

Hints for Writing Effective Paragraphs of Literary Analysis
From "[Jazz and Literature](#)"
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Well-organized paragraphs have four components that work together to produce a coherent, unified product. Think of each paragraph as a mini-essay endeavoring to prove one aspect of your thesis statement. That is, each paragraph should

- make a debatable claim (the topic sentence)
- provide proof for that claim (the evidence or support)
- show how the evidence supports the claim (the analysis)
- contain effective transitions both within the paragraph and between paragraphs so that the reader can follow the logic of the argument (transitions).

Let's break these components down and define each one.

Topic sentence The topic sentence is to the paragraph what the thesis is to the entire paper. That is, a paragraph's topic sentence states the claim or argument of that paragraph. The topic sentence usually asserts a claim that will support one part of the paper's larger thesis. For example, imagine that the paper's thesis is "e" from the thesis handout:

By the end of "Sonny's Blues," the narrator is liberated from his warped personality; he finally begins to feel, which means he will be freed from his fear and sadness.

This paper has a lot to prove. It must begin by proving that the narrator does indeed have a "warped" personality. Thus, the topic sentence of that paragraph might be:

Though many readers may sympathize with the narrator because his brother is addicted to heroin, the narrator actually begins as a hardened, unfeeling man. Two scenes show his lack of compassion.

Notice that, like a thesis, a topic sentence can be more than one sentence if necessary.

Support: Support or evidence usually refers to quotations from or summary of the literary work. Without support, your topic sentence will go unproven and your paragraph will fall flat. (If your topic sentence does not seem to require support, it probably isn't an effective topic

sentence to begin with). Working with the topic sentence above, we might use the following two pieces of evidence:

1. The way the narrator treats and thinks about Sonny's friend (pp. 49-50).
2. The narrator's flashback to his encounter with Sonny in the Greenwich Village (p. 62).

Analysis: With analysis, you tell your reader how you want him or her to understand the quotation or summary you have provided as support. As a writer, you can't necessarily assume that your reader will draw the same conclusions you have drawn from the evidence. For example, some people might interpret the narrator's treatment of Sonny's friend as kind, because he gives the friend a cigarette and some money. But that interpretation doesn't work for your argument, so you need to elaborate, through your analysis, on your own interpretation. Thus, support and analysis go hand in hand.

Here's an example of some analysis following the support cited above. The **green** sentences are primarily analytical, while the **red** ones convey the evidence itself:

The narrator shows how cruel and unfeeling he is when he meets Sonny's friend on the street. Adopting a sarcastic tone, the narrator questions the friend's motives: *"You come all the way down here to just tell me about Sonny?"* We can see in this tone that the narrator doubts that the friend truly cares for Sonny. *The narrator also swears at the friend, saying "you're pretty goddamn smart, I bet," and offers him no sympathy for his "sad story," declaring that he wishes the friend had a pistol so he could kill himself (49).* These reactions to the friend show the narrator's anger at the situation Sonny is in, but also convey a stark lack of compassion for those less fortunate than himself. In fact, the narrator's anger seems to fuel his lack of compassion. *In the flashback scene, we find out that the narrator has been angry with Sonny before, for when the narrator visits Sonny in his Greenwich Village apartment, he tells Sonny that he "might just as well be dead as live the way he was living" (62).* These scenes depict the narrator's warped personality; his anger and fear have made him cruel, almost sadistic.

Transitions: Well organized paragraphs use transitions between the topic sentence, support, and analysis which let the reader know where the argument is going. Simple transitions such as "for example," "for instance," "therefore," "however," and "also" are useful to show relationships between ideas. More complex transitions can be whole phrases or even sentences that show how the writer is moving from one idea to another. A transition (purple) that links this paragraph to the next might be:

Not only is the narrator cruel and unfeeling toward those he views as hopeless deadbeats, but *he lacks emotion in his dealings with his wife and mother.*

Notice here how the transition and the topic sentence (in italics) have been woven together into a single sentence.

Here's our whole sample paragraph together. Re-read it now and notice how it incorporates each of the required components of an effective paragraph.

Though many readers may sympathize with the narrator because his brother is addicted to heroin, the narrator actually begins as a hardened, unfeeling man. Two scenes show his lack of compassion. The narrator **first** shows how cruel and unfeeling he is when he meets Sonny's friend on the street. Adopting a sarcastic tone, the narrator questions the friend's motives: "You come all the way down here to just tell me about Sonny?" We can see in **this tone** that the narrator doubts that the friend truly cares for Sonny. The narrator **also** swears at the friend, saying "you're pretty goddamn smart, I bet," and offers him no sympathy for his "sad story," declaring that he wishes the friend had a pistol so he could kill himself (49). **These reactions to the friend** show the narrator's anger at the situation Sonny is in, but they **also** convey a stark lack of compassion for those less fortunate than himself. **In fact,** the narrator's anger seems to fuel his lack of compassion. **In the flashback scene,** we find out that the narrator has been angry with Sonny before, **for** when the narrator visits Sonny in his Greenwich Village apartment, he tells Sonny that he "might just as well be dead as live the way he was living" (62). **These scenes** depict the narrator's warped personality; his anger and fear have made him cruel, almost sadistic in wishing for the deaths of his brother and his brother's friend.

Writing Exercises:

"Not only is the narrator cruel and unfeeling toward those he views as hopeless deadbeats, but he lacks emotion in his dealings with his wife and mother."

Exercise #1: What evidence and analysis would you use to prove the topic sentence above? *Where* do we see the narrator's lack of emotion in his dealings with his wife and mother? *How* can we explain that lack of emotion in a way that supports the thesis of our paper?

Exercise #2: Working from the same thesis statement, and following the advice about paragraph organization above, outline two more paragraphs for this paper.