

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. Each paragraph should have its own topic sentence and should focus on only one main idea or point. *Every time you move into a new idea, you need a new paragraph and a new topic sentence*

A topic sentence has several important functions: it substantiates or supports an essay's thesis statement; it unifies the content of a paragraph and directs the order of the sentences; and it advises the reader of the subject to be discussed and how the paragraph will discuss it. Readers generally look to the first few sentences in a paragraph to determine the subject and perspective of the paragraph. That's why it's often best to put the topic sentence at the very beginning of the paragraph. In some cases, however, it's more effective to place another sentence before the topic sentence—for example, a sentence linking the current paragraph to the previous one, or one providing background information

There are two types of topic sentences: **obvious** and **implied**.

You should probably focus on **obvious** topic sentences. For most classes, it is best to be straightforward and to state your point as clearly and early as possible. Remember: the goal of your essay/paragraph is to get your point across in a clear, concise, and persuasive manner. You don't want to confuse your reader or your instructor.

Obvious Topic Sentences

These sentences should come at the beginning of your paragraph, preferably in the first or second sentence (since you want to leave room to effectively transition from one paragraph to the next).* A rule of thumb: If the topic sentence comes at or towards the end of the paragraph, you should move it up to the beginning.** Making your reader figure out what you're trying to say as you go along is generally not a good tactic

**Note: You may want to check with your instructor to see if you can use an introductory sentence in the paragraph (which would be the transition) before the topic sentence. Some instructors want you to start immediately with a topic sentence.*

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

Good Example (of a clear, effective, and obvious topic sentence):

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
(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 didn't simply say *students*, he said *hardworking and persevering students*. The sentence also specifically states that in the paragraph, the author is going to discuss how to “fight” burnout.

Bad Example:

Adams implies that Langely is afraid of new technology, and therefore afraid of the future. “...for he constantly repeated 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 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 means” (319). The word “vain” shows that he failed in his attempts to figure out what's going on and how the dynamo came to be. This is a bad thing because the word “vain” has a bad tone. So he discovers the concept of the virgin.

This example has an ineffective topic sentence because it does not convey the main idea of the paragraph. The paragraph mainly discusses Adam's views and his thoughts on the dynamo. The author does not discuss Langely'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.

Some points to remember...

1. A topic sentence has a subject and a treatment; “[t]he **subject** is what you intend to write about. The **treatment** is what you intend to do with your 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 point in your own words. Use quotes for support.

Example of a 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 more appropriate 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 – it shouldn’t be “vague, too broad, or too narrow” (Brandon 40).

Example of a bad topic sentence:

Vague: Public schools are great.

Better: Public schools do as well academically as private schools, according to statistics.
(Brandon 40)

The first topic sentence uses vague language (great). What is great about the schools? Is it great academically, socially, etc.? The second topic sentence is much more specific and the reader knows the author is going to discuss how public schools compare to private schools academically.

4. For essays, your topic sentences need to tie into 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 Bernet, William Burto, and William E. Cain. New York: Longman, 2004. 154-163.

“Paragraphs and Topic Sentences.” Writing Tutorial Services *Indiana Universtiy, Bloomington*.
<<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/paragraphs.shtml>>.

Pacheco, Derek. “Topic Sentences.” HyperTeach Resources: Handouts. *Univeristy of California*.
<http://www.english.ucla.edu/TA/hyperteach/PDFs/topic_sent.pdf>.