

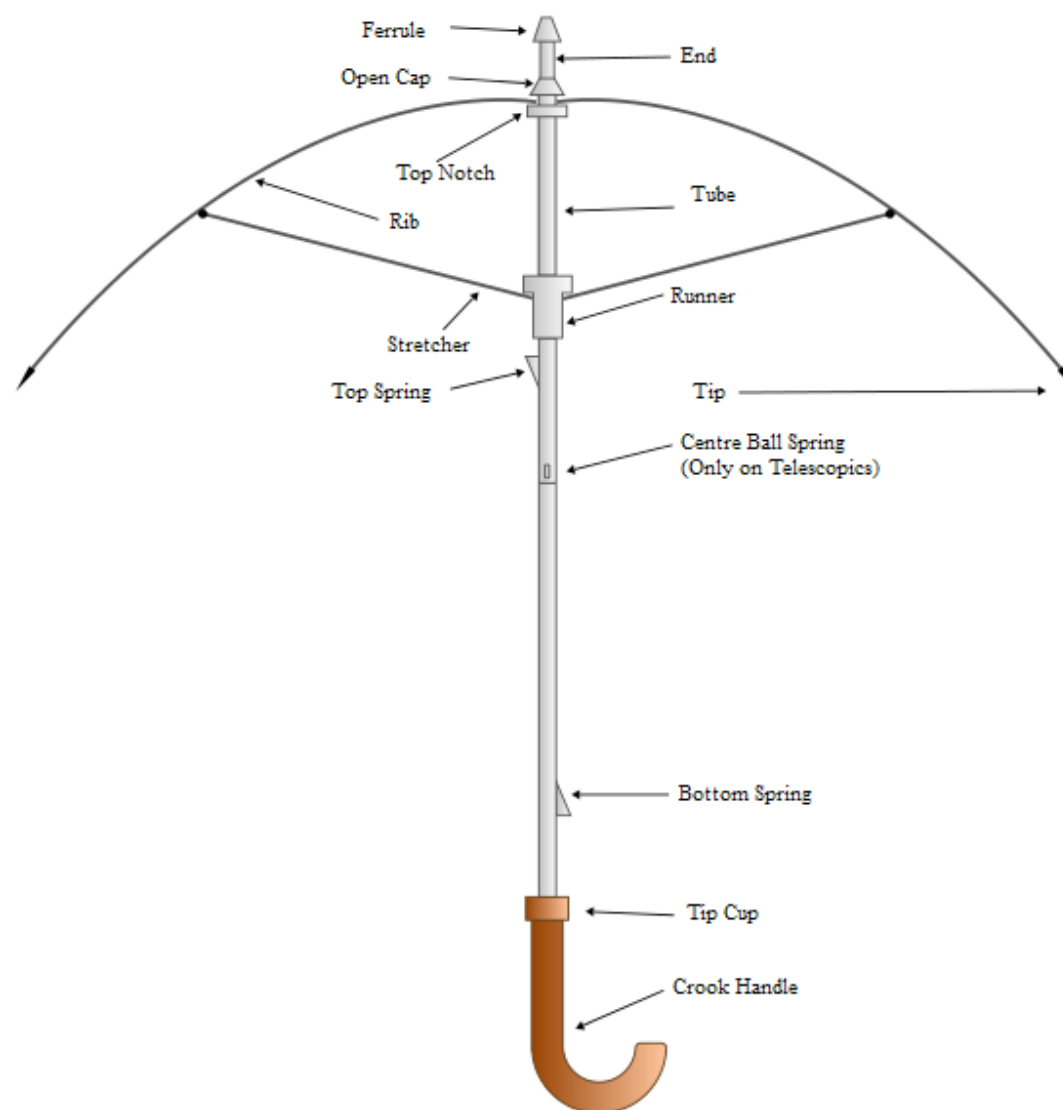
# Constructing Paragraphs

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## You Can Stand Under My Umbrella

The umbrella is an amazing tool.

I know what you're thinking. If this is an essay about constructing paragraphs, why are we talking about umbrellas? Well, when imagining the construction of an essay, it sometimes helps me to think of an image rather than a bunch of words strung together. When I think of the relationship between my thesis statement and the paragraphs that support it, I imagine an umbrella. Depending on who you talk to, different people have different names for the various parts of an umbrella. I usually describe the parts of an umbrella by their functions: "that thing that pops it open," "that knob at the top," "the nylon web part that keeps you dry," or "the metal prongs that hold it open." However, I recently learned that these things have much more official names than the ones I've given them. "That thing that pops it open" is called a "spring." "The knob at the top" is called the "ferrule." "The nylon web part that keeps you dry" is called "the rib," and "the metal prongs that hold it open" are called "stretchers." Here's a simple and handy diagram of all these fun pieces:



Source

The reason I mention all these different parts is because I think of the different parts of my essay as these different parts of an umbrella. The thesis statement could be described as the tube in the middle of the umbrella, ending at the top of the umbrella with the ferrule. It's the center of the umbrella, the thing that all the other parts attach to. But a thesis statement alone doesn't make an essay, just like a tube with a ferrule at the top doesn't make an umbrella. A tube with a ferrule at the top won't protect me from the tropical storm outside my window right now.

