Paragraphs

What is a paragraph?
A paragraph is a distinct unit which connects to a larger idea. A paragraph should have only one idea or topic (in the example below, Alexie’s family members are each distinct units connected to the larger idea of his family; his house is one distinct unit connected to the larger idea of his reservation, etc.).

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me. I began to think of everything in terms of paragraphs. Our reservation was a small paragraph within the United States. My family's house was a paragraph, distinct from the other paragraphs of the LeBrets to the north, the Fords to our South, and the Tribal School to the west. Inside our house, each family member existed as a separate paragraph but still had genetics and common experiences to link us. Now, using this logic, I can see my changed family as an essay of seven paragraphs: mother, father, older brother, the deceased sister, my younger twin sisters, and our adopted little brother.


How can you tell when to start a new paragraph?
Paragraphs help keep ideas clear and organized in writing; if one paragraph covers several unrelated topics, the ideas in that paragraph will become unclear and lose meaning.

One way to know whether or not you should start a new paragraph is by determining whether or not you are starting on a new main idea. Some paragraphs may contain several different ideas which are all actually being used to support the main idea of that paragraph. If you have several topics in one paragraph, make sure they support that paragraph’s main point; if they don’t, give those topics their own paragraphs.

How are paragraphs formatted?
There are several ways to format a paragraph. One common way is to use the PIE method:

  - Point or main idea
  - Information that supports the point of that paragraph
  - Explanation of why this information is relevant

This is only one of many ways to format a paragraph, and you don’t necessarily want all of your paragraphs to follow this exact format. You also wouldn’t necessarily keep all of your PIE paragraphs in the PIE order (for instance, you might lead into your main point with your information and explanation).