Tip Sheet: Writing Unified Paragraphs

A paragraph is a single block of writing containing a few or several related sentences. It develops one central point or idea—one piece of a larger document, like a report, a memo, or an essay.

To write effective paragraphs, you might try some or all of the following suggestions:

- Begin your paragraph with a “topic sentence,” a sentence that indicates what your paragraph will focus on. (Consider the paragraph a “topic sentence-support” unit; the topic sentence states the paragraph’s main idea and the remaining sentences explain or support it.)

- Provide specific information or ideas within the paragraph.

- Use transitions within your paragraph to guide your readers.

Read the following sample paragraphs:

There have been a number of recent cases of professional athletes being connected with violent crimes. A few years ago, pro football player Rae Carruth was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder in the death of his wife. Even more recently, All-Pro linebacker Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens was tried for his involvement in a stabbing death, though he was not convicted of a crime in the incident. In addition, pro basketball player Jayson Williams was recently convicted of trying to cover up the shooting death of a man inside his home. And Kobe Bryant, one of pro basketball’s biggest stars and, until this incident, most positive role models, has been accused of rape and is awaiting trial.

The attention these players, and others, have brought to themselves and, in turn, their sports, has caused damage in ways we might not immediately recognize. While attendance at major league sporting events shows no signs of decreasing, the feelings that many fans share about professional athletes certainly have been affected. It’s not uncommon for sports talk shows on both television and radio, for example, to devote substantial air time to the chronicling of athletes’ misdeeds, to the point that these shows often feel like tabloids. Furthermore, those who promote positive stories among pro athletes often seem to imply that these stories are no longer the rule, but the exception. As a result, the average fan seldom combines admiration of athletic skill with admiration of character.
Each of these two paragraphs serves a separate (but related) function. The first paragraph focuses on providing specific examples of professional athletes who’ve been connected to violent crimes—exactly what the topic sentence (in bold print) indicates it will provide. And the second paragraph follows by discussing the “damage” these situations may be contributing to—again, exactly what the topic sentence indicated. We might imagine these two paragraphs working together in an essay about the image problems faced by professional athletes, or some other closely related topic.

Now read each of these paragraphs again, this time with the transitional elements highlighted in bold print:

There have been a number of recent cases of professional athletes being connected with violent crimes. **A few years ago**, pro football player Rae Carruth was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder in the death of his wife. **Even more recently**, All-Pro linebacker Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens was tried for his involvement in a stabbing death, though he was not convicted of a crime in the incident. **In addition**, pro basketball player Jayson Williams currently stands accused of negligent homicide in the shooting death of a man inside his home. **And** Kobe Bryant, one of pro basketball’s biggest stars and, until this incident, most positive role models, has been accused of rape and is awaiting trial.

The attention these players, and others, have brought to themselves and, in turn, their sports, has caused damage in ways we might not immediately recognize. While attendance at major league sporting events shows no signs of decreasing, the feelings that many fans share about professional athletes certainly have been affected. It’s not uncommon for sports talk shows on both television and radio, **for example**, to devote substantial air time to the chronicling of athletes’ misdeeds, to the point that these shows often feel like tabloids. **Furthermore**, those who promote positive stories among pro athletes often seem to imply that these stories are no longer the rule, but the exception. **As a result**, the average fan seldom combines admiration of athletic skill with admiration of character.

**A Closing Tip:** Creating a web or an outline in the early stages of the writing process, before you try to write a first draft, can help you to determine how you will paragraph your essays. Doing this allows you to produce paragraphs that focus on one aspect of your paper.