"The Paragraph"

WHAT IS IT?

A paragraph could be called a mini-paper, since its basic elements are pretty much the same as those of an essay. It has

1. its own central idea (usually set forth in a topic sentence) using relevant detail to be convincing
2. its own plan of development, and
3. its own sense of completeness and unity

It is called a paragraph because it expands and develops one main idea into something more specific that a reader can better understand. Consider, for example, the following paragraph:

Main Idea: Another benefit obtained from work is that of physical well-being (although it is difficult to separate this from mental well-being, since the two are so closely related). It is often said that poor old so-and-so worked himself to death. This may be true in some cases, but it is far more likely that old so-and-so, after working hard through application to his life retired at sixty-five and died of sheer boredom.

Specific instances included as proof of better general statement: Statistics have shown that those who retire from work have an astoundingly high death rate compared to those who don't retire. This is because work keeps them in physical shape, and partly because it gives purpose to their lives. Those who keep working after retirement generally feel better and have a brighter outlook on life in general.

THE CENTRAL IDEA

If the paragraph is part of a composition, it will contain its central idea from some part of the thesis of the essay. This idea will usually then be set forth in a topic sentence which has the same controlling power over the paragraph as the thesis of the essay. Because it is part of the thesis, the paragraph will be more specific and limited in scope than the essay itself.

METHODS OF PARAGRAPH ORGANIZATION

1. General Statement followed by evidence
2. Idea illustrated with real or hypothetical examples
3. Problem followed by its solution
4. Term, expanded or defined
5. Comparison or Contrast
6. Cause and Effect

COMPLETENESS AND UNITY—ONE IDEA

The fulfillment of the paragraph usually depends upon the amount of concrete, specific detail provided for the reader, or on the soundness of the logic presented.

Another way to check your paragraphs for completeness and depth of development is to outline them, sentence by sentence, according to their generality and relation to other sentences.

What Makes a Paragraph Unified?

Unity in a paragraph simply means that it sticks to the one main idea. That is, once the main idea is stated, everything in the rest of the paragraph must relate back to it.

Another important kind of unity in a paragraph is internal unity, or COHERENCE. Coherence means that the sentences in a paragraph not only relate back to the main idea, but they also relate closely to each other, creating a smooth and logical flow of ideas in the overall text.

A writer achieves coherence in a paragraph through the use of transitions (words and phrases) and reference pronouns ("boy"
lade, referred to as "he"), and by the repetition or expanding of key words (usually first used in the topic sentence.) This helps link sentences and keeps the main idea in focus throughout the paragraph. The following illustrates:

Another fallacy about babysitting is that it combines both fun and profit. Granted babysitting can be fun if you are lucky enough to get a fun-loving, affectionate, well-behaved kid; however, I have yet to get that kind. Mine usually scream up until the time their parents walk out the door. Then, a malicious, "I-dare-you-to-make-me-behave" look spreads across their face, and havoc follows. As for profit, if you can call having your hair pulled, your clothes ripped and stained, your nerves tried (and found wanting), and your eardrums shattered--all for only fifty cents an hour--a bargain, then babysitting is indeed profitable. I, for one, never expect to get rich from it.

*Sometimes a writer starts a new paragraph to give the reader some visual relief from unbroken text, but in short essays, this will not be a problem since there are usually one to four paragraphs per page.*