

Writing Handout 05 - Topic Sentences

A paragraph is writing where all the sentences are related to one idea or topic. When someone begins to read a paragraph, they need something to give them a general overview of what they are about to read. This is called the **topic sentence** because it lets the reader know what the rest of the paragraph is going to be about.

Topic sentences are usually made of two parts. One part is the **topic**. The other part is the **controlling idea**. The controlling idea limits what you will say about the topic. Both parts are needed!

For example, if you want to write a paragraph about teachers, you need to write a topic sentence that mentions teachers (topic) and something specific about teachers (the controlling idea):

Example 1: Teachers have really difficult jobs.

“Teachers” is the topic. It tells the reader what the paragraph will be about. “Difficult jobs” is the controlling idea. The writer could say many things about teachers: their jobs are easy, their jobs are fun, their jobs are challenging, their jobs are boring... All of these controlling ideas are fine, but they cannot all go in the same paragraph! Choosing just one controlling idea focuses the paragraph.

Some other examples:

Example 2: That country is the most dangerous place in the world to visit.

Example 3: Learning a foreign language is beneficial.

In these two examples, can you identify the topics and the controlling ideas?

▲ *Practice 1* ▼

For the following sentences, circle the topic and underline the controlling idea.

1. Hawaii has wonderful surfing beaches.
2. Hawaii has the perfect climate.
3. Small cars are better than large cars for many reasons.
4. Big cars are safer than small cars.

▲ Practice 2 ▼

With a classmate, add different controlling ideas to the following topics to make a topic sentence.

1. Foreign travel _____

Foreign travel _____

2. Television _____

Television _____

3. This university _____

This university _____

As many writers know, thinking of a topic sentence is one of the hardest parts of writing, but if you have a good topic sentence, writing the rest of the paragraph becomes easier. Here are some steps that can help you make a topic sentence:

Step 1 Think of a general topic.

Ex: university

Step 2 Narrow down this idea into smaller categories.

Ex: school life, classes, club activities, friends, teachers

Step 3 Choose one of these smaller categories and narrow it down again.

Ex: club activities: tennis, friends, practice, parties

Step 4 Choose one of the smaller categories and think of your own opinion about the topic that you can support.

Ex: tennis: lots of fun

Step 5 Make a topic sentence with a controlling idea.

Ex: Joining the university tennis club can be an enjoyable experience.

What makes a good or bad topic sentence? Why are these good and bad?

- (1) **X** Can you imagine life without a cell phone?
 √ The cellular phone is one of the biggest inventions of modern technology.
- (2) **X** Mickey Mouse is a cartoon created by Walt Disney.
 √ Disney animation had a negative effect on the movie industry.
- (3) **X** I have practiced *judo* since I was 10 years old.
 √ *Judo* is a beneficial martial art that teaches the importance of effort and patience.
- (4) **X** These days many people go abroad to study English.
 √ Going abroad is the best way to study English.

▲ Practice 3 ▼

In the space provided, put a √ if you think the sentence can be a good topic sentence and put an **X** if you think it is not (and think of a reason why).

- (1) _____ This paragraph will be about the changing Japanese education system.
- (2) _____ Television has a negative influence on children's growth.
- (3) _____ Studying abroad is fun.
- (4) _____ What are the advantages of living alone?
- (5) _____ Overpackaging is a waste of natural resources.
- (6) _____ Popular winter sports among Japanese are skiing and snowboarding.
- (7) _____ I am going to write about my favorite hobby.
- (8) _____ The most stressful part of American college life is living in a dormitory.
- (9) _____ William Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.
- (10) _____ There are three ways to shorten your study time.

▲▲▲ Look at these topic sentences. Circle the topic and underline the controlling idea.

1. My sister is my best friend.
2. Snowboarding is a fabulous winter sport.
3. The last book I bought changed my life.
4. Cell phones are very convenient for three reasons.
5. Reading novels like the Harry Potter stories can help students improve their English.
6. Part-time jobs can help teach university students new skills.
7. Disneyland is a wonderful place to spend a vacation.

