

Community Ecology (EEB 421), Spring 2011  
**Paragraph Writing Assignments**

*Approximately once per week, provide an answer, written in paragraph form, to the question provided. Paragraphs and questions on the Blackboard discussion board are together worth a total of 150 points for the semester. Paragraphs will be graded for clarity, brevity, and completeness. Paragraphs should be typed and printed. Paragraphs are due at the beginning of the stated class period.*

Some notes on constructing a paragraph

- A paragraph is a unit of thought, not a unit of length. It should have a single purpose – to help the reader understand something. Always remember that a paragraph has a single purpose, and every sentence (if not every word) should advance that purpose.
- There is no rule that paragraphs must have 4-5 sentences.
- Have a compelling and descriptive topic sentence. A topic sentence states the paragraph's topic—it need not state the paragraph's particular argument about that topic. The topic sentence is the guidepost that tells the reader what to expect. It sets up the coming argument.
- Again, every sentence should support the topic sentence. If in rereading a paragraph, you have some question about whether a sentence helps explain a topic sentence, then it doesn't.
- A paragraph has an inevitable logic. The topic sentence raises expectations. Now you follow through with the meat of your argument: a set of logically connected sentences that clearly and concisely builds your case. Avoid bouncing around, going back and forth, etc. If you've worked on a paragraph and are still not getting the response you want from your readers, it's often the case that your logic is flawed. Put another way, writing is one of the best ways of discovering what you do not understand about your topic.
- In my opinion, the best way to write clear, concise paragraphs is to sit down and write them. Then write a sentence that summarizes the paragraph; use that sentence as the topic sentence of the second draft of the paragraph you'll write.
- The best advice on writing paragraphs I've found is at <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/paragraphs.html>

Some other notes on scientific writing

1. Do not use contractions in scientific writing.
2. Data are plural. For example, a sentence beginning "The data shows..." would be incorrect.
3. If you begin a sentence with a number, write out the number. Don't use the numeral.
4. Affect and Effect are different. Make sure you know how to use them properly.
5. "Only" (and words like it) modifies the word directly after it. Make sure you put it in the correct place. Think about these three sentences:
  - a. Michael and Jim were drinking only the coffee.
  - b. Michael and Jim were only drinking the coffee.
  - c. Only Michael and Jim were drinking the coffee.

6. Please use double or 1.5 spacing, not single spacing.
7. You can never be too clear or concise. Avoid long, complex sentences.
8. Avoid useless jargon. It's fine if you "use" rather than "utilize" or "do" rather than "perform." In every case, simpler is always better.
9. Use the active voice. Use I and me if accurate. For example, write "We counted chirps" instead of "Chirps were counted."
10. Minimize the number of sentences that use the verb "to be." For example, write "depends on" of "is dependent on."
11. Minimize the use of referents - these, this, that, those, etc. It is often difficult to know to what the referents are referring.
12. Don't be afraid to start over and to write multiple drafts. Here's what Ernest Hemingway said about how he writes: "I write one page of masterpiece to ninety one pages of sh\*t. I try to put the sh\*t in the wastebasket."