

Topic Sentences

A **topic sentence** sums up the main idea of a paragraph.

A topic sentence essentially tells what the paragraph is about and functions as follows:

- It acts for the paragraph much like the thesis does for the whole essay. All the rest of the sentences develop the main idea for the paragraph by giving more information, offering facts, or describing it.
- It shows the relationship between that paragraph and the thesis of the essay, indicating how the information contained within that paragraph will contribute to the support of the claim for the essay.
- It keeps the writer focused on one main idea in each paragraph and helps him or her decide what details belong where.
- It acts like a road map for the reader, showing how the information in the paragraph is connected together to form one main idea.

Qualities of a Good Topic Sentence

If you follow these guidelines, the reader will have no trouble identifying your topic sentence and the main point of your paragraph.

- **Focused:** It contains only one central idea.
- **Clear and Precise:** Choose your words carefully to make sure the reader understands your main idea.
- **Concise:** Make sure it is direct and straightforward, making the point quickly.
- **Emphatic:** It should be a strong sentence that draws the reader to the point.

Placement of a Topic Sentence

- **Beginning:** The reader expects the topic sentence to be the first sentence and you will find it there in the majority of paragraphs. However, in some cases, delaying the topic sentence works better. See some reasons below.
- **Second sentence:** Sometimes you need to use a transitional sentence, such as between major sections of a paper, before you move on to the topic of that paragraph.

- **Middle:** You may need to establish some background or present some important facts before the reader will understand the point of the paragraph.
- **End:** If you need to build suspense, or if you want the reader to be coming to his own conclusion as he reads and then confirm it with a topic sentence, you will want to save the topic sentence for the end of the paragraph.
- **Beginning and End:** Sometimes in addition to beginning with a topic sentence, you may need to repeat the main idea at the end. Don't overuse this technique, though, as it could just seem repetitive. But if you have a particularly long paragraph or complex idea/argument, you may need to remind the reader of the main point before moving on.

Sample Topic Sentences

Becoming a successful business owner requires certain personality characteristics.

Police investigators face many challenges when arriving at a crime scene.

Programs about the consequences of distracted driving should be added to the high school curriculum.

The public transportation system in Springfield is the worst in the state for several reasons.

Sample Paragraphs

Topic sentence at beginning:

The star system has been the backbone of the American film industry since the mid 1910s. Stars are the creation of the public, its reigning favorites. Their influence in the fields of fashion, values, and public behavior has been enormous. "The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars," Raymond Durnat has observed. Stars confer instant consequence to any film they appear in. Their fees have staggered the public. In the 1920s, Mary Pickford and Charles Chaplin were the two highest paid employees in the world. Contemporary stars such as Julia Roberts and Tom Cruise command salaries of many millions per film, so popular are these box-office giants. Some stars had careers that spanned five decades: Bette Davis and John Wayne, to name just two. —Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, p. 251

Topic sentence at end:

In the developing world 1.1 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water, 2.6 billion do not have access to adequate sanitation services, and more than 1.6 million deaths each year are traced to waterborne diseases (mostly in children under five). All too often in developing countries, water is costly or inaccessible to the poorest in society, while the wealthy have it piped into their homes. In addition, because of the infrastructure that is used to control water, whole seas are being lost, rivers are running dry, millions of people have been displaced to make room for reservoirs, groundwater aquifers are being pumped down, and disputes over

water have raised tensions from local to international levels. Fresh water is a limited resource in many parts of the world which is certain to become even more so as the 21st century unfolds.

—Wright and Boorse, *Environmental Science*, p. 247

Topic Sentence Delayed:

In the past, exposure to liability made many doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals reluctant to stop and render aid to victims in emergency situations, such as highway accidents. Almost all states have enacted a Good Samaritan law that relieves medical professionals from liability for injury caused by their ordinary negligence in such circumstances. Good Samaritan laws protect medical professionals only from liability for their ordinary negligence, not for injuries caused by their gross negligence or reckless or intentional conduct. Most Good Samaritan laws protect licensed doctors and nurses and laypersons who have been certified in CPR. Good Samaritan statutes generally do not protect laypersons who are not trained in CPR—that is, they are liable for injuries caused by their ordinary negligence in rendering aid.

—Goldman and Cheeseman, *Paralegal Professional*, p. 459