

Vocabulary Building

Topic – What the author is discussing in the paper. Someone or something that the paper is about.

Main point – An opinion or statement of fact that is the author’s argument or focus in the paper. What the author is trying to show in the paper.

Claim – An assertion based on explanations, details, facts, or evidence that is related to the topic of a paragraph.

Thesis – A sentence (or sentences, but generally one sentence) that clearly states both the topic of the paper as well as the author’s main point.

Linear progression – A series of points that move directly from one to the next in a certain order.

Sequential – An adjective used to describe items that follow a logical order.

Transition – A passage between two paragraphs that creates a smooth shift from one to the other.

Are there more unfamiliar words?

Look up words you don’t know on the Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary at www.learnersdictionary.com.

Sources for examples:

Von Drehle, David. “It’s All About Him.” *Elements of Argument*. 11th ed. Eds. Annette T. Rottenberg and Donna Haisty Winchell. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2015. 306. Print.

Sharples, Tiffany. “Young Love.” *Models for Writers*. 10th ed. Eds. Alfred Rosa and Paul Eschholz. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010. 419. Print.

Want More Practice?

There are staff in the Learning Center who would love to help you with your writing!

The College Skills Zone

The College Skills Zone is a great place to engage in conversations that help you understand concepts, especially some basic grammar concepts, and then practice those skills. The College Skills Zone is a place where you can just drop in anytime during open hours.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center assistants are trained to help you with any aspect of the writing process, from understanding an assignment, to brainstorming, to revising your essays. You can drop in during open hours or make a 30-minute appointment for a specific time.

English Language Learner Specialist

A specialist for English Language Learners, Sarah Mosser, is available in the Learning Center during certain hours for drop-in or appointments. Because her schedule varies, it is best to make appointments.

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE

WRITING CENTER

Organization

Topic Sentences



Go-To Guides

Go-To Guides are designed to help in all areas of the writing process.

A Brief Explanation

Although **topic sentences** are not a part of the writing tradition in every culture, they are an important part of American academic writing. Why? They help us get straight to the point and make our ideas clearer. Many American academic papers have what we call a “**linear progression**.” The author makes a series of points, moving from one to the next in a sequential manner. Even at the paragraph level, the progression is linear: topic sentence, evidence and explanation, significance of the evidence.

So, what is a **topic sentence**? A topic sentence explains the main point of a paragraph, similar to the way a thesis explains the main point of your whole paper. Like a thesis, a topic sentence makes a claim that will be supported by the writing that follows it. You may sometimes see paragraphs without a topic sentence, but when first learning these skills, it is best to assume that every paragraph in your writing should have one. Usually topic sentences appear as the first sentence of a paragraph (although this is not always the case).

Let's take a look at this **example**:

“**Freud explained narcissism as a failure to grow up.** All infants are narcissists, he pointed out, but as we grow, we ought to learn that other people have lives independent of our own. It's not their job to please us, applaud for us, or even notice us—let alone die because we're unhappy “ (Von Drehle 306).

The topic sentence for this paragraph is “**Freud explained narcissism as a failure to grow up.**” Note that this topic sentence is both general enough to capture the meaning of the whole paragraph and specific enough that we know exactly what the paragraph will be about. The sentences following the topic sentence all support the topic sentence.

Now that we know what a topic sentence is and does, how do we write a good one? A strong topic sentence will include both a **topic** and a **main point or claim**. In the above example, the topic is “Freud explained narcissism ” and the main point/claim is *how* he explained narcissism, which is “as a failure to grow up.”

Examples

Strong Topic Sentences:

In these paragraphs, the topic sentences are in **bold**:

1. **Writing the perfect topic sentence can be challenging.** You have to think about what you want your paragraph to be about, as well as how to transition into your new topic. Sometimes, a transition will come before your topic sentence, and sometimes the topic sentence will even appear in the middle or end of the paragraph instead of the beginning.

2. Fog rolled across the hills and through the fields. The sky was still pink from sunrise. Condensation on the window of the bus made it difficult to see, so I wiped some of it off with my sleeve, trying to ignore the loud music coming through the headphones of the person sitting next to me. **Taking the bus has its downfalls, but I love looking through the window instead of driving.**

(Note: It's uncommon for topic sentences to come at the end, but it helps to be aware of this possibility.)

Weak Topic Sentences:

What makes a weak topic sentence? Being too specific, too vague, too unrelated to the paragraph—all of these should be avoided. Here is an example of a topic sentence that could be strengthened:

Weak: People with diabetes are affected by some factors in the environment.

Stronger: For people with type 1 diabetes, blood glucose levels are negatively impacted by several environmental factors, such as consuming large amounts of gluten and being exposed to illness.

Check It:

Is the following topic sentence a good topic sentence for its paragraph? Why or why not?

1. **With an increase in online banking and bill paying, the danger for identity theft also increases.** Capital punishment has been around for as long as we can remember, existing in pre-Biblical times and probably before. Although our reasons for killing criminals have changed—from punishing suspected adultery and petty thievery, to requiring absolute proof of a brutal murder—the ultimate punishment has always been death.

Try it Out!

True or False?

1. T F Every paragraph must have a topic sentence.
2. T F A topic and a main point/claim are two important elements of a strong topic sentence.
3. T F Topic sentences should be supported by the rest of their paragraph.
4. T F Every writing tradition in the world uses topic sentences somehow.
5. T F A topic sentence is always the first sentence of a paragraph.

ANSWERS: 1.F 2.F 3.T 4.T 5.T

Find It:

The following sentences are out of order in the paragraph. Find the topic sentence and write a “T” next to it.

1. ___ I woke up at 6 a.m., took a shower, got dressed, and sat down with a cup of coffee to do homework. ___ I had a finished draft of the essay due in my history class and was just getting started on math when the doorbell rang. ___ The day before my math test got off to a productive start.
2. ___ Mothers learn to sync their behavior with their newborn's, so that they offer a smile when their baby smiles, food when their baby's hungry. ___ As babies seduce and adults respond, a sophisticated dynamic develops. ___ That's a pleasingly reciprocal deal, and while adults are already aware that when you give pleasure and comfort, you get it in return, it's news for the baby.

(Sharples 419)

Imagine It:

You are writing a paragraph about what you did last weekend. What might be a good topic sentence for this paragraph?
