

Paragraph Types: Explanation

Explanation paragraphs provide detail about how or why things happen by explaining relationships between processes, events or other phenomena. Sequential explanations explain how things happen, for example, through various stages in a process. Explanations that explain why things happen can be **causal** or **consequential**. **Causal** explanations explain the **causes** of phenomena such as processes or events. **Consequential** explanations explain the **effects** of processes or events.

Topic sentence identifies and gives general information about the phenomenon.

Support Sentences

- For sequential explanations, give a sequenced explanation of how something works, happens, or changes over time.
- For causal and consequential explanations, organise the supporting sentences around causes and effects.

Concluding Sentence gives a brief summary of the process in conclusion (optional).

Useful transitional words and phrases

For indicating time and stages in a sequence

at first, initially, to begin with, in the beginning, first of all, the first step, while, as, at the same time, the next step, after, next, then, meanwhile, until that time, finally, eventually, at last, the final step

For indicating causes or consequences

so, because, because of this, therefore, thus, as a result, to this end, consequently, for this reason, accordingly, hence, on account of, due to

Other words to indicate cause and effect

cause, effect, affect, influence, contribute to, result from, lead to, change, reduce, increase, impact

Examples of questions requiring *explanation* paragraphs.

Sequential explanations:

- Describe the response of plant growth to temperature.
- Explain how Eratosthenes measured the radius of the earth.
- How is a law made?
- Describe the process of beer production.
- How is cheese made?

Notice that the word **explain** does not always appear in the question.

Causal or consequential explanations:

- Why did Thailand not become a European colony like all neighbouring Southeast Asian states?
- Explain the importance of scaffolding to support language learning in the classroom.
- What are the underlying causes of poverty?
- What are the impacts of climate change on food security?
- How does high population density affect the behaviour of mice?

Sample sequential explanation paragraph

How is cheese made?

The general principles of making cheese from milk have changed little for nearly 3,000 years. The aroma, texture, and taste of cheese depend on slight variations of the process used to produce it, but all methods consist of two to four basic steps. According to Bronson (2003), the first step consists of the coagulation of the protein 'casein' by adding acid or enzyme to the milk. Next, the liquid, called whey, is drained, leaving a semi-solid cheese, called curds, which may be eaten in this form or processed further. All soft or cream cheeses are of this type. Hard cheese undergoes two additional steps in the process. The semi-solid cheese is matured until it reaches the required level of acidity, at which time it is salted and pressed into forms or moulds to give it the distinctive shape and size of a particular cheese. The final step is the aging process, during which the world's most famous cheeses acquire their unique flavours from the place and length of storage (Bronson, 2003).

Sample causal explanation paragraph

Why did Thailand not become a European colony like all neighbouring Southeast Asian states?

There were several reasons why Thailand remained independent during the period of European colonisation in Southeast Asia. First, the important changes brought about by reforms initiated by the fourth and fifth kings of the Chakri dynasty, the growth of trade, and the signing of treaties with England, the USA, and several European countries during the 19th century played a significant role in holding back the European powers (Wyatt, 1984). Second, geographical factors placed Thailand in a unique position in relation to other Southeast Asian countries because the country lacked crucial strategic importance for the major European trading routes (Osborne, 2000). Finally, the capacity of the Thai to borrow alien cultural forms and adapt to the changing conditions of their world also allowed Thailand to maintain its independence (Osborne, 2000). Therefore, a full understanding as to why Thailand did not become the colony of a European power requires the consideration of these interrelated factors.

Sample consequential explanation paragraph

How does high population density affect the behaviour of mice?

When mice are kept at high population densities, their behaviour changes in a number of ways. Aggressive activity within populations of mice rises as density increases, with a rise in the cannibalism of young mice and aberrant sexual activity (Tyson, 2009). Also, there is an abnormal increase in communal nesting, which is frequent in natural mouse populations (Brooks, 2010). Unusual communal living was observed in one example where 58 mice that were one-to-three days old (from several litters) were found in the one nest. None survived because most of the mothers deserted them immediately after birth.