

M.E.A.L. Plan Paragraphs

WHAT IS THE M.E.A.L. PLAN APPROACH? (from Donald Kyle Danielson, Duke University. Emphasis added.)

“Effective paragraphing is a central skill in academic writing. Many writers have been told a paragraph should contain a single idea; many have heard paragraphs have to be a minimum length—three sentences, for instance. In reality, paragraphs come in different shapes and sizes, and some so called “rules” may put writers in a straightjacket that unnecessarily hampers their ability to convey their ideas as needed in a particular piece of writing. Nevertheless, grasping the general form of a paragraph provides a good foundation. *Once you have this basic building block at your command, you can vary from it by conscious choice when needed.*

One way to envision a body paragraph is as a “complete MEAL,” with the components being the paragraph’s **Main idea, Evidence, Analysis, and Link** back to the larger claim.”

M**AIN IDEA** The MAIN IDEA, or TOPIC SENTENCE, of a paragraph is essentially the central idea, or argument on which that paragraph will focus. Generally, the main idea will be the first sentence of a body paragraph; however, as writers become more advanced, topic sentences can be delayed and located in different places within the body paragraph. They might be the second or third sentence, or even the last sentence. Nevertheless, main idea sentences should have the following components: (1) they should identify the SINGLE topic of that paragraph; (2) they should be derived from the thesis statement; (3) they should be argumentative (make a claim); (4) they should be comprised of the writer’s opinion. When the main idea sentence is the first sentence of a body paragraph: (5) it should contain appropriate transitional language.

E**VIDENCE** (adapted from Danielson.) EVIDENCE and ANALYSIS are a paragraph’s main course; they are what allow a writer to prove that her paragraph’s main idea is plausible. Evidence could be: (1) information from journal articles; (2) data from research or interviews; (2) a quotation or paraphrase from a work of literature; (3) a concrete example; (4) a chain of logical reasoning the writer has developed; (5) an anecdote or personal experience. However, evidence shouldn’t be plopped down in a paragraph and left to “speak for itself.” If evidence is left unexplained, the reader may interpret it differently than the writer intended, and if that happens, the main idea doesn’t get the support it needs. Therefore, body paragraphs should carefully analyze the evidence it provides; it should, in other words, explain exactly how the evidence provided proves what the writer thinks it proves. *Often a paragraph’s “E” and “A” are hard to separate: the writer might provide some evidence, analyze it, and then provide more evidence and analysis.* Sometimes individual sentences will contain both evidentiary and analytic elements. But in most academic writing, both evidence and analysis are essential to a paragraph’s wellbeing.

L**INK** The LINK statement is often an implicit statement that gives closure to the paragraph and subtly

connects the analysis provided in the paragraph back to the central claim. It is not a restated topic sentence or a preview of the next body paragraph. Often, it a statement or phrase tied in with the final analysis of that paragraph.