

PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

I. THE TOPIC SENTENCE

Every good paragraph has a topic sentence, which, not only names the topic of the paragraph, but also limits the topic to one specific area that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph. The part of the topic sentence that announces the specific area to be discussed is called the controlling idea.

A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph. It is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include (and what information to exclude). The reader can see what the paragraph is going to be about and is therefore better prepared to understand it.

The topic sentence is usually (but not always) the first sentence in a paragraph. Experienced writers sometimes put topic sentences in other locations, but the best spot is usually right at the beginning.

1. A topic sentence must be a complete sentence, with a subject and a verb.
2. A topic sentence should be neither too general nor too specific.
3. A topic sentence should not have unrelated controlling ideas.

Practice 1: *Recognizing Topic Sentences*

A. Remember that a topic sentence is a **complete sentence** and is **neither too general nor too specific**.

- Read the sentences in each group, and decide which sentence is the **best topic sentence**. Write **best TS** (for "best topic sentence") on the line next to it.
- Decide what is **wrong** with the other sentences. They may be too general, or they may be too specific, or they may be incomplete sentences. Write *too general*, *too specific*, or *incomplete* on the lines next to them. The first one has been done for you as an example.

Group 1

Too specific a. A lunar eclipse is an omen of a coming disaster.

Too general b. Superstitions have been around forever.

Best TS c. People hold many superstitious beliefs about the moon.

Incomplete d. Is made of green cheese.

Group 2

_____ a. The history of astronomy is interesting.

_____ b. Ice age people recorded the appearance of new moons by making scratches in animal bones.

_____ c. For example, Stonehenge in Britain, built 3500 years ago to track the movement of the sun.

_____ d. Ancient people observed and recorded lunar and solar events in different ways.

Group 3

- _____ a. It is hard to know which foods are safe to eat nowadays.
- _____ b. In some large ocean fish, there are high levels of mercury.
- _____ c. Undercooked chicken and hamburger may carry *E. coli* bacteria.
- _____ d. Not to mention mad cow disease.
- _____ e. Food safety is an important issue.

Group 4

- _____ a. Hybrid automobiles more economical to operate than gasoline-powered cars.
- _____ b. The new hybrid automobiles are very popular.
- _____ c. Hybrid cars have good fuel economy because a computer under the hood decides to run the electric motor, the small gasoline engine, or the two together.
- _____ d. The new hybrid automobiles are popular because of their fuel economy.

Group 5

- _____ a. The North American Catawba Indians of the Southeast and the Tlingit of the Northwest both see the rainbow as a kind of bridge between heaven and earth.
- _____ b. A rainbow seen from an airplane is a complete circle.
- _____ c. Many cultures interpret rainbows in positive ways.
- _____ d. Rainbows are beautiful.
- _____ e. The belief that you can find a pot of gold at a rainbow 's end.

B. Remember that the topic sentence is **the most general statement in a paragraph**. Read the following scrambled paragraphs and decide **which sentence is the topic sentence**. Write **TS** on the line next to that sentence.

Paragraph 1

- ___ a. A notes/memo function lets you make quick notes to yourself.
- ___ b. Other capabilities include word processing, spreadsheets, and e-mail.
- ___ c. A voice recorder that uses a built-in microphone and speaker works like a tape recorder.
- ___ d. Basic tools include a calendar to keep track of your appointments, an address and phone number book, to-do lists, and a calculator.
- ___ e. MP3 playback lets you listen to digital music files, and a picture viewer lets you look at digital photos.
- ___ f. Most personal digital assistants (PDAs) have tools for basic tasks as well as for multimedia functions.
- ___ g. A few models also include a built-in digital camera and keyboard.

Paragraph 2

- ___ a. Twelve years after *Sputnik*, the United States caught up by becoming the first nation to land a man on the moon.
- ___ b. The Europeans have joined the competition, vowing to land European astronauts on the moon by 2025 and on Mars by 2035.
- ___ c. The number of nations competing in the "space race" has grown since the early days of space exploration.
- ___ d. China joined the competition in 2003 when it launched *Shenzhou 5*.
- ___ e. Initially, the former Soviet Union took the lead when it sent the first man into Earth orbit in the spaceship *Sputnik* in 1957.
- ___ f. For almost 50 years, the United States and Russia were the only competitors in the contest to explore space using manned spacecraft.

Paragraph 3

- ___ a. Another important change was that people had the freedom to live and work wherever they wanted.
- ___ b. The earliest significant change was for farming families, who were no longer isolated.
- ___ c. The final major change brought by the automobile was the building of superhighways, suburbs, huge shopping centers, and theme parks such as Disney World in Florida.
- ___ d. The automobile revolutionized the way of life in the United States.
- ___ e. The automobile enabled them to drive to towns and cities comfortably and conveniently.
- ___ f. In fact, people could work in a busy metropolitan city and drive home to the quiet suburbs.

