PARAGRAPH ORGANIZATION

Topic Sentences:
Readers generally look to the first few sentences in a paragraph to determine the subject and perspective of the paragraph, making topic sentences guides for your paragraphs. Each topic sentence should relate back to the thesis and contain the following:

- The main point of the paragraph in relation to the essay’s argument
- Only one idea to be expanded upon in the paragraph

Essentially, topic sentences act as miniature theses. Just as a thesis establishes the entire argument of an essay, a topic sentence establishes the entire argument of a paragraph within an essay.

Paragraph Organization:
Most academic papers are organized according to a fairly standardized structure. Although the outline of this structure contains only five paragraphs, it can easily be extended or shortened.

- First Paragraph: Introduction
  - How will you grab the reader’s attention?
  - What is being discussed? What is the problem or argument? Is there a solution?
  - What is the thesis statement?
  - What will you be discussing throughout the rest of your paper?
- Second Paragraph: Thesis Reason 1
  - Topic Sentence and Three Support Details
  - These three supporting details should only discuss “Reason 1” and should not contain any ideas concerning the various other points of the essay.
- Third Paragraph: Thesis Reason 2
  - Transition, Topic Sentence, and Three Supporting Details
- Fourth Paragraph: Thesis Reason 3
  - Transition, Topic Sentence, and Three Supporting Details
- Fifth Paragraph: Conclusion
  - Tie back to the hook
  - Remind the reader of the problem and possible solutions
  - Reiterate the thesis statement in new words and end with a closing thought

Note that not all papers need to be formatted this way, but it is a good place to start.
Expanding Your Paper:
While the outline above is only a basic outline for organizing a paper, it can be expanded well beyond five paragraphs. For example, many arguments require recognition of opposing viewpoints and ideas, followed by a rebuttal. Additionally, although the outline only has room for three main points (“reasons”), more points can be added. It’s also important to remember that although the outline has room for one paragraph per thesis reason, oftentimes longer papers will require that more than one paragraph be dedicated to each reason.

Expanded Organization:
Below is a sample of how the five paragraph outline might be expanded to fit longer papers. Note that the outline is flexible, and this is only an example of one of the many ways that it can be edited and altered to fit an individual paper’s need.

• First Paragraph: Introduction
  o What is being discussed? What is the problem and is there a solution?
  o What is the thesis statement?
• Second Paragraph: Thesis Reason 1
  o What is the topic sentence? What is one of the three supporting details for your first reason?
• Third Paragraph: Thesis Reason 1 (cont’d)
  o What is the topic sentence? What is your second supporting detail for your first reason and in what ways does this second detail interact with and relate to the first supporting detail?
• Fourth Paragraph: Thesis Reason 1 (cont’d)
  o What is the topic sentence? In what ways are the prior two supporting details complimented by the third supporting detail for your reasoning?

Note that after four paragraphs, the topic of discussion is still the first reason that was presented in the thesis. By dedicating an entire paragraph to a supporting detail, rather than a third of a paragraph, the paper is already three times its original length.

Where to Place a Rebuttal:
Addressing the opposing side’s point of view, and composing a rebuttal to that point of view, can happen at any point in your paper. Although this bow to the opposition is oftentimes organized as the last paragraph (or paragraphs) prior to a conclusion, this doesn’t necessarily always need to be the case.

Place opposing viewpoints, and the rebuttals associated with those viewpoints, wherever they fit most logically. If you’re discussing one of your main “reasons” that you know the opposite side will disagree with, this may be a great place to put your acknowledgement of opposing views and consequent rebuttals.