The parts of an umbrella that keep us dry, the parts that make an umbrella an umbrella, are the ribs and the stretchers. If we were to imagine your essay as an umbrella, your paragraphs are the ribs and the stretchers. Without the paragraphs, your essay is just a tube in the air, and that won't do anybody much good. But with ribs and stretchers, you've got length, depth, coverage, and you're nice and dry.

Much like an essay, a paragraph should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. These are the bare bones of a paragraph; these are its ribs.

Your paragraph should start with a topic sentence. Like a thesis statement, your topic sentence tells the reader what to expect. If you had to sum up your essay's content in a single sentence, that sentence would be your thesis statement. If you had to sum up a paragraph's content in a single sentence, that sentence would be the paragraph's topic sentence. Your paragraph, and therefore your topic sentence, might be informative, it might be argumentative, or it might explain a counter argument. Whatever the case may be, a reader should be able to read your topic sentence and know what the whole paragraph will be about. If, after you've written your paragraph, you go back and read your topic sentence and you find that your topic sentence doesn't accurately sum up your paragraph, you have two choices: (1) revise your topic sentence so that it more accurately captures the content of your paragraph, or (2) revise your paragraph so it more accurately reflects your topic sentence. Either choice is fine. It's up to you as an author to decide which choice is the right one for your essay. Now that we've discussed how to begin your paragraph (with a topic sentence), let's move on to the middle.

The middle of your paragraph contains the evidence you provide to support your topic sentence. You can read more about evidence in "Defining Evidence," but for our purposes, let's just say that evidence is what authors use to give credibility, or ethos, to their claims. When making a claim, it always helps to be able to point to somebody else and say, "Look! She's an expert in her field and she agrees with me." This kind of evidence lends credibility (ethos) to your claim, it adds depth to your paragraph, and it strengthens your overall umbrella. I mean, essay. So your paragraph now has a beginning and a middle, but it still needs an end.

I like to use the end of a paragraph to transition my reader smoothly into the next paragraph. Typically I do two things when I end my paragraphs: (1) I look backwards and (2) I look forwards. By that I mean, I remind my reader what I've been discussing in this paragraph and why it's important, or it how connects to my thesis statement. That's me "looking backward" at the paragraph I've just finished. Then I "look forward," and hint to my reader what's coming next. This kind of transition helps ease your reader through your essay as you shift from one idea to another. It helps them keep up with your train of thought.

Let's take a look at the paragraph above on topic sentences and review the bare bones necessary to make an effective paragraph. First, we need a topic sentence that tells us what the paragraph is going to be about. In this particular paragraph, the topic sentence is, "Your paragraph should start with a topic sentence." Can a reader read this sentence and get a sense for what the whole paragraph will be about? Yes. This topic sentence indicates to me that the subsequent paragraph will be discussing the importance of topic sentences

and their relationship to the paragraphs they precede. Second, the middle of the paragraph should provide evidence to support the topic sentence. Does the paragraph above do this? Yes. In this particular case, there is a discussion of the reasons that topic sentences are important, and some suggestions for writers who find that their topic sentences don't accurately reflect the content of their paragraphs. The middle of the paragraph above develops the notion that paragraphs should begin with topic sentences; rather than just stating that it **is** important, this section of the paragraph discusses **why** it is important to begin paragraphs with topic sentences. And third, does the end of the paragraph transition the reader smoothly into the next paragraph? Yes. First it "looks back" and reviews what has just been covered ("Now that we've discussed how to begin your paragraph") and then it hints at what will be addressed in the next paragraph ("let's move on to the middle"). When constructing your own paragraphs, remember that like any good essay, a paragraph should also have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But as we've discussed above, these are just the bare bones of an essay. Just like effective umbrellas are not made solely of ribs, effective paragraphs are not made solely of these bare bones. Something is still missing.

Let's return to my umbrella metaphor briefly. If the beginning, middle, and end of a paragraph are its ribs, what are the stretchers? Remember, the stretchers are the nylon covers that actually keep us dry. Stretchers are the things that give our umbrellas fun colors or patterns like neon green, or black and white polka dots, or, as I have on my umbrella, purple zebra stripes. The stretcher is the flair, the style, the thing that makes an umbrella an umbrella and, not only that, but also makes it **your** umbrella. In your paragraph, the stretcher is your voice, your style, your tone, and your word choice. It's made up of the little things you do to make your essay your own, to keep your reader interested, to make your writing yours. This part is just as important in constructing a successful paragraph as having an accurate topic sentence, effective evidence, or a smooth transition at the end.

There is a tropical storm raging outside my window right now. The wind is blowing, the rain is coming down hard, the lightning is bright and the thunder is loud. If I were to go outside, I wouldn't do it without my trusty purple zebra striped umbrella. And if a single part of that umbrella was weak, I could probably still stay partially dry, but I might have water dripping on my shoulder, or part of my umbrella might be flapping in the wind. I'd much rather have all the pieces there and doing their jobs just like they're supposed to. The same goes for your essay. A thesis statement will help get you started, but it's not a full essay. You need paragraphs to support those ideas, to help your reader move through your essay successfully. It's easy to do, too; just make sure you have all the pieces there, and then add some purple zebra stripes. I mean, style.