Paragraph 4

- ___ a. In time, this melted part rises as magma.
- ___ b. The formation of a volcanic eruption is a dramatic series of events.
- ___ c. As the plate sinks, friction and Earth's heat cause part of it to melt.
- ___ d. The magma produces heat, steam, and pressure.
- ___ e. First of all, most volcanoes are formed where two plates collide.³
- ___ f. Then one of the plates is forced under the other and sinks.

___ g. When the heat, steam, and pressure from the magma finally reach the surface of Earth, a volcanic eruption occurs.

Practice 2: *Recognizing Controlling Ideas*

Circle the **topic** and underline the **controlling idea** in each of the following sentences. The first one has been done for you as an example.

1. Driving on freeways requires skill and alertness.
2. . Driving on freeways requires strong nerves.
3. Driving on freeways requires an aggressive attitude.
4. The Caribbean island of Trinidad attracts tourists because of its calypso music.
5. Spectacular beaches make Puerto Rico a tourist paradise.
6. Moving away from home can be a stressful experience for young people.
7. Many religious rules arose from the health needs-of ancient times.
8. A major problem for many students is the high cost of tuition and books.
9. Participating in class discussions is a problem for several groups of students.
10. Owning an automobile is a necessity for me.

Practice 3: *Writing Topic Sentences*

Write good topic sentences for the following paragraphs. Remember to include both a topic and a controlling idea.

Paragraph 1

.....English speakers relaxing at home, for example, may put on *kimonos*, which is a Japanese word. English speakers who live in a warm climate may take an afternoon *siesta* on an outdoor *patio* without realizing that these are Spanish words. In their gardens, they may enjoy the fragrance of *jasmine* flowers, a word that came into English from Persian. They may even relax on a *chaise* while snacking on *yogurt*, words of French and Turkish origin, respectively. At night, they may *shampoo* their hair and put on *pajamas*, words from the Hindi language of India.

Paragraph 2

.....In European universities, students are not required to attend classes. In fact, professors in Germany generally do not know the names of the students enrolled in their courses. In the

United States, however, students are required to attend all classes and may be penalized if they do not. Furthermore, in the European system, students usually take just one comprehensive examination at the end of their entire four or five years of study. In the North American system, on the other hand, students usually have numerous quizzes, tests, and homework assignments, and they almost always have to take a final examination in each course at the end of each semester.

Paragraph 3

.....
For example, the Eskimos, living in a treeless region of snow and ice, sometimes build temporary homes out of thick blocks of ice. People who live in deserts, on the other hand, use the most available materials, mud or clay, which provide good insulation from the heat. In Northern Europe, Russia, and other areas of the world where forests are plentiful, people usually construct their homes out of wood. In the islands of the South Pacific, where there is an abundant supply of bamboo and palm, people use these tough, fibrous plants to build their homes.

Practice 4: On a piece of paper, write two or three topic sentences for each of the following topics. In other words, give two or three controlling ideas for the same topic.

Example

Topic: Cell phones

Topic sentences:

1. Using a *cell phone* while driving can *be* dangerous.
2. There are certain rules of *cell phone* manners that everyone should know.
3. *Cell phones* have changed the way we communicate.

Topics

Movies

Space exploration

Studying a foreign language

Advertising

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Practice 5: *Recognizing Supporting Sentences*

Match each supporting sentence with the corresponding topic sentence.

Topic Sentence

TS 1: Low-fat diets are an excellent way to stay healthy and trim.

TS2: High-protein diets are favored by athletes and competitors.

Supporting Sentences

- a. These foods help build muscles and increase stamina.
- b. They are preferred by the general public because they help with weight reduction.
.....
- c. Low-fat diets are recommended by most physicians.
- d. Many athletes eat high-protein foods, such as meat, beans, and nuts.
- e. Low-fat foods include fruits, vegetables, and pasta.
- f. Because they are easy to find in stores, low-fat foods are convenient.
- g. Athletes generally eat high-protein diets to give them more energy.
- h. Crispy steamed vegetables and grilled fish and chicken are all tasty parts of a low-fat.
.....

Practice 6: Writing Concluding Sentences

Write good concluding sentences for the following paragraphs. You may either paraphrase the topic sentence or summarize the main points.

Paragraph 1

You can be a good conversationalist by being a good listener. When you are conversing with someone, pay close attention to the speaker's words while looking at his or her face. Show your interest by smiling and nodding. Furthermore, do not interrupt while someone is speaking; it is impolite to do so. If you have a good story, wait until the speaker is finished. Also, watch your body language; it can affect your communication whether you are the speaker or the listener. For instance, do not sit slumped in a chair or make nervous hand and foot movements. Be relaxed and bend your body slightly forward to show interest in the person and the conversation.
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Paragraph 2

Modern communication technology is driving workers in the corporate world crazy. They feel buried under the large number of messages they receive daily. In addition to telephone calls, office workers receive dozens of e-mail and voice mail messages daily. In one company, in fact, managers receive an average of 100 messages a day. Because they do not have enough time to respond to these messages during office hours, it is common for them to do so in the evenings or on weekends at home.

Bibliography

All exercises from:

- Oshima, A. and Hogue, A., 1991, *Writing Academic English*, 2nd Edition (New York: Longman,), pp. 6-11.
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