist is restricted to people who speak out with the “correct” set of political views or morals. Their attacks reveal something very ugly about modern feminism: While today’s feminists claim to champion the rights of all women, they speak only for women who agree with them. Is speaking out with certain “correct” political views the test for what it means to be a feminist? If so, then Taylor Swift is not a feminist. Rinse and repeat the 5 steps for each paragraph!

Take time to . . .

- create transitions between paragraphs to show the logic and organization of your essay.
- craft clear, precise topic sentences. And questions are okay! Some writing teachers discourage them, but they are wonderful ways to propel a conversation forward. Who can resist a question?