▲▲▲ In the following pairs, circle the letter of the better topic sentence. Then explain your choice to your partner. Say why the sentence you didn't choose is weak. Use one or more of these reasons.

- It's too broad. -- There is no main idea or opinion.
- It's too narrow. -- There is more than one main idea.

- (1) a. Many people in England and the U.S. have cats.
 b. Cats are good company for their owners.
- (2) a. Studying English diligently in high school will benefit you in job hunting.
 b. We study English in high school.
- (3) a. The food and people in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea are very interesting and
 different, and so are the buildings.
 b. Traditional Japanese food is different from Korean food.
- (4) a. My grandfather has been a great advisor to me over the years.
 b. My grandfather is 86 years old.
- (5) a. I really like sports.
 b. Baseball has taught me many valuable lessons about life.

▲▲▲ Improve these topic sentences. Circle the topic. Choose a main idea for each topic and write a topic sentence. Then share your new sentences with a partner.

1. I like the town where I live.

Idea: I like the good things about my town.

Topic sentence: Takadanobaba is a wonderful place to live.

2. I bought a new jacket.

Idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

3. I use the Internet every day.

Idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

4. I have a friend.

Idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

5. I learn English at school.

Idea: _____

Topic sentence: _____

▲▲▲ The following sentences are related to pets. Some of them talk about dogs, and some of them talk about cats. Put a **D** next to the sentence if it says something about dogs. Put a **C** next to the sentence if it says something about cats. Two sentences make good topic sentences. Put a **T** in the space after the sentence if it is one of these sentences.

1. _____ I enjoy taking him for a walk everyday because I can stay in shape that way. _____
2. _____ They are very quiet and will never disturb the neighbors with noise. _____
3. _____ He rushes to the door to greet me every night. _____
4. _____ They do not mind being left alone for many hours. _____
5. _____ My dog is a wonderful pet. _____
6. _____ You never have to give one a bath because it will clean itself daily. _____
7. _____ Cats are easy to take care of. _____
8. _____ He always likes to catch the balls I throw to him at the park. _____
9. _____ They do not need to be walked daily because they can go outside by themselves. _____
10. _____ He wags his tail and gets very excited when he sees me. _____

Put the number of the sentence in the column where it belongs, starting with the topic sentences.

CATS

(A) _____

(B) _____

(C) _____

(D) _____

(E) _____

DOGS

(A) _____

(B) _____

(C) _____

(D) _____

(E) _____

You could write two paragraphs using the sentences above...

▲▲▲ The following sentences are related to university life. Some talk about the academic side of university life, and some of them talk about the social side of university life. Put an *A* next to the sentence if it says something about the academic side of university life. Put an *S* next to the sentence if it says something about the social side of university life. Two sentences make good topic sentences. Put a *T* in the space after the sentence if it is one of these sentences.

1. _____ I also made many friends at university after I joined the tennis team. _____
2. _____ In my English class I have to read twenty pages a week. _____
3. _____ Not only have I become friends with students of my own university,
but I have also met a lot of people from different schools. _____
4. _____ University classes are a lot harder than those I took in high school. _____
5. _____ The teachers assign a lot more homework. _____
6. _____ I have some free time during the day, so I can meet my friends in the
student cafeteria for a chat. _____
7. _____ I have to write many reports. _____
8. _____ I spend a lot of time doing my homework for my English classes. _____
9. _____ Many teachers are enthusiastic about teaching their specialties. _____
10. _____ An important part of university life is making many friends. _____

Put the number of the sentence in the column where it belongs, starting with the topic sentences.

ACADEMIC LIFE

(A) _____

(B) _____

(C) _____

(D) _____

(E) _____

(F) _____

SOCIAL LIFE

(A) _____

(B) _____

(C) _____

(D) _____

You could write two paragraphs using the sentences above...