

Using Details, Examples, Evidence to Make your Paragraphs Stronger

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Make sure to use nouns that are very specific to your subject matter. For example, if you are discussing doctors on medical TV shows, you must include the name of the show and the name of the characters you are discussing. You cannot simply say “a show” or “that sexy male doctor” because those descriptors are too vague (plus, what does *sexy* add to your argument? That’s right, nothing.).

General words are the broad categories such as trees, books, politicians, students, and Absolute words like everyone, always, never, etc

Specific words name particular kinds of things and items such as oaks, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, John McCain and Barack Obama, and college freshmen (see the difference?)

Abstract words name qualities and ideas that do not have physical properties, such as charity, beauty, and hope.

Concrete words name things on which we can use the five senses, such as velvet, vinegar, smoke, screech, and sweater.

Vague: The city faced bad weather.

Precise: Hurricane Ike battered the city of Houston with gale-like winds.

Make sure to look for overused, vague terms and replace them with unused, concrete terms

(This is why double-spacing as you write is so crucial)

Remember that you do not want to overdo better words. 4-5 adjectives in a sentence is too much.

Show vs. Tell

Instead of telling your reader about you point, it is better to show your point in action. For example, if you were discussing violence:

- ✓ Tell: The television programs that children watch are too violent.
- ✓ Show: In a half-hour television show, an innocent child may witness a murder, an attempted rape, several cases of assault, and the kind of driving that only occurs in a demolition derby.

The Show sentence has more detail and really helps the reader to grasp the point of view of the writer. “Violent” is just too vague of a term for the Tell sentence to have an impact. The Show sentence does not even have the word “violent,” but the idea permeates the sentence due to the good examples/details.

So What?

There also needs to be a reason that you have written specific details and examples. If a reader asks why you have mentioned an idea (“So what?” is the most typical response), *that is bad*. There must be a clear connection between the topic sentence of each paragraph and your evidence. A good method to use is to write a sentence with your evidence and then write 1-2 more sentences explaining/arguing how this example proves your topic sentence and your thesis. After you write each sentence, ask yourself “So what?” The answer you come up with is the “why,” and putting that answer in your next sentence will vastly improve your paragraph.

Ideas for Sufficiently Developing Your Paragraphs

Note: NEVER invent or include statistics. The rater assumes you have made them up, and they do nothing for your argument. (ex: “95% of high school juniors drive cars.” So what? Can you prove that?)

Examples from your life (personal knowledge) are fine: material you have read, TV/movies you have seen, information friends/family have told you. You can also invent stories – the rater will not know if something has actually happened to you or not. If you do invent a story, do not spend time explaining how you heard it or who told you (and their relation to you). Just simply own the story yourself and give the details of the story instead of spending time on the set-up.

If you have only one good example make it an extended example, which will turn the paragraph into an anecdote (a story). Stories from your personal life are fine as long as there is a clear reason *how* they tie into your thesis and *why* the story matters in your argument. If you do not have a good story, you can always make one up. Nobody will know.

If a paragraph feels too short, try to think of examples that come in three and then discuss each one (i.e., men, women, and children; expensive, moderate, and cheap; young, middle-aged, old). Progression allows you to examine all possible factors and/or results of your argument and it can lead to a thorough paragraph.

If you have three examples but your sentences are short and choppy:

- ✓ Add items in a series
- ✓ Add specific modifiers (adjectives and adverbs): (*latest* boyfriend, *good-looking* and *firm* chest, *so-called* friends, *obviously* envy)
- ✓ Add descriptive phrases after the close of the original sentence that expand on and image or idea in the sentence (One of the ways to reduce litter is to take the week’s trash to a recycling center, *the kind that has those huge green metals bins clearly marked for depositing various kinds of household garbage*).
- ✓ Add descriptive or example sentences after general ones (The American flag is a symbol of freedom all over the world. *When people in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and other totalitarian regimes see the Stars and Stripes, they know immediately that it means Americans have the right to speak their minds, to cast a vote for the candidate of their choice, to worship as they see fit, and to join with others in peaceful protest of government policy.*)

Put It All Together

An example of an empty paragraph: (Topic: Qualities in a Good Leader)

First, a leader must be imbued with spotless character. This person must not have any problems in his background that might cause others to suspect that he has done something on the past that would be a blot on his character. If the person who is seeking public office has been involved in one or two incidents that were not above-board in his earlier years, then he should not run for a leadership position. Leaders must first be people with good character.

Now, why does this paragraph not work?

- ✓ The word “character” is repeated 3 times, without a definition or an elaboration on the concept.
- ✓ There are no concrete examples to illustrate the author’s point
- ✓ What was actually said/argued? Nothing.