

How to Get Started if You Hate to Write



Part II—Writing Paragraphs

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**Reminder:
Successful science writing is**

 **Logically constructed—think “linear”**

Clearly and succinctly expressed

Precisely and simply worded

Written to inform and persuade

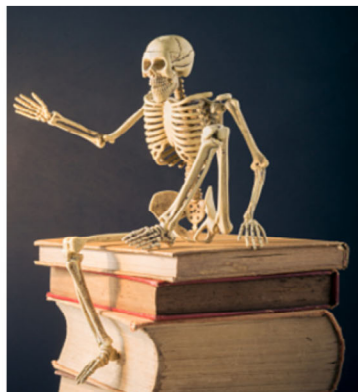
Written with the *reader* in mind

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Any piece of scientific writing must present a coherent, cohesive, persuasive logical argument—that’s axiomatic.

First, write your five-sentence synopsis

1. Goal
2. Context
3. Method
4. Results
5. Conclusions



One coherent sentence for each part

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As we learned last week, we start out with a five-sentence synopsis that is a microcosm of the entire paper.

Next, make an outline...



**To avoid the novice
writer's "core dump"
method...**

**...and the cognitive paralysis induced by a
blank piece of paper or a blank screen**

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Then we make an outline, preferably a *sentence* outline, to control the length and focus of our paper.

The “standard model” of physics writing—

- **three kinds of sentences and**
- **two flavors of paragraphs**

Three sentence “particles”:

Topic—states a primary idea

Supporting—explains, expands on, illustrates, gives evidence for the topic sentence

Limiting—expresses opposing or contrasting ideas

Two flavors of paragraphs:

Direct—states main idea in the first sentence and then expands on it

Pivoting—states a contrary or limiting idea first, then states the topic sentence

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Good resource for writing paragraphs:

“Write with purpose: what do you want your paragraph to do?”

https://libguides.newcastle.edu.au/ld.php?content_id=39162655

Direct paragraph style—the topic sentence is the first sentence in the paragraph

Followed by supporting sentences that explain, give examples or evidence, or expand the topic sentence

Use the direct paragraph style to:

- Explain an idea**
- Define a concept**
- Describe a thing or process**
- Classify parts of a whole**
- Make an argument**

The direct paragraph style is most common in science writing

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The pivoting paragraph begins with a *limiting* sentence or a rhetorical question

The topic sentence comes next, followed by supporting sentences

Presents a contrasting or negative idea or a question *before* the main idea is introduced

Is effective for comparing and contrasting ideas

Use a pivoting paragraph to:

Set up a logical argument

Emphasize positive aspects of the main idea

Anticipate reader's questions or objections and answer them

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**Whichever paragraph style you use, always
end a paragraph with a sentence that—
Reminds the reader of the topic sentence (TS)
Summarizes the TS in a way that leads logically
to the TS in the next paragraph**

Landau's Fermi liquid theory successfully describes the behavior of interacting fermionic particles for a wide range of materials, such as electrons in simple metals and liquid helium-3.¹ In some metals, Fermi liquid theory fails when strong correlations or fluctuations are present.² Also known as bad, or strange, metals, these states present anomalous properties such as resistance that does not follow the Fermi liquid prediction T^2 , sometimes scaling as T instead or exhibiting more complex phenomena.^{2,3} The resistivity of bad metals also does not saturate^{4,5} as temperature is increased into the regime where the Mott–Ioffe–Regel (MIR) limit is violated and the apparent meanfreepath is shorter than the interatomic spacing.^{4,6} This lack of saturation implies that quasiparticles are absent (e.g., refs. 7–9 for an overview), as does the lack of particle-like excitations in photoemission spectroscopy.¹⁰ Understanding the origin of bad-metal behavior is a key problem in condensed matter physics, which may be important to resolving questions related to high-temperature superconductivity¹¹ and Mott quantum criticality.¹² This problem has been studied using ...

W. Xu, W.R. McGehee, W.N. Morong, and B. DeMarco, "Bad-metal relaxation dynamics in a Fermi lattice gas," *Nature Communications* **10**, 1588 (2019).

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This paragraph is an example of a *pivoting* paragraph. It starts out with a statement about standard Fermi liquids, to set up the contrast with “bad” or “strange” metals, which do not behave as standard Fermi liquids.

In this paragraph, the second sentence is actually the topic sentence.

The last sentence in the first paragraph reiterates the idea that strange metals exhibit non-Fermi-liquid behavior, and leads into the next topic sentence—why we must understand the behavior of these materials.

