A Paragraph by Any Other Name:  
An Introduction to Stand-Alone Paragraphs

If novelist Gertrude Stein had been a writing instructor, she might have said about paragraphs what she said about roses: “A rose is a rose is a rose.” Well, I’m not sure about roses, but I do know that a paragraph isn’t a paragraph isn’t a paragraph. Indeed, all paragraphs are definitely not alike. There are several different sorts of paragraphs, in fact, and they have very distinct “jobs” and follow very different “rules.”

An introductory paragraph, for example, works to draw readers into an essay and to present, or “introduce,” the idea that will be the focus of that essay. A body paragraph’s main purpose is to develop a point that supports the essay’s thesis. It ranges in length from 10 to 12 sentences and employs various rhetorical modes--like narration or description--to explain the point it makes. In this sense, body paragraphs, which are also called supporting paragraphs, are very different from introductions because "intros" don't really adhere to length requirements, do not argue on behalf of the thesis, and have their own special features never seen in body paragraphs (e.g., interest grabbers and background material).

Similarly, concluding paragraphs are unique entities, and they too have their own "rules." A conclusion’s contribution to an essay is to “wrap it up” in a way that avoids out-and-out summarization. Ideally, the writer will attempt a clever or memorable ending that makes a reader glad he or she began reading in the first place.

Clearly, writers must master all three of these paragraph types if they hope to produce effective essays. And typically, writing classes devote a lot of time to these three, but writing students would serve themselves well were they to learn a fourth type. This fourth paragraph is not easily or universally labeled. I call it a "stand-alone paragraph." This sometimes-neglected paragraph is actually as common as the essay, if not more so, but it's usually not spotlighted by English teachers. Unfortunately, the stand-alone paragraph’s lack of exposure confuses students because, without knowing it’s a bad idea, they try to apply--with it--the rules they learned for the three paragraphs used in essays. This is an understandable but nevertheless unhelpful tactic, for the strategies associated with the other paragraphs don't succeed with “stand-alones.”

It might be helpful to clarify situations in which stand-alone paragraphs are typically
written. They occupy a fairly solid place in the worlds of business and technical writing, where they often appear in manuals, memoranda, and advertising copy. They also show up as "fillers" in local newspapers and as the very short "articles" we read in magazines. Quite a few of the e-mail messages we all send and receive fit the stand-alone paragraph bill as well. But stand-alone paragraphs are perhaps most common in the academic world, for these are the paragraphs students write when they're responding to exam questions like "Briefly explain the flaws in Napoleon's plans to conquer Europe," "How does Shakespeare's characterize Ophelia?" or "What traits identify a psychopath?"

Sure, sometimes students can get away with a list for an answer to exam questions like these or even a few jotted down words and phrases, but, more often, students are expected to provide cogent and well-supported answers that go on for several sentences. This is especially so if a student's goal is to earn high grades, for short, sparsely worded answers don't tend to impress professors. Instructors prefer well-organized and sufficiently developed answers that demonstrate 1) that students studied, 2) that they understand the material, and 3) that they have the capacity for critical thought. And here's where stand-alone paragraphs come in handy, for they are extremely well suited to the task of writing exam answers. In fact, I'd say they're practically crucial.

Consider the so-called "essay questions" students face on a regular basis. These are a bit of a misnomer. After all, even if they are called "essay questions," teachers aren't really expecting essay-length responses. Why, if only four such questions were posed on an exam and test-takers were truly expected to respond with essays, they would be writing some 8,000 words for one test. It would take most students many, many hours to finish the test, and let's not even talk about the time it would take to grade their efforts. More often, teachers posing "essay questions" really only want brief (but thorough) discussions, and, again, stand-alone paragraphs allow examinees to provide that. They are, in this respect, a virtual guarantee to higher test scores.

Stand-alone paragraphs help with more than just tests, though. They also work well for so-called "journal assignments," the short reflective writings students are often called upon to do in English classes. (These assignments are fairly popular in the social sciences and in the humanities, so lots of students will need to know the best way to go about writing them.)
A third place in which stand-alone paragraphs come in handy in the academic setting is in note-taking. Even if not required or reviewed by an instructor, a set of well-ordered notes can be a student’s salvation, and stand-alone paragraphs can be a useful part of any study notebook. There they usually take the form of a chapter summary or a paragraph-length overview of a professor’s lecture. Not only would such a paragraph provide good review, it would give its author practice at articulating his or her understanding of a concept. Research tells us, incidentally, that this technique greatly solidifies a person’s grasp of practically any subject.

Now that you’ve seen where stand-alone paragraphs work best and show up most often—both inside and outside the classroom, you might already be feeling a bit more comfortable about them. You may even realize that, despite the fact that you may never have heard the term before, you’ve actually written quite a few stand-alone paragraphs in the past. But, of course, whether you have or haven’t is really beside the point. The point is to learn when to use them in the future, and, perhaps more importantly, how to write good ones.

