

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.

▲ Practice 3 ▼

What makes a good or bad topic sentence? Why are these good and bad? Explain each pair.

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| (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 <i>judo</i> since I was 10 years old. |
| | √ | <i>Judo</i> 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 4 ▼

On your answer sheet, 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.

▲ Practice 5 ▼

Look at these topic sentences. Identify the topic and controlling idea for each.

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.

▲ Practice 6 ▼

In the following pairs, determine which is the better topic sentence. Then explain your choice to your partner. Say why the sentence you didn't choose is weak.

- (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.

▲ Practice 7 ▼

Improve these attempts at topic sentences. Determine an idea for why the write said the first sentence. Then, based on that idea, write an acceptable topic sentence. Be sure that the topic sentence you write is related to the idea sentence. If there is no relation, then you did not do the task correctly.

Example:

- 1a. I like the town where I live.
1b. Idea: I like the good things about my town.
1c. Topic sentence: Takadanobaba is a wonderful place to live.

* * * NOTE * * *

Look at 1c. It is **OBJECTIVE**. Both 1a. and 1b. are **SUBJECTIVE**. It is much better to write a topic sentence that is objective because it can be applicable to almost everyone. If it is subjective, you are only talking about your situation. That is not very persuasive or convincing.

Any topic sentences on this sheet that have “my,” “me,” or “I” or other subjective wording may now be ignored. You should understand that they are used for practice purposes only.

Write your answers on your answer sheet.

- 2a. I bought a new jacket.
2b. Idea: _____
2c. Topic sentence: _____
- 3a. I use the Internet every day.
3b. Idea: _____
3c. Topic sentence: _____
- 4a. I have a friend.
4b. Idea: _____
4c. Topic sentence: _____
- 5a. I learn English at school.
5b. Idea: _____
5c. Topic sentence: _____

▲ Practice 8 ▼

The following sentences are related to pets. Some of them talk about dogs, and some of them talk about cats. On your answer sheet:

1. circle **D** if the sentence says something about dogs. Circle **C** if it says something about cats.
2. Write the number of the sentence that makes the topic sentence for the dog paragraph and for the cat paragraph.
3. Put the numbers of the sentences in the columns where they belong, starting with the topic 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.

▲ Practice 9 ▼

The following sentences are related to university life. Some of them talk about the academic side of university life, and some of them talk about the social side of university life. On your answer sheet:

1. circle **A** if the sentence says something about the academic side of university life. Circle **S** if it says something about the social side of university life.
2. Write the number of the sentence that makes the topic sentence for the academic paragraph and for the social paragraph.
3. Put the numbers of the sentences in the columns where they belong, starting with the topic 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) _____