

# Fact sheet - Level 2

# Paragraphs

---

Learning how to break your stories and essays into paragraphs is a confusing but important job.

## Before you begin

You can break a piece of writing into paragraphs after you've written it, or you can do it as you go. Doing it as you go is the best choice, but you might not be able to do that right off the bat.

## How to do it

There are a few standard times to make a new paragraph:

- When you start in on a new topic
- When you skip to a new time
- When you skip to a new place
- When a new person begins to speak
- When you want to produce a dramatic effect

## New Topic

This one's mainly for essays. Every time you go on to a new topic, you should make a new paragraph.

## New Time

This one--and the rest--are mainly for use in short stories. Whenever you skip some time, that will probably be the right place to make a new paragraph. If you find yourself using phrases or sentences like these, you are skipping some time:

- Later that day,
- The next morning,
- Five hours passed.
- They waited and waited.
- Life in Yate remained unchanged.
- The seconds seemed like hours.

## New Place

Scenes in stories generally happen in one place. When the characters go to a new place, a new scene happens. At the very least, a new paragraph happens. Any time you have a "Meanwhile, back at..." phrase in your story, make a new paragraph.

## New Speaker

If you're doing a good job, your short stories are going to have dialogue, or characters talking to each other. Dialogue helps bring stories to life. Every time you switch speakers, you make a new paragraph. Sometimes this means that your paragraphs are really short, because all a character might say is, "No." If that's all he says, though, that is as long as the paragraph needs to be. Another thing to remember is that, if you put the "he said" phrase before the quote, or you character does some action before he speaks, you should make that part of the same paragraph as the quote.

## Action That Serves As Part of the Dialogue

A good writer will break long stretches of dialogue up with snatches of action. This is good for the rhythm of the piece. Changing things up makes the conversation flow smoothly, at least from the reader's standpoint. It also helps make a picture in the reader's mind by inserting just the right detail to bring the scene to life. The last reason for using this kind of paragraph break is that people don't always reply with words. Sometimes they shrug or make a face or ignore the other speaker entirely.

## Dramatic Effect

Sometimes you simply want a paragraph to stand out, or you want to slow the reader down and control the pace of the story. At times like this, you can make a brief sentence--or even a word--an entire paragraph. Just don't overdo it; this gets old fast.

Here are some examples, excerpted from the novel Kate Macready and the Pirates. They are colour coded when possible to show which type of paragraph break is being used: **yellow** for new topic, **brown** for new time, **purple** for new place, **light blue** for new speaker, **dark blue** for an action that takes the place of some dialogue, and **green** for dramatic effect.

The one good thing I could see was that the water was so shallow where the Narwhal went down that, once I broke clear of the ship, I didn't have far to go to reach the surface.

**It was long enough, though.**

**By the time I broke the surface, I had almost given up hope, but I found myself in the air and took a huge, gulping gasp. I splashed around, happy just to be alive. That's when the hand reached down and grabbed me.**

Before I had a chance to think, I had been hauled into a small boat and dumped there like a load of fish. I opened my eyes and was surprised--and happy--to see Jeremy staring down at me.

"You made it," he said.

**I nodded.**

"Did you get the map?" he asked.

I sat up, outraged. "Is that all you can think about?" I demanded.

"No. Of course not. But did you get it?"

I pulled the map, now waterlogged, from the folds of my shirt and tossed it to the floor of the boat. Jeremy looked visibly relieved.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I--I think so," I said.

"What happened to...uh, to Diablo?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't see him."

**There was a pause.**