Developing an argument through paragraphs

The paragraph is a unit of ideas, not a unit of length. It consists of:

- a topic sentence which communicates the main idea of the paragraph – an idea that is rarely just descriptive but always contributes to your overall argument.
- sentences that support and develop the main idea in the remainder of the paragraph, where each sentence is connected to the others to allow a flow of ideas. These sentences usually provide supporting evidence such as statistics, quotations, critics' perspectives, or other documentary evidence.
- coherent development signalled by transitions or linking phrases, ie words such as "moreover,” “nevertheless,” “for instance,” “in addition” and “consequently.” Transitions show the reader how a sentence is related to the sentence that precedes it. In other words, linking phrases signpost your argument and the direction you wish to take. Do not, however, use transitions at the start of each supporting sentence. Transitions can appear at various points in the sentence or not at all. As Barnet suggests:

> The point is not that transitions must be explicit, but that the argument must proceed clearly. The gist of a paragraph might run thus: "Speaking broadly, there were in the Renaissance two comic traditions... The first... The second... The chief difference... But both traditions... ”

- a logical end. This end may summarise or conclude your argument on that particular evidence; if possible, it logically leads – and gives some presage to – the argument developed in the next paragraph.

Example

The following paragraph – outlining relationships between the Australian military in Afghanistan and the media – uses all the building blocks of paragraph construction. The topic sentence poses a question which has been set up by the previous paragraph; it communicates that the paragraph will discuss the development of the "embargo" on "objective reporting":

> How did the Australian military come to embargo objective reporting in Afghanistan and what are the consequences for the public’s understanding of and responses to the conflict there? We can trace the Defence Department's intolerance for the free-flow of information back to the purported "lessons" of the Vietnam War. The US military has long asserted that the war was not lost in Vietnam but in the living rooms of America, where an "anti-establishment" press, free to report as and where it pleased, fatally undermined public support for the war. The media, the military argued, had "stabbed" the fighting man "in the back." Despite a number of detailed academic studies revealing that nothing of the sort had happened, the US military chose to take a single, self-reinforcing "truth" from the war—only was press freedom inimical to success on the battlefield, but there was also an inverse proportionality between the two. However questionable the validity of this conclusion, militaries around the world paid heed to the US defence establishment's analysis.

The sentences following this paragraph support and develop this argument, using several linking phrases which signpost Foster's position. The expression “has long asserted” indicates that this position is not Foster's. "Despite" and "however" also signpost Foster's argument and develop it through the paragraph.

This paragraph appears nearly halfway into the essay. The article begins by recalling “Eyewitness,” the nom-de-plume for Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Swinton in WWI who used this name in his press releases. Following two paragraphs of historical background, the topic sentence in the next paragraph develops the issue and makes it relevant to the
present:

I mention Swinton because, more than ninety years later, in Australian media coverage of the war in Afghanistan, we find ourselves back in Eyewitness’ world.

This topic sentence introduces an important element of Foster’s argument: that the past and present control of the media are similar. The following topic sentence in the next paragraph then puts the military’s point of view:

The ADF [Australian Defence Force] argues that its troops in Oruzgan are mostly special forces, engaged in highly classified operations, and so security considerations preclude all but the most controlled and limited coverage of their actions.

The final sentence of the paragraph quotes from the guidelines issued to journalists from the ADF. The topic sentence in the next paragraph flows from this quotation, and argues against the military’s point of view:

Despite the dry legalese [of the military guidelines to journalists] it is clear that this document is a suicide note for the investigative journalist.

There is another paragraph of evidence supporting his position, concluding that “neither they [journalists] nor their opinions are welcome.” The next topic sentence brings together the evidence and the historical background to establish an important line of argument:

The reincarnation of Eyewitness in a slouch hat demonstrates an important, if dispiriting, truth about contemporary war reporting: namely, that its development has not traced a linear path towards increased liberalisation but a circular arc that has taken us back to the norms and expectations of the past.

Now Foster is in a position to develop his argument regarding the history of military influence in the media: how did the Australian military come to embargo objective reporting in Afghanistan and what are the consequences for the public’s understanding of and responses to the conflict there?

This paragraph then develops the argument outlining how the Australian military accepted the conclusions of the US military, and concludes:

However questionable the validity of this conclusion, militaries around the world paid heed to the US defence establishment’s analysis.

This neatly leads into the next paragraph, which develops this argument through a detailed analysis of British military operations:

In Britain, as early as 1970, the Director of Defence Operations ... proposed that next time the UK’s forces went to war, ‘we would have to start saying to ourselves, are we going to let the television cameras loose on the battlefield?’

To summarise the development of his argument, Foster introduced some historical background over two paragraphs. He then developed the context for this argument in the next paragraph. Notice how he first put the side of the argument with which he disagreed; having mapped the debate, and he set up his next paragraph which forcefully rejected this argument, using the military’s evidence as his own.

Note how these examples resist the temptation to introduce the main idea of the next paragraph but create a logical connection to that idea. As an exercise in exploring how academics write paragraphs and in identifying the flow of an argument, read just the topic sentence of each paragraph in a journal article you are reading. Do this in your own writing as well and, if it makes sense, you have a clear line of argument.