

Structure of an Analytical Paragraph

Approaches to Organizing a Paragraph

A paragraph is a useful and extremely flexible unit of writing. It acts as an organizational tool and therefore a memory aid for your reader, breaking down your argument or narrative into clearly defined, relatively short sections that can be easily searched through and referenced to reaffirm understanding. **Say-mean-matter** is a framework for thinking about how to analyze evidence within a paragraph; it's both an analytical tool and an organizational principle.¹

There are a number of different pneumonics to help writers remember paragraph organization. Other frameworks for paragraph organization include TEA—**Topic sentence, Evidence, Analysis**—and PEEL or TEEL, meaning **Point/Topic sentence, Evidence, Explanation, Link** (i.e. link back to your thesis).² In reality, however, all of these models outline the same general structure; the difference lies in which elements they emphasize and which elements they only imply. TEA assumes writers know to include the “link”—otherwise known as the matter-level analysis—as part of its “A,” while say-mean-matter assumes the inclusion of a topic sentence. The **"They Say, I Say"** concept is a bit different: It can be useful for incorporating others' research into your own argument (see the ["They Say, I Say" handout](#) for more information).

This handout will focus on the say-mean-matter framework. The nice thing about this framework is its adaptability; it doesn't prescribe a paragraph structure in the same way that TEA and PEEL can appear to. The say-mean-matter framework defines its three elements based on their rhetorical purpose, what they *do*, rather than what they *are*.

Defining Say, Mean, and Matter

1. The "say" level is the evidence itself: what the text "says." This can take the form of a quote, paraphrase, or description depending upon the form of the text being analyzed.
2. The "mean" level is the first level of analysis, direct analysis of the *immediate* significance of the evidence. It may interpret specific wording, the context, or another aspect of the evidence you've provided (connotation). This level of analysis is rooted in the evidence, so it typically doesn't make sense without the evidence providing context.
3. The "matter" level is the highest level of analysis. **Matter-level analysis links your interpretation back to some portion of the thesis**, if you have one. Whether or not you have a thesis, it answers the question: Why does your interpretation of the evidence *matter* for your broader argument/the text itself/the world?

Organizing Your Elements

The most fundamental form of a short analytical paragraph would be a topic sentence (TS), then one piece of say-level evidence (S), one piece of mean-level analysis (mE), and one piece of matter-level analysis (Ma):

[TS, S, mE, Ma]

However, you might include more or fewer repetitions of each element depending on your purposes. If you're analyzing several different aspects of the same piece of evidence, your paragraph may look like:

[TS, S, mE, mE, Ma] or [TS, S, mE, Ma, mE, Ma]

If you're analyzing several different pieces of evidence to prove the same section of the larger argument, it might read:

[TS, S, mE, S, mE, Ma] or [TS, S, mE, Ma, S, mE, Ma]

¹ This framework comes from the curriculum of the Department of English at Chadwick School in Palos Verdes Peninsula, California.

² “Paragraphs.” *Oxford Brookes University*, <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/students/academic-development/online-resources/paragraphs>. Accessed 12 August 2023.

You can have more than one of each element depending on the situation, though you're still always, ultimately, proceeding from "say" to "mean" to "matter." You should avoid including any mean-level analysis in your essay without at least one piece of relevant say-level evidence first, or any matter-level analysis without at least one piece of relevant mean-level analysis first.

Why is each level important?

- If you leave out the "say," the evidence itself, your claims are unsubstantiated.
- If you leave out the "mean," the link between the evidence and why it matters is lost; it's unclear how the evidence supports the "matter" argument and, therefore, unclear how it supports your thesis.
- If you leave out the "**matter**," your reader won't understand *why* this paragraph or piece of evidence is included in the essay.

Students tend to struggle most with the "mean" level.

Adapting the Framework to Suit Your Needs

The flexibility of the say-mean-matter framework becomes particularly important when writers face more complicated or unusual analytical tasks. In some disciplines and for some complex essays, the lines between the three levels of analysis (particularly mean and matter) can become blurred, and how exactly the three levels of analysis would be best organized and weighted will depend on the specific form and content of your argument as well as disciplinary rhetorical norms. For example, a piece of argumentative writing that is meant to be more persuasive than informative, like a speech on a social issue, might be weighted more towards "matter," with the "say" serving the analytical sections rather than the analytical sections explicating the "say," as in a more standard analytical essay.

The basic say-mean-matter framework is most applicable for close reading. If your paper takes a more unusual analytical format—not thesis-based, or organized in a specific, unfamiliar way—you might check with your professor about the applicability of this framework.

Example 1: Close-reading Literary Analysis

This situation, however, reveals the second purpose of language in *The Tempest*: Language enables Caliban to subvert Prospero's authority and disrupt his hierarchy, both within the play and metatextually [TS]. Caliban declares to Miranda, "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse" (I.2.363-64). He "needs must curse," despite the consequences, [S] because this language act expresses resistance to an authority he cannot otherwise resist (II.2.4) [mE]. Caliban also persuades Stephano to try to kill Prospero rather than attempt it himself—his language skills enable genuine resistance. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Caliban's speech—articulate and poetic, especially in contrast to Stephano and Trinculo's, as at III.3.134-142—reveals him to be more than a "shallow monster," subverting the way Prospero seeks to frame him (II.2.141-42). His language serves as a kind of metanarrative resistance to the hierarchies of the play itself [Ma].³

Example 2: Scientific Literature Review

The findings of this article highlight potential mechanisms that contribute to cardiometabolic diseases [TS]. For instance, the inverse cortisol rhythm during complete circadian misalignment [S] could lead to insulin resistance and hyperglycemia [mE] while the decrease in leptin implies a decrease in energy expenditure which could contribute to the development of obesity. Decreased sleep and decreased sleep efficiency are known to be associated with an increased risk for obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Together, these effects may provide a mechanism underlying the increased risk for obesity, hypertension, and diabetes in shift workers [Ma].

³ Writing samples are from Vanderbilt student writing, used with permission of the authors, who choose to remain anonymous.