Dividing your Argument

Starting a new paragraph is a signal to your reader that you are beginning a new thought or taking up a new point. Since your outline will help you divide the essay into sections, the resulting paragraphs must correspond to the logical divisions in the essay. If your paragraphs are too long, divide your material into smaller, more manageable units; if they're too short, find broader topic sentences that will allow you to combine some of your ideas.

Look at the list of sentences below:

In preparation for study some students apportion a negligible period of time to clearing off a desk, a table, a floor; others must scrub all surfaces and clean all toilet bowls within 50 meters before the distraction of dirt disappears.

Some eat or pace while they work.

Some work with deep concentration, others more fitfully.

Students might smoke, or chew their nails, or stare blankly at walls or at computer screens.

If asked what space is reserved for learning, many students would suggest the classroom, the lab or the library.

The kitchen, and the bedroom function as study spaces.

Some people need to engage in sports or other physical activity before they can work successfully.

Being sedentary seems to inspire others.

Although most classes are scheduled between 8:30 and 22:00, some students do their best work before the sun rises, some after it sets.

Some need a less flexible schedule than others, while a very few can sit and not rise until their task is completed.

Some students work quickly and efficiently, while others cannot produce anything without much dust and heat.

Were these sentences simply combined they would yield nothing but a long list of facts, not obviously related to one another, except that they all refer to students and the way we study. There is too much information here to include in one paragraph. The solution is to develop two topic sentences under which all (or most) of the above information will fit.

For most students the process of studying involves establishing a complex set of rituals which come to be repeated, with little variation, every time a task is assigned by a professor.

If we add the first five sentences to this topic sentence we have a unified but general description of the types of "rituals" or study patterns which are such an important part of academic life.

For most students the process of studying involves establishing a complex set of rituals which come to be repeated, with little variation, every time a task is assigned by a professor. In preparation for study some students apportion a negligible period of time to clearing off a desk, a table, a floor; others must scrub all surfaces and clean all toilet bowls within 50 meters before the distraction of dirt disappears. Some eat or pace while they work. Some work with deep concentration, others more fitfully. Students might smoke, or chew their nails, or stare blankly at walls or at computer screens.

The rest of the sentences are more specific. They concern the distribution of individual time, space and effort, and relate the rituals involved in study to those less commonly associated with school. A topic sentence might look something like this:

Work tends, therefore, to be associated with non-work-specific environments, activities, and schedules. If asked what space is reserved for learning, many students would suggest the classroom, the lab or the library. What about the kitchen? The bedroom? In fact, any room in which a student habitually studies becomes a learning
Some people need to engage in sports or other physical activity before they can work successfully. Being sedentary seems to inspire others. Although most classes are scheduled between 8:30 and 22:00, some students do their best work before the sun rises, some after it sets. Some need a less flexible schedule than others, while a very few can sit and not rise until their task is completed. Some students work quickly and efficiently, while others cannot produce anything without much dust and heat.

Some organisation and a couple of topic sentences have transformed a long and undifferentiated listing of student activities into two unified paragraphs with a logical division between them.

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