**Today, we're going to write the
introduction (#1 of the synopsis)
for a paper about the special mirrors
built for NASA's Solar Dynamics
Observatory (SDO)**



Courtesy NASA

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For more information about the SDO, see
https://sdo.gsfc.nasa.gov/assets/docs/SDO_Guide.pdf.

A common paradigm in science writing is the “inverted pyramid”

**Start broad
and general**

**Add details that
define and refine
your message**

Finish with the very specific

takeaway point



First, write down main points* you want to make in the introduction section

- The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.
- Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.
- The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.
- One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.
- The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.
- The SDO cost \$817M.

***Write a complete sentence for each point, in any order now**

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Start by writing down the main points you want to make in the paper. Don't worry about details—just concentrate on the main ideas now.

Next, arrange the points so they provide a logical narrative arc*



***No digressions or discursive material**

***Show a linear progression of ideas from premise to conclusions**

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Next, arrange the points in a logical order so they provide a coherent storyline.

Think of this step as creating a map to guide your reader through your talk, paper, or proposal.

Each one of these points is going to be a signpost along the journey.

First, check for any superfluous or discursive material

- **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- **Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
- **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
- **One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
- **The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**
- ~~The SDO cost \$817M.~~

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Once you have your main ideas written down, check to see if any are unnecessary or would derail the logical progression of your story.

It's much less painful to cut things now than after you've struggled to get them written and are tempted to leave in superfluous information out of pride of authorship.

Next, arrange the points so they provide a logical narrative



- **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- **Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
- **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
- **One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
- **The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

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Using the inverted-pyramid structure as a guide, we next arrange the points we want to make in a coherent, logical order.

Next, arrange the points so they provide a logical narrative



- **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
 - **Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
 - **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
 - **One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
- 1. The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

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Start with the “big picture” statement.

Next, arrange the points so they provide a logical narrative



- **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- **Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
- 2. The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
- **One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
- 1. The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

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Continue to define and refine your message.

Next, arrange the points so they provide a logical narrative



- **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
 - **Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
- 2. The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
 - 3. One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
 - 1. The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

Next, arrange the points so they provide a logical narrative



4. **The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
 - **Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
2. **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
3. **One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
1. **The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

Next, arrange the points so they provide a logical narrative



- 4. The atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA) is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- 5. Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**
- 2. The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
- 3. One component of SDO is the AIA, a suite of four telescopes.**
- 1. The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**

Check to see if you've left anything out...

- ✓ **The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.**
- ✓ **The NASA Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) was launched in 2010 to study the solar corona.**
- ✓ **One component of SDO is the atmospheric imaging assembly (AIA), a suite of four telescopes.**
- ✓ **The AIA is composed of highly reflective multi-layer mirrors.**
- ✓ **Mirrors image the sun at all seven euv wavelengths.**

... or if you've included superfluous material that will derail the logical flow of your story

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Check to see if you've left anything out, or if you have superfluous statements that lead the reader off the trail that you've laid out for him or her to follow.


Make adjustments (additions or deletions) now. It's much easier to write from a structure than to try to go back after you've already written something and try to impose a logical order on it.



NOW (and only now)
**you're ready to start
writing...**

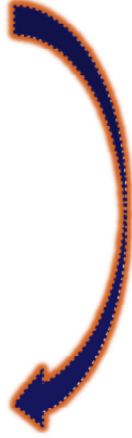
Each sentence in your outline becomes the “topic” sentence for a paragraph

The sun is the source of all space weather, but its physical processes are poorly understood.



<We put a paragraph here>

The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona.



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Your main points provide a framework for your narrative. They become the topic sentence of a paragraph.

The purpose of **every additional word** that you put in a paragraph should be to support and explain the topic statement and move the reader logically and incrementally to the next topic statement.

Celia's foolproof, four-step SEES* method to crank out science writing:

- 1. Put the topic sentence first**
- 2. Explain, expand, give evidence for it**
- 3. Give an example of it**
- 4. Summarize it in a way that leads
logically to the next topic sentence**

Expand
***State → Explain → Exemplify → Summarize**
Evidence

**Tip: Use the same construction paradigm for paragraphs,
subsections, and sections of your paper**

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One of the key advantages of this method is its scalability—you can use it for short papers, theses, talks, posters—for any audience.

