Paragraph and Essay Construction  
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1. Prewrite/Outline. Sketch out your ideas, pursue the good and eliminate the bad. Hone the good ideas, determine what exactly you have to say. Then outline your argument, according to the principles discussed below. Policy memos are notoriously brief, and therefore it’s impossible to get all the relevant information on the page. So you have to prioritize, and you have to organize your information carefully, so as to avoid repetitions or detours.

2. Each paragraph should have one main idea.

3. Begin each paragraph with a clear topic sentence that announces the purpose of the paragraph.

4. Follow the topic sentence with clear reasoning to prove your point, augmenting with examples and hard evidence.

5. Just as each sentence in each paragraph should follow a logical order, so, too, should your paragraphs. In an average paper, the paragraphs (A, B, C, D) have no logical coherence, like beads on a string—they can be rearranged in any order with no meaning lost (B, D, C, A). In a well-argued paper, the paragraphs are arranged in a rational, step-by-step way. One helpful way to think about this is to work backwards from your conclusion: in order to understand D, we must first understand C; in order to understand C, we must first understand B, etc.

6. Your topic sentences, in addition to announcing the paragraph’s main idea, should also make clear the relationship between the preceding and following paragraph. Proper organization as explained in number 5 is key here. If you have arranged your paragraphs in a logical fashion, your topic sentences need only make clear the logic governing the transition from one main idea to another.

For example, a paragraph citing the shortcomings of a state lottery might end:

*The state focuses nearly all its publicity effort on merchandising a get-rich-quick fantasy, one that will come true for only a handful of people, while encouraging millions of others to think of success as a product of luck, not honest work.*

The following paragraph immediately sets up a contrasting view:

*While the shortcomings of the state lottery system are numerous, there are sound arguments for allowing state lotteries to continue and spread....*

The reader now sees the relationship between paragraphs and expects to read a defense of the lottery system. (Ex. borrowed from Philip DiGennaro, Hamilton College.)