

Paragraphs

The Topic Sentence

A topic sentence usually comes at the beginning of a paragraph; and it is the most general sentence in a paragraph. What does "most general" mean? It means that there are not many details in the sentence, but that the sentence introduces an overall idea that you want to discuss later in the paragraph.

For example, suppose that you want to write a paragraph about the natural landmarks of your city. The first part of your paragraph might look like this:

My city, *Wheaton*, is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the city is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep.

(Notice how the first sentence begins with "My city..." a few spaces to the right of the paragraph edge. This is an **indentation**. All paragraphs in English MUST begin with an indentation.)

Note how the first sentence, *My city, Wheaton, is famous for several amazing geographical features*, is the **most general** statement. This sentence is different from the two sentences that follow it, since the second and third sentences mention specific details about the town's geography, and are not general statements.

Here are some examples of sentences that cannot be used as topic sentences. Can you figure out why they are inappropriate?

1. My hometown is famous because it is located by Wheaton River, which is very wide, and because it is built near an unusually steep hill called Wheaton Hill.
2. There are two reasons why some people like to buy cars with automatic transmission and two reasons why others like cars with manual transmission.
3. Clouds are white.

The problem with **sentence #1** is that it contains too many details. Topic sentences are general, and details should appear later in the paragraph. A better topic sentence would be like the one mentioned above, *My hometown is famous for several amazing geographical features*.

Sentence #2 is not appropriate as a topic sentence because it mentions two topics, not just one. Paragraphs are usually about one main thing and so their topic sentences should also be about only one main thing.

The problem with **sentence #3** is that it is *toogeneral*. It is also very boring! Would you like to read a paragraph with this topic sentence? Most people would not.

We can rewrite sentences #2 and #3 in the following ways to make it better:

- There are two reasons why some people like to buy cars with automatic transmission.

OR (in a different paragraph):

- There are two reasons why some people like cars with manual transmission.
- The shapes of clouds are determined by various factors.

A good topic sentence:

- informs the reader of the subject that will be discussed in the paragraph,
- asserts the writer's point of view or attitude,
- intrigues the reader to continue reading,
- creates a sense of action, and
- is not vague, rambling, too narrow or too broad.

Every topic sentence will have a topic and a controlling idea. The controlling idea shows the direction the paragraph will take.

Topic Sentences and Controlling Ideas

Here are some examples:

- Topic Sentence: To be an effective student/ sports person requires certain characteristics.
- The topic is "To be an effective student / sports person" and the controlling idea is certain characteristics.
- Topic Sentence: There are many possible contributing factors to global warming.
- The topic is "contributing factors to global warming" and the controlling factor is "many reasons."
- Topic Sentence: Dogs make wonderful pets because they help you to live longer.

- The topic is "dogs make wonderful pets" and the controlling idea is "because they help you to live longer."
- Topic Sentence: Teen pregnancy may be prevented by improved education.
- The topic is "teen pregnancy may be prevented" and the controlling idea is "improving education."
- Topic Sentence: Cooking requires a number of different skills.
- The topic is "cooking" and the controlling idea is "many different skills."
- Topic Sentence: Graduating from high school is important for many different reasons.
- The topic is "graduating from high school" and the controlling idea is "many different reasons."

Other examples of topic ideas

- My first day of college was a disaster. First, I went to the wrong classroom for math...
- I would like to have a new pet.
- School is very important.
- My city is famous for several amazing natural features.
- An elephant is the biggest living animal on land.
- The camels are called the "ships of the desert".
- The stars are tiny points of light in the space.
- The condor is the national bird of Colombia.

Supporting Sentences

Consider again the above-mentioned, short paragraph:

My hometown, Wheaton, is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep.

The second and third sentences are called **supporting sentences**. They are called "supporting" because they "support," or explain, the idea expressed in the topic sentence. Of course, paragraphs in English often have more than two supporting ideas. The paragraph above is actually a very short paragraph. **At minimum, you should have at least five to seven sentences in your paragraph.** Here we can see our paragraph about Wheaton with a few more supporting sentences in **bold** font:

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. **The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six**

hundred years old.

In this lesson, we will talk about supporting sentences again in the section, "Details in Paragraphs," below.

The Concluding Sentence

In formal paragraphs you will sometimes see a sentence at the end of the paragraph which summarizes the information that has been presented. This is the concluding sentence. You can think of a concluding sentence as a sort of topic sentence in reverse.

You can understand concluding sentences with this example. Consider a hamburger that you can buy at a fast-food restaurant.* A hamburger has a top bun (a kind of bread), meat, cheese, lettuce, and other elements in the middle of the hamburger, and a bottom bun. Note how the top bun and the bottom bun are very similar. The top bun, in a way, is like a topic sentence, and the bottom bun is like the concluding sentence. Both buns "hold" the meat, onions, and so on. Similarly, the topic sentence and concluding sentence "hold" the supporting sentences in the paragraph. Let's see how a concluding sentence (in **bold** font) might look in our sample paragraph about Wheaton:

My city is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old. **These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place.**

Notice how the concluding sentence, *These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place*, summarizes the information in the paragraph. Notice also how the concluding sentence is similar to, but not exactly the same as, the topic sentence.

Not all academic paragraphs contain concluding sentences, especially if the paragraph is very short. However, if your paragraph is very long, it is a good idea to use a concluding sentence.

As you can see, the topic sentence provides a focus for the reader or listener. It tells what the paragraph is about. The controlling idea helps the audience understand what you are saying.

This paragraph is well written because it explains the *main topic sentence* with supporting sentences. The supporting sentences answer the questions of "WHICH or WHAT", "HOW or WHY". "What foods are nutritious?", "How are those foods nutritious?"

I like to eat healthy. Nutritious diet rich in protein, fiber and vitamins helps to keep my body and mind in good health. I eat fish, vegetables, fruits, and multi-grain breads. Fish contains good fats; vegetables contain rich sources of vitamins such as A, C, E, K, and essential anti-oxidants to protect cells from inflammation. Multi-grain breads contain B vitamins that help to balance the nervous system functions, keep the heart and arteries in good shape. I stay away from unhealthy foods: soda beverages, trans fats found in cakes, candy, snacks such as pretzels, cookies and potato chips. These foods, known as *junk food*, cause obesity, diabetes, heart diseases and colon cancer. In addition, these foods may also cause brain disorders and other serious ailments over time if consumed regularly.

This paragraph is well written because it explains the main topic sentence with supporting sentences. The supporting sentences answer the questions of HOW or WHY. "Why is charity for the poor works to the interest of society?", "How does charity for the poor work to the interest of society?"

Charity for the poor works to the interest of society. Charity helps poor people eat better, have a shelter and medicine so that they live better lives. Without charity the poor may not find basic resources to get by in life. As a consequence of being left alone with their misfortune--hungry, ill and homeless--poor people may contract diseases, die early, and engage in crimes. Most likely, they become bad role models for their children, too. These end-results harm a society.