Writing Body Paragraphs

courtesy of the
Franklin & Marshall College
Writing Center

A body paragraph completely develops a single idea. A strong paragraph includes a strong assertion that is supported by specific examples or evidence clearly explained to the reader.

There are three steps to building a paragraph:

1) Assert
2) Support
3) Explain

* Assert *

Each paragraph should begin with a strong assertion or topic sentence that supports your thesis.

- An assertion is not a factual statement or a summary of the plot.
  
  *ex.,* Cudjoe dreams about a black youth hanging from the rim of a basketball hoop.

- Instead, an assertion is something arguable or debatable that must be demonstrated throughout the paragraph.
  
  *ex.,* Cudjoe’s dream suggests the way that racial violence steals potential from the youths that play basketball on Philadelphia’s inner-city courts.

* Support *

After you make your assertion, you must support that assertion through textual evidence or specific examples to clearly illustrate your point.

- There are two ways to provide support: quoting and paraphrasing (see Using Outside Sources for recommendations on when to use each).

- A piece of support should not simply be a full-sentence quote following your assertion. Rather, you must set up the context for your supporting evidence.
  
  *ex.,* In his dream, Cudjoe envisions a black youth hanging from the basketball rim: “a boy is lynched from the rim. A kid [is] hanging there” (93).
Finally you must tell your reader how the evidence or example supports your assertion and, ideally, tie your evidence into your broader thesis. Never assume that the connections are obvious (if they are, your point is not worth arguing). By thoroughly explaining each piece of support, you will make your paragraph much stronger; it is better to say a lot about a little than a little about a lot.

Example paragraph:

In the paragraph below, the **assertion** is in bold, the **support** is italicized (the portion of the sentence that introduces the **support** is unaltered), and the explanation is **underlined**.

Notice how much this writer has to say about two very short supporting passages:

**Cudjoe’s dream suggests the way that racial violence steals potential from the youths that play basketball on Philadelphia’s inner-city courts.** In his dream, Cudjoe envisions a black you hanging from a basketball rim: “a boy is lynched from the rim. A kid [is] hanging there” (93). The irony in this scene stems from the usual cultural association of “hanging on the rim” with an accomplishment, a display of one’s talents on the court. The youth in Wideman’s novel aspires to excel, but this aspiration is not just thwarted, it is linked symbolically with the violent death of a racial hate crime. Sorrowfully, Cudjoe further comments that “if they had waited a little longer, his legs would have grown, his feet would have reached the ground and he’d be OK” (94). This statement hints at wasted potential, potential that could have led the hanged youth into adulthood. The image of the legs being almost, but not quite, long enough to touch the ground suggests an untimely, unnecessary destruction. With more time, this child could have gained so much from the game: self-confidence, admiration of friends, perhaps even a scholarship. But instead of being rewarded with the glory that comes with “hanging on the rim,” this young man is “rewarded” with his own death, the ultimate end to potential.