

Topic Sentences

If a thesis is a road map to a paper, then a topic sentence is a guide to a paragraph. Therefore, you should think of topic sentences as kinds of mini-theses, organizing and enabling the development of each paragraph in a paper. The topic sentence of a paragraph should convey that paragraph's content and organization. It gives a preview of the paragraph's subject and the treatment of that main idea (your view of the subject). Therefore, use specific language in your topic sentences and avoid making broad, sweeping generalizations.

Each paragraph should have its own topic sentence and should focus on only one main idea or point, which is referred to as **paragraph unity**. When your writing shifts to a new idea, you need to begin a new paragraph and write a new topic sentence (Adapted from Pacheco).

Purposes of a Topic Sentence:

1. To substantiate or support an essay's thesis statement
2. To unify the content of a paragraph and establish a general sense of organization
3. To present to the audience the subject to be discussed and how the paragraph will treat that subject

Readers generally look to the first few sentences in a paragraph to determine the subject and the writer's perspective. Therefore, it is usually best to place the topic sentence at the very beginning of the paragraph. In some cases, however, it may be more effective to place another sentence before the topic sentence—for example, a sentence linking the current paragraph to the previous one, or a sentence providing critical background information (<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/paragraphs.shtml>).

**Note:* Check with your instructor to see if you can use an introductory sentence (or transitional sentence) before the topic sentence. Some instructors prefer that you start immediately with a topic sentence.

***Note:* Some textbooks give the option to place the topic sentence at the end of a paragraph. Again, it is generally best to check with your instructor before placing your topic sentence near the end of the paragraph.

Types of Topic Sentences:

1. Obvious
2. Implied

You should probably focus on writing **obvious topic sentences**, which will allow you to state your point as clearly and early in the paper as possible. Remember, the goal of your essay/paragraph is to convey your point in a clear, concise, and persuasive manner. You don't want to confuse your audience.

Obvious Topic Sentences

These sentences should come at the beginning of your paragraph, preferably in the first or second sentence. Making your reader figure out what you're trying to say as you go along is generally not a strong strategy (Adapted from Pacheco).

Example: Effective Topic Sentence (Obvious)

Burnout is a potential problem for hardworking and persevering students to fight. A preliminary step for preventing student burnout is for students to work in moderation. Students can concentrate on school every day, if they don't overtax themselves. One method students can use is to avoid concentrating on a single project for an extended period. For example, if students have to read two books for a midterm history test, they should do other assignments at intervals so that the two books will not get boring. Another means to moderate a workload is to regulate how many extracurricular projects to take on. When a workload is manageable, a student's immunity to burnout is strengthened.

-Bradley Howard, Student Writer
(Troyka and Hesse 86)

This example shows an effective topic sentence because it has both the **subject** ("burnout") and the **treatment** ("is a potential problem for hardworking and persevering students to fight"). It also uses **specific language** ("hardworking and persevering students"). For example, Howard does not simply write "students"; rather, he identifies them as "hardworking and persevering students." The topic sentence also states that, in this paragraph, the author is going to discuss how to "fight" burnout.

Example: Unclear Topic Sentence

Adams implies that Langely is afraid of new technology and, therefore, afraid of the future, "...for he constantly repeats that these new forces were anarchical and especially that he was not responsible for the new rays" (318). The dynamo amazes Adams. He calls it a "moral force" and explains that "after a while he began to pray to it" (218). This [idea] leads him to a discussion of history because Adams is a historian, and, for him, everything goes back to history. He says there is no more cause and effect: "assuming in silence a relation between cause and effect...Adams himself toiled in vain to find out what he meant" (319). The word "vain" shows that he failed in his attempts to figure out what [wa]s going on and how the dynamo came to be. This is a bad thing because the word "vain" has a bad tone.

-Example adapted from Pacheco

This example has an ineffective topic sentence because it does not convey the main idea of the paragraph and because it uses a quote in the topic sentence. The paragraph mainly discusses Adams's views and his thoughts on the dynamo. The author does not discuss Langley's fear of new technology and the future in the rest of the paragraph. Also, unless Adams and Langely are introduced earlier in the essay, the reader does not know who they are. Nor does the reader understand the concept of the dynamo. Further, this writer might include stronger diction (word choice), and should avoid vague words, such as "bad," as well as vague references, for instance, the word "this."

Important Points

1. A topic sentence has a subject (the topic you will write about) and a treatment (how you will approach your subject, your perspective of the subject).

Example:

Glendora High School offers a well-balanced academic program.

subject

treatment

(Brandon 40)

The subject does not necessarily come first. It may come at the end, the middle, or even interrupt the treatment.

Example:

Four factors establish Elvis Presley as the greatest entertainer of the
treatment subject treatment

twentieth century: appearance, singing ability, style, and influence.

(Brandon 40)

2. A topic sentence should not be a quote. It should be your own idea expressed in your own words. Use quotes for support.

Example of a weak topic sentence that uses a quote:

The narrator in “Cathedral” shows his jealousy when he thinks, “I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife’s sweet lips” (Carver 158).

Example of a stronger topic sentence:

The narrator in “Cathedral” seems to be jealous of the relationship between his wife and Robert. He reveals his jealousy when he thinks, “I waited in vain to hear my name on my wife’s sweet lips” (Carver 158).

3. Make sure to use specific words in your topic sentence. A topic sentence should not be “vague, too broad, or too narrow” (Brandon 40).

Vague Topic Sentence: Public schools are great.

Stronger Topic Sentence: Public schools do as well academically as private schools, according to statistics.

(Brandon 40)

The first topic sentence uses vague language, notably, the word “great.” The second topic sentence is much more specific, and the reader knows the author is going to discuss how public schools compare academically to private schools.

4. When writing essays, your topic sentences need to relate to and further develop your thesis (the essay’s main idea).

References:

Brandon, Lee. *Paragraphs and Essays: A Worktext with Readings*. 9th ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Carver, Raymond. “Cathedral.” *An Introduction to Literature*. 13th ed. Ed. Sylvan Barnet, William Burto, and William E. Cain. New York: Longman, 2004. 154-163.

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