Having said that, it’s probably worth noting that the degree to which stand-alone paragraphs are subject to strict scrutiny regarding rules of grammar and stylistic considerations depends greatly on their intended audience or use. Sometimes the standards are more relaxed for these paragraphs than they are for essays and other longer, more formal types of writing. For example, you probably don’t worry if your own notes aren’t too perfect, and you usually won’t see anybody marking errors in a magazine ad or correcting e-mail. But other times, it might be more important that stand-alone paragraphs be well written. You can be pretty sure that if the paragraph represents a school assignment, it is expected to conform to the conventions of good writing, regardless of its brevity. After all, journal assignments are frequently graded, and exam answers are assigned scores, so it only makes sense that you learn to write “good” stand-alone paragraphs.

Don’t despair at this, though, because even if it held up to high standards, a good stand-alone paragraph isn't so difficult to write. It's really not much longer than most body paragraphs, and it contains many elements already familiar to most student writers. Its first sentence or two orient the reader, providing him or her with a tiny introduction to the topic
at hand. This introduction is generally followed by a topic sentence containing the writer’s main point. That point, of course, is developed over several sentences (probably nine or ten), and the paragraph ends with a conclusion of sorts that may take a sentence or two to express.

In a sense, a stand-alone paragraph, then, looks rather like a "mini-essay." Of course, "mini" is a relative term. To some students, a 15- or 16-sentence, 300-word paragraph seems pretty long, but it is fairly petite when compared to essays, which, in college, tend to cover seven or eight paragraphs and range between 1,500 to 2,000 words. Despite the size differential, both forms of writing try to present a complete discussion. It’s just that the stand-alone paragraph compresses a more limited topic while an essay gives expanded treatment to slightly broader topic. Structurally, though, they’re very similar.

The key to stand-alone paragraphs may be in their name. They stand alone—literally. They are not part of a longer document. They don’t conjoin with other paragraphs to create something else. Hence, what you see in the page (or ¾ of a page) it usually takes to write a stand-alone paragraph is what you get. There aren’t separate introductory paragraphs or concluding ones. Those functions, plus full development, must take place all within just the one paragraph.

In class, you will be given handouts that illustrate the typical structure and development of a stand-alone paragraph. We will also examine several examples and undertake exercises to gain practice at writing stand-alone paragraphs.

While you may not be thrilled at the prospect of learning yet another type of paragraph, I think you will find that perfecting your ability to write this lesser-known paragraph will really help your development as a writer.
The other day, I was getting after my teenaged son for watching some silly TV program: “Why can’t you watch something that’s useful?” I criticized, “Okay, Mom,” he says. “I’ll change the channel to the news,” but I’m not going to watch the news; it’s too depressing.” I’ve decided he has a point.

The daily news programs focus far too much on bad news. Each newscast, it seems, is just a litany of one horrible story after another. Here’s what I learned from this evening’s 5 o’clock “NewsWatch”: a local middle-school teacher was arrested for having sex with one of her students, the rates of malignant melanomas are increasing among women, a band of Palestinians attacked several Jewish settlers, Israeli soldiers killed three Palestinian protestors, a Houston suburb is being devastated by flash flooding, another professional athlete tested positive for drugs, and the Government Accounting Office is investigating wasteful spending on the part of the Justice Department. There was also news about an explosion at a local plumbing supply warehouse. Nowadays, it seems, even the so-called human interest stories aren’t as heart-warming as they ought to be. Take the adopt-a-child segments many stations feature on a weekly basis. Sure it’s nice to promote adoption and hopefully the kids in question will end up in good homes, but it’s depressing to hear that the reason the child is in need of adoption in the first place is that his drug-addicted natural parents neglected him.

I don’t have any solutions for improving the news. After all, bad things happen in the world. I suppose we ought to know about them. But there is such a thing as balance, and the news organizations—especially the television ones—should strive for less gloom and do their part to incorporate a bit more good news along with all the bad. I mean, it does exist. Personally, I’d like to see more on heroic rescue workers, on folks who invent cool gadgets, on kids who win science fairs, and on actors who return to their high school theater departments to conduct free seminars. I’d like my son to know that what’s going on in the world isn’t as sad as the journalists make it out to be, but, until the news networks see the light, it’s hard to force him to watch such depressing stuff.
The other day, I was getting after my teenaged son for watching some silly TV program: “Why can’t you watch something useful?” I criticized, “Why don’t you watch the news?” “Okay, Mom,” he says. “I’ll change the channel to something else, but I’m not going to watch the news; it’s too depressing.” I’ve decided he has a point. The daily news programs focus far too much on bad news.

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The banter of the news anchors doesn’t help either. Not too long ago, two were going on and on about the cuteness of a dog named Loco, but the focus of the story was how that dog had inspired anti-cruelty legislation after he was intentionally blinded in a senseless attack. I don’t have any solutions for improving the news. After all, bad things happen in the world. But there is such a thing as balance, and the news organizations—especially the television ones—should strive for less gloom and doom and try incorporating a bit more good news in along with all the bad. I mean, it does exist. Personally, I’d like to see more on heroic rescue workers, on folks who invent cool gadgets, on kids who win science fairs, and on actors who return to their high school theater departments to conduct free seminars. I’d like my son to know that what’s going on in the world isn’t as sad as the journalists make it out to be, but, until the news networks see the light, it’s hard to force him to watch such depressing stuff.