The Paragraph

The paragraph is a fundamental structural unit in writing.

- Every paragraph must be dominated by one, and only one, big idea.
- This big idea is expressed in the topic sentence, which is usually the first sentence.
- The topic sentence should be supported by smaller ideas and specific details.

Sample Paragraphs, with Topic Sentence in Bold

Imperialism was a foreign policy used by the British for a number of different reasons. An imperialist nation acquired vast amounts of additional territory. Imperialism added to Britain's wealth by providing raw materials for use in its factories. Imperialist nations such as Britain argued that they were spreading more advanced civilization to areas of the world that they said were "backward" and "uncivilized." Lastly, imperialism brought with it a great deal of glory and prestige for the British Empire.

On the issue of Martha Stewart versus Julia Child, the world is clearly divided into two camps. Perhaps you love Martha—her freakishly neat ways, her ability to strangle the warmth out of homemaking, the artificially manufactured twinkle in her eye. Or perhaps you love Julia—the hooting voice, the happily sloppy technique, her naughty humor. For those who are wavering between the two, the path to righteousness was made clear this week, when Ms. Robotic Perfectpants was sued for allegedly trading on some insider stock tips and Julia had her kitchen enshrined at the Smithsonian Institution.

Characteristics of a Well Designed Paragraph:

1. Unity
2. Coherence
3. Completeness

How to Make Sure Your Paragraph Is Well Designed:

1. To achieve Unity, have all the sentences in your paragraph relate to the topic sentence.

2. To insure Coherence, use the following four devices:
   1. Transitional words and phrases (such as furthermore, but, a second point)
   2. Pronoun references
   3. Repeated key terms (but not over-repetition)
   4. Parallelism

Another way of achieving Coherence is to be consistent in both Tense and Point of View.

3. To make your paragraphs complete, make sure that you provide enough evidence to prove your topic sentence. A good exercise is to do the following:
   1. Look at what you have written, or proposed, in your topic sentence.
   2. Then ask yourself this question: “Given the evidence and support that my other sentences have provided—your smaller ideas and specific details—would I believe this proposition?
   3. If you don’t think your reader would “swallow your argument,” then you need to either change the topic sentence (to match the evidence you have)—or better yet, provide better supporting evidence in your supporting sentences (by means of more ideas and details).