One of the key advantages of this method is its scalability

Do the math:

one topic sentence = one paragraph

one figure = one to two paragraphs

four paragraphs = one page

By counting the number of sentences you have in your outline and the number of figures you plan to use, you can predict how long your paper is going to be

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Check to see if you've left anything out, or if you have superfluous statements that lead the reader off the trail that you've laid out for him or her to follow.

Make adjustments (additions or deletions) now. It's much easier to write from a structure than to try to go back after you've already written something and try to impose a logical order on it.

Suppose you're writing a paper for PRL, which is limited to 4 pages, and you have 21 sentences and 3 figures. You know right NOW, before you write another word, that you've got too much material for one PRL. Make your adjustments now—it's much less painful than trying to cut later.

Use the formula to create logical, coherent paragraphs.

So let's go back to our first two topic sentences from our outline:

"The Sun is the source of all space weather..."

and

"The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010..."

and run them through the paragraph cranker-outer...

1. Topic sentence goes first

**The sun is the source of all space weather,
but its physical processes are poorly
understood.**

The Solar Dynamics Observatory was
launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar
corona.



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In science writing, the topic sentence is almost always the first sentence of the paragraph. While literary writing might put the topic sentence last, to build suspense, or in the middle, to redirect a reader's attention, put the topic sentence first in your paragraphs to emphasize your important points and reinforce the logical structure of your arguments.

Readers pay the most attention at the beginning of chunks of text. Exploit this natural human tendency by putting your topic sentences in the places where people are most likely to recognize and remember them—as the first sentence of each new paragraph.

2. Explain it

The sun is the source of all “space weather,” but its physical processes are poorly understood.

Space weather refers to conditions on the sun and in the solar wind, magnetosphere, ionosphere, and thermosphere of Earth. These conditions affect the performance and reliability of space and terrestrial systems and can endanger life and health.

The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona.

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In the next sentence(s), explain, expand on, or provide supporting evidence for the ideas conveyed in the topic sentence.

In the SEES method, this first *E* can stand for three things: explanation, expansion, evidence.

3. Give an example

The sun is the source of all “space weather,” but its physical processes are poorly understood. Space weather refers to conditions on the sun and in the solar wind, magnetosphere, ionosphere, and thermosphere of Earth. These conditions affect the performance and reliability of space and terrestrial systems and can endanger life and health. **For example, a coronal mass ejection, the solar equivalent of a hurricane, can disrupt telecommunications systems on Earth.**

The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona.

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Your explanation will often include illustrative examples. Put them next.

Note how the writer has used a familiar example from terrestrial weather, a hurricane, to reinforce the idea of space weather and to explain the unfamiliar concept of “coronal mass ejection.”

4. Summarize and transition

The sun is the source of all “space weather,” but its physical processes are poorly understood. Space weather refers to conditions on the sun and in the solar wind, magnetosphere, ionosphere, and thermosphere of Earth. These conditions affect the performance and reliability of space and terrestrial systems and can endanger life and health. For example, a coronal mass ejection, the solar equivalent of a hurricane, can disrupt telecommunications systems on Earth. **Solar research is needed to understand solar processes and predict space weather.**

The Solar Dynamics Observatory was launched by NASA in 2010 to study the solar corona...



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Finally, add a transitional sentence that sums up this paragraph and leads the reader logically to the next topic sentence.

In this example, the fourth sentence repeats the ideas of “space weather” and “not currently understood” that are introduced in the topic sentence and sets the stage for the next paragraph, which explains what the SDO is, what kind of research it is designed to do, and how it is addressing the problem of space weather. ***Thus the two paragraphs are linked structurally by the evolution of the ideas and explanations that they present.***

Elliott paragraph equation:

$$1 S_t = 1 \text{ ¶}, \quad [1]$$

where S_t is a topic sentence, and ¶ is a paragraph

N.B. Only one topic sentence per paragraph

**If you have more than one S_t in a paragraph,
break up the paragraph!**

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No superfluous “stuff” in a paragraph. If it is not directly related to the topic sentence, delete it or move it to its own paragraph.

In fact, no superfluous stuff anywhere!

(q.v. <http://people.physics.illinois.edu/Celia/Lectures/Fluff.pdf>)

To recap:

Finish thinking before you start writing

Only one topic sentence in a paragraph

$$1 \text{ S}_t = 1 \text{ ¶}, \quad [1]$$

Don't put anything in a paragraph that doesn't support, explain, exemplify, or summarize the topic sentence

Write shorter paragraphs (<8 sentences)!



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<http://physics.illinois.edu/people/Celia/>

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Notes: