

Expository Paragraphs: Explaining and Informing

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Expository paragraphs are a foundational academic writing pattern that explains ideas clearly, logically, and objectively for the reader. They focus on informing rather than persuading, narrating, or entertaining, and they rely on facts, logical connections, and well-chosen examples rather than personal opinion or emotional language.

Definition and Purpose

Expository writing aims to make a topic clear by defining, explaining, or analyzing it in an organized way. Its main purposes are:

1. **Clarification:** To make complex ideas easier to understand by breaking them into manageable parts.
2. **Information:** To provide readers with accurate, well-structured knowledge about a topic.
3. **Analysis:** To show logical relationships such as causes and effects, similarities and differences, steps in a process, or parts of a whole.
4. **Support for Academic Work:** To build the paragraphs and sections of essays, reports, and research papers in most university disciplines.

Good expository paragraphs are unified by a clear controlling idea, developed with specific supporting details, and coherently organized through appropriate signal words and transitions.

The Seven Key Expository Patterns

In practice, most expository paragraphs rely on one or more of the following seven patterns of organization:

1. Division and Classification
2. Definition
3. Cause and Effect
4. Process Analysis
5. Comparison and Contrast
6. Example and Illustration
7. Problem and Solution

1. Division and Classification Paragraphs

Purpose and Logic: These paragraphs explain a broad topic by dividing it into parts or classifying it into categories based on clear principles.

- **Division:** Breaking one whole subject into its main parts.

- **Classification:** Grouping many items into types or categories according to shared features.

Common Signal Words: “Can be divided into,” “falls into,” “consists of,” “is classified into,” “types of,” “categories of,” “first,” “second,” “third,” “finally.”

Example (Student Smartphones): “University students’ smartphone use can be classified into three main categories: academic, social, and entertainment-related. Academic use includes checking the learning platform, photographing lecture slides, and using dictionary or reference applications between classes. Social use appears in constant messaging, quick voice notes, and updates on class group chats that keep students connected beyond the classroom walls. Entertainment use, in contrast, involves streaming short videos, playing games, or scrolling through non-academic content as a way to escape from stress. Although these categories often overlap, recognizing them helps both teachers and students distinguish between productive and distracting uses of the same device during the university day.”

2. Definition Paragraphs

Purpose and Logic: Explains the meaning of a key term or concept, moving beyond dictionary meanings to include functions, examples, and context.

- **Formal definition:** Term + general class + distinguishing features.
- **Extended definition:** Adds explanation, examples, and contrasts to deepen understanding.

Common Signal Words: “Is defined as,” “refers to,” “means,” “in this context,” “in academic terms,” “can be understood as.”

3. Cause and Effect Paragraphs

Purpose and Logic: Explains reasons (why something happens) or results (what happens because of something).

Common Signal Words: * **For causes:** “Because,” “since,” “due to,” “one reason is,” “is caused by.”

- **For effects:** “Therefore,” “as a result,” “consequently,” “thus,” “this leads to.”

4. Process Analysis Paragraphs

Purpose and Logic: Explains how something works or how to do something step-by-step.

- **Directional process:** Gives instructions for performing a task.
- **Informational process:** Explains how a process occurs.

Common Signal Words: “First,” “next,” “then,” “after that,” “finally,” “meanwhile,” “at the same time.”

5. Comparison and Contrast Paragraphs

Purpose and Logic: Shows similarities (comparison) and differences (contrast) between two or more subjects.

- **Block method:** All points about Subject A, then all points about Subject B.
- **Point-by-point method:** Alternating between A and B for each specific feature.

Common Signal Words: * **For similarity:** “Similarly,” “likewise,” “in the same way,” “both,” “also.”

- **For difference:** “However,” “in contrast,” “on the other hand,” “whereas,” “while.”

6. Example and Illustration Paragraphs

Purpose and Logic: Clarify a general idea by providing specific examples that make it concrete and convincing.

Common Signal Words: “For example,” “for instance,” “such as,” “one illustration is,” “this can be seen in.”

7. Problem and Solution Paragraphs

Purpose and Logic: Identify a specific problem, then propose one or more solutions and evaluate them.

Common Signal Words: * **For problems:** “Issue,” “challenge,” “difficulty,” “a major concern,” “leads to.”

- **For solutions:** “One possible solution,” “to address this,” “can be improved by,” “a practical response is.”

Choosing the Right Pattern

When planning, ask yourself:

- Do I need to categorize this topic? (**Division/Classification**)
- Do I need to clarify meaning? (**Definition**)
- Do I need to explain why or with what result? (**Cause/Effect**)
- Do I need to explain how something works? (**Process Analysis**)
- Do I need to compare options? (**Comparison/Contrast**)
- Do I need to make an abstract idea concrete? (**Example/Illustration**)
- Do I need to present an issue and suggest ways forward? (**Problem/Solution**)

Common Pitfalls

1. **Weak or hidden topic sentence:** Details feel random.
2. **Listing without development:** Points are named but not explained.
3. **Mixed patterns without control:** Jumping between structures erratically.
4. **Inappropriate signal words:** Using transitions that don't match the logic.

Writing Strategy Checklist

- Have I written a clear topic sentence with a focused controlling idea?
- Have I chosen one main organizational pattern that suits my purpose?
- Do my supporting sentences develop the idea with sufficient detail?
- Have I used accurate and appropriate signal words?
- Are my sentences logically ordered and easy to follow?
- Have I avoided unnecessary personal opinion and emotional language?
- Does the final sentence reinforce the main idea?