

Developing Doctoral-Level Writing Skills



Doctoral-level writing is referred to as scholarly writing or academic writing. It demonstrates a high level of rigor and has a specific structure. The objective of academic writing is to provide clear, concise insights and to support them with evidence. The transition to scholarly writing from casual or business writing—where editorial, narrative, or casual writing conventions may be used—involves learning the five-paragraph essay format.

The Five-Paragraph Essay Format

The five-paragraph essay format is a classic structure used for building an essay and is helpful in organizing and developing ideas for beginning academic writers.

The basic five-paragraph essay contains the following:

- One introductory paragraph to introduce the topic and a thesis statement
- Three body paragraphs that support, defend, and develop the topic of the essay
- One concluding paragraph to summarize and synthesize the information provided on the topic

The body paragraphs can be expanded for a more robust discussion. Please review the American Psychological Association's (APA) style manual for further guidance in paragraph and sentence development.

Planning Your Paragraphs With the “MEAL Plan”

Presenting information to your reader in a clear and concise manner requires writing organized and effective paragraphs. Paragraphing is a core skill in building paraphrase that convey mastery of your academic writing abilities. Students at Duke University are encouraged to think of a paragraph as a complete **MEAL** that includes a **M**ain idea, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, and a **L**ink. Understanding

the MEAL Plan will provide you with an effective strategy to ensure each paragraph contains a main idea, evidence to support the idea, analysis of evidence, and a link of the information to what already exists and to the next topic in the discussion.

M – The Main Idea

Every paragraph should have one main idea. If you find that your paragraphs have more than one main idea, separate your paragraphs so that each has only one main point. The idea behind a paragraph is to introduce an idea and expand on it. If you veer off into a new topic, begin a new paragraph.

E – Evidence (or Examples)

Your main idea needs support, either in the form of evidence that buttresses your argument or examples that explain your idea. If you don't have any evidence or examples to support your main idea, your idea may not be strong enough to warrant a complete paragraph. In this case, re-evaluate your idea and see whether you need even to keep it in the paper.

A – Analysis

Analysis is the heart of academic writing. While your readers want to see evidence or examples of your idea, the real “meat” of your idea is your interpretation of your evidence or examples: how you break them apart, compare them to other ideas, use them to build a persuasive case, demonstrate their strengths or weaknesses, and so on. Analysis is especially important if your evidence (E) is a quote from another author. Always follow a quote with your analysis of the quote, demonstrating how that quote helps you to make your case. If you let a quote stand on its own, then the author of that quote will have a stronger voice in your paragraph (and maybe even your paper) than you will.

L – Link Back to the Larger Claim

Linking one idea to another helps your reader to see how your paragraphs fit together. When you end a paragraph, try to connect that idea to something else in your paper, such as your thesis or argument, the previous paragraph or main idea, or the following paragraph. Creating links will help your reader understand the logic and organization of your paper, as well as the logic and organization of your argument or main points.

Rigor

Rigor does not refer to whether an essay uses an elevated vocabulary or has impeccable grammar, but, rather, it is determined by how well ideas are expressed and supported by compelling evidence.

Low-rigor indicators	High-rigor indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vague ideas or clichés• Sweeping generalizations• Exaggerations• Stating the obvious or well-known information as if it were a new insight• Unsupported assertions and opinions• Inadequate explanations• Insufficient use of examples• Lack of analysis of researched material	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Specific facts and ideas supported by research• Explanations of key concepts• Examples to illustrate ideas• Analysis that explains, interprets, or synthesizes researched material• New information or insights

Make sure to use specific facts supported by research. Always proofread and revise your work until the paper is well organized, your phrasing is precise, and the information flows from one point to another in a logical manner.

Writing Resources

For assistance with scholarly writing, please visit the [Center for Writing Excellence: Doctoral Writing Resources page](#).

Reference

Duke University Writing Studio (n.d.). Paragraphing: The MEAL plan. Retrieved from https://twp.duke.edu/uploads/assets/meal_plan.pdf. Adapted with written permission.

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