

Opinion
Editing, Writing
& Publishing



Paragraphing in English Articles: Tips for Non-Anglophone Authors



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Received: Jan 28, 2021
Accepted: Feb 15, 2021

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Disclosure

The author has no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

A paragraph is a visual textual unit which usually consists of a number of sentences dealing with one main idea. By dividing a text into paragraphs, writers give their readers cues as to how process their texts. In other words, paragraphing performs an organizational function as it structures the meaning of a piece of writing “so that a reader can absorb the text sensibly.”¹ The skill of paragraphing is also of great importance for nonnative English authors, of medical texts in particular, as its mastery helps them to clearly express ideas and thus to avoid various forms of plagiarism, often found in the papers of non-Anglophone researchers.^{2,3}

The writing of effective paragraphs requires competence on the so-called meso-level, in addition to that on macro- (overall text organization) and micro- (sentences and words) levels.⁴ Development of such competence in English can, however, be not easy, especially for nonnative writers. As, for example, the research conducted in Asian academic contexts shows,⁵⁻⁹ non-Anglophone university students experience a variety of difficulties related to the production of essay paragraphs; these include insufficient or illogical paragraph development, inconsistency in maintaining a point of view, deficiencies in the overall structure of a paragraph, and lack of transition devices (e.g., words like *although*, *however*, *therefore*).

Such problems are most often attributed to the influence of national writing styles. However, another reason seems to arise from the insufficient awareness of nonnative writers of the main principles of paragraphing, which were historically elaborated in the field of English writing and composition. According to these principles, paragraphs should build around one central, controlling idea and follow three main requirements. The first one is *unity* which implies that all sentences in a single paragraph relate to a single main idea. The second one is *coherence*, according to which the sentences in a paragraph should be arranged in a logical manner. The final principle lays emphasis on the *development* of paragraphs which should not only present ideas but also explain them and support through evidence and details. These principles are realized via the typical paragraph structure which consists of a topic sentence (usually the first sentence in a paragraph expressing its main idea), supporting arguments and evidence, and (sometimes) a concluding sentence which summarizes the paragraph. Depending on their functions, paragraphs are divided into a number of types, such as argumentative, descriptive, comparative, or narrative ones. As to their length, there are no specific requirements, although it is generally assumed that the number of words in the paragraphs of an academic English text is more or less balanced (with 100 words on average).

In what follows, I will try to show and exemplify the typical cases of violation of the above mentioned principles which often occur in nonnative English research writing, biomedical in particular. The examples have been taken from the articles written in English by Slavic-speaking medical researchers and published in a local journal.

One of the most widespread mistakes related to paragraph writing and detected in the studied corpus is the combination of several ideas in one paragraph. As a result, the paragraph may lack such important characteristics as its unity. For example, the paragraph provided below contains two ideas:

The human body is not a property, not a resource, not a commodity. The body enables our “being-in-the-world” and “being-in-the world-with-others”: through the body we perform our activities in the world and interact with other people. Through attunement with the others we give meaning to our actions and fulfill ourselves. One becomes human through encountering the other-that-oneself. Gifts are important for establishing and maintaining moral relationships between people within society and for respecting human values as they underscore our interdependence and the value of solidarity and human dignity. Therefore, donorship should be regarded as gift-giving in the context of our attunement with the others.

The initial four sentences of this paragraph develop a philosophical vision of the human body, thus making the reader anticipate some further reflexivity on the theme discussed. However, the fifth sentence (beginning with the word *Gifts*) rather abruptly introduces a new idea, which seems not be immediately related to the previous one. Furthermore, this sentence, similarly to the first one, appears to be a topic sentence, as it outlines a further theme. It would be therefore much better to divide this excerpt into two paragraphs and reduce the reader's efforts aimed at its understanding.

The paragraphs produced in English by nonnative researchers may also lack coherence. In medical texts, this happens when authors combine different temporal perspectives and/or types of writing in reporting their research, as in the reduced example below:

Over a five-year period ... 325 cases of incarnated onychomycosis ... were performed. In 182 patients late relapses of onychocryptosis were confirmed after previous surgeries at other clinics. Removal of the affected nails was performed in patients with mycotic lesions (local and systemic fungicide therapies were used). Investigation of the morphogenesis of destructive aspect of the mycotic lesions was carried out. The analysis justifies the feasibility of establishing predictive relationships between clinical variants of chronic purulent necrotic infections and combined comorbidity. System therapy ... in a postoperative period was carried out.

This paragraph has been extracted from the Methods section of a research article. It describes the procedure of the investigation, using the simple past tense and establishing a narrative perspective, typical of this part of a research paper. At the same time, the paragraph contains one sentence (*The analysis justifies...*), which uses the simple present and provides some explanation of the procedure. By choosing another tense and a different sentence structure (which signal the transfer from narration to description) in the middle of the paragraph, the author breaks the logical and textual flow and interrupts the reader's linear perception of the text. Therefore, the paragraph needs certain rearrangement; for instance, the author could have reported the procedure in one paragraph and then explained it in another one,

or develop one separate paragraph, which connects a certain stage of the procedure and its explication.

Another typical mistake, which leads to the insufficient paragraph coherence, is scarce use of transition devices (also called logical connectors), e.g.:

Patients suffering from classic forms of CAH and non-classic CAH are at higher risk of appearance of unilateral or bilateral focal changes in the structure of adrenal glands. Treatment with glucocorticoids may decrease in size the adrenal tumours. It is important to examine the patients with congenital adrenal hyperplasia for adrenal tumours. Likewise, patients diagnosed with adrenal tumours should be examined for congenital adrenal hyperplasia...

The paragraph contains an appropriate transition device (*Likewise*), indicating comparison, but lacks the one which would have established the necessary logical connection of cause and effect between the two initial sentences and the third one (*It is therefore important to examine...*). Overall, the poor use of such devices appears to be a persistent error in nonnative English research writing.¹⁰

The logical development of a paragraph appears to be another source of problems for nonnative authors, as can be seen from the example below:

Thus, the HIV epidemic in L... region is so far concentrated in the groups that are most vulnerable to HIV. At present both parenteral and sexual ways of transmission have epidemiological significance. The use of contaminated injecting equipment remains one of the significant risk factors for HIV infection. Practice has proven feasibility, usefulness and justification of the preventive measures and actions aimed at averting the spread of HIV, in particular, focus on changing people's behavior and their lifestyle.

The reader of English texts generally assumes that the first sentence of the paragraph is a topic one and therefore anticipates further elaboration of the theme it indicates. However, the rest of the sentences in the quoted paragraph focus on unexpectedly different facts and ideas, which do not immediately follow from the first one. Furthermore, upon closer scrutiny it becomes clear that the first sentence is a concluding sentence of the previous paragraph and should obviously be placed there. At the same time, the remaining sentences, which outline three different themes (ways of HIV transmission, risk factors, and usefulness of preventive measures), require either one topic sentence, generalizing them, or, possibly, even the development into three separate paragraphs.

Writing correct and efficient paragraphs is crucial for producing strategically important parts of research articles, for example, introductions. The nonnative authors of English medical texts sometimes try to make their introductions tightly focused and develop them in one paragraph by combining the outline of the research context and literature review. This is quite possible if the article is short. However, in larger texts, lengthy one-paragraph introductions are quite difficult "to digest."

In the studied corpus, some introductory paragraphs appeared to be unreasonably long; for example, in one of the articles, the introductory paragraph contains 412 words! The authors tried to "pack" it with general statements, overview of the previous investigations, and

their own research hypothesis and aim. As a result, they produced a huge paragraph, which requires a large amount of receptive efforts on part of the reader and could make him/her bored and tired.

Unreasonably short paragraphs (consisting of one sentence) are another extreme, as rapid switches in the attention focus “can be equally exhausting”¹ for readers. Also, there occur the paragraphs, which include one, excessively long sentence, e.g.:

It should be noted that all existing guidelines were provided in February-April 2020 and will be subject to changes following the accumulation of knowledge and experience related to COVID-19, and since different countries are now at various stages of the pandemic, there may be some international changes in applied practices...

This paragraph could have been easily divided into two sentences and thus become much more comprehensible.

As seen from the above, paragraphing in research English is an important skill, which requires logical thinking and attention to readers' mental capacity. In order to produce effective paragraphs, nonnative authors can be advised to follow appropriate recommendations and guidelines, provided in articles¹¹ and learning materials.^{4,12} Proceeding from my own writing and teaching experience, I can suggest the following steps and measures to improve paragraph writing.

1. Maintain the principle “one idea – one paragraph.”
2. Build your paragraphs based on deductive reasoning, that is, start with a rather broad topic sentence previewing the theme of the paragraph and then support it with evidence and facts.
3. Use transition devices (logical connectors) to ensure clear logical and textual relationships between sentences in a paragraph.
4. Do not put a summarizing (concluding) sentence at the beginning of a paragraph; its place is at the end of the previous one.
5. Avoid writing one-sentence paragraphs (unless it is of strategic importance for your text, for example, when you wish to lay a special emphasis on a certain idea or fact).
6. Remember that if your paragraphs are more or less balanced in length, this will make your text more pleasant for the reader's eye and, consequently, easier for comprehension.

With due regard for these recommendations, nonnative English researchers will succeed in producing logical and coherent paragraphs in English.

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