

Weak and Strong Topic Sentences

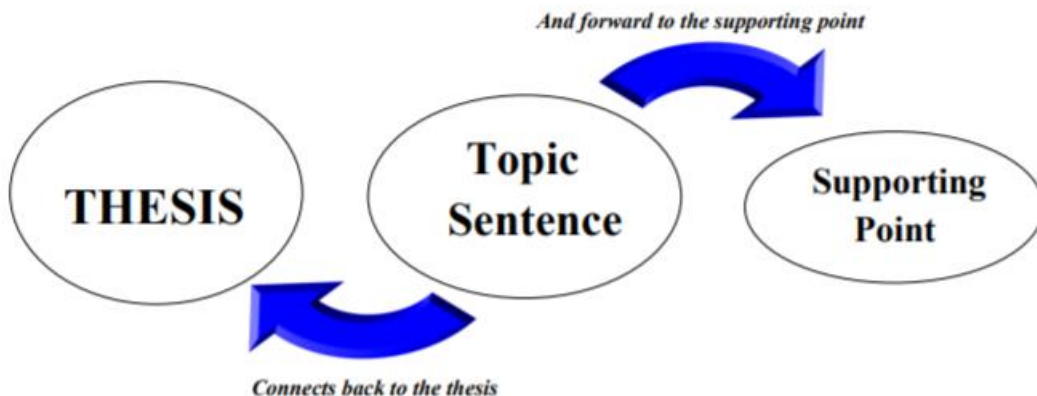
WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF A TOPIC SