Transcript 1: What makes a good paragraph?

Description: Watch this short video to learn about paragraph writing: this includes structure, development, academic style and language.

Title Slide: What makes a good paragraph?
A good academic paragraph is written with an academic audience in mind. It is well-structured and while it uses academic language, it is also easy to follow. Have a look at the following examples of an introduction and body paragraph for the essay entitled “University should be free. Discuss”.

Slide Two: The introduction”
An introduction lets the reader know what the topic is, the argument being presented and how that argument will be organised in the body. The introduction therefore starts broad by establishing the background or context - In this case, it is Australian university, and educational funding. The next section introduces the issue within that context In this example, the issue is about whether or not university should be free – this is a debatable topic, as not everyone would agree. Next is a brief statement of your position or argument in relation to this issue. The writer here thinks that university should not be free, nor should it be completely funded by the student. The introduction ends with the scope or map of the essay. Here you let the reader know how you plan to develop your argument in the body paragraphs, and in what order.

As you can see, the introduction starts broad and ends with the narrow, specific focus of the essay…it’s a bit like a funnel.

Slide Three: The body paragraph
Each body paragraph has one focus point – the focus of each paragraph is usually introduced in the first sentence, known as the topic sentence. Sometimes the topic sentence can be more than one sentence, especially if the idea is being argued against, as it is in this example. After introducing the topic of the body paragraph, you then develop that idea through explanations and support from literature. Not only do you need to include references, but you also need to explain the importance of the references to your argument. The paragraph is then closed, and you move onto a new focus point in the next paragraph. You can either choose to conclude the idea being presented in this paragraph, or use a transition sentence to show that you are moving to another idea in the next paragraph.
Slide Three: The body paragraph (continued)
So the basic structure of an introduction is like a funnel – you start by establishing context and then move towards your specific argument and essay map. The body paragraph on the other hand is a bit like a hamburger. You start with a topic sentence (which is like a top bun), develop and support that idea (I guess the filling of the burger) and close or transition to the next paragraph (so that’s like the bottom bun and it holds the hamburger together). Now, let’s look at academic style, language and expression.

Slide Four: Academic style
Which of these two expressions are more academic? Press pause, and try to you think about what makes one more academic than the other.

The first one is more academic for the following reasons: It is formal as it is for an academic audience, and therefore has a serious tone. This is opposite to informal non-academic language. It is also a complex sentence. The writer would have had to think about what he or she was going to write, so it has been well-planned. It is also a complete sentence and includes discipline-specific words and expressions. Informal language on the other hand is simple, spontaneous, and can be incomplete and include short forms, idioms and slang.

Slide Five: Language and expression
Regardless of whether English is your first, second or third language, it’s a good idea to proofread your writing for grammatical errors. Poor language and expression can make your writing sound unprofessional, and it may even read as though you rushed, and didn’t take great care in writing your assignment. Here are 3 common grammatical errors I often come across:

A fragment, or incomplete sentence, is where the full idea has not been expressed. For example, “in learning and development”. This is half a sentence – we don’t know what this relates to. A complete sentence would be something like, “Numerous studies have been conducted in early childhood learning and development”.

A run-on is where one idea runs into another: it is unclear where one idea ends and the next begins. In this example, there are two ideas which need to either be separated with a full stop, or a comma and a linking word. This, for example would read more clearly: “The impact of media on behaviour can vary, as a number of studies indicate.”

Unparallel structures are when your sentence has a list of ideas or a set of verb tenses which don’t quite match one another. This example shows a mismatch in verb tense agreement. The ideas are about the same time frame, but here the writer has used two different tenses.
Slide Five: Clarity of expression (continued)
Spelling plays an important role too – Don’t rely on spell check, because sometimes the spelling error leads to the use of an incorrect word such as ‘vary’ instead of ‘very’, or ‘quite’ instead of ‘quiet’. A change in words can sometimes change the meaning of your idea.

If you have put in a lot of effort into your writing, you want your reader to know that, so check your language carefully. It’s a good idea to read your paragraphs out loud to hear what the assessor will read. Also, read through more than once, and take breaks from looking at your writing for too long. The longer you look at something, the less likely you’ll see your mistakes. Try to proofread with a fresh mind and well-rested eyes.

To sum up, good writing requires attention to both structure and language. Proofread your work carefully to ensure your ideas and evidence are presented logically, academically and clearly.

For more information on academic writing, visit the L3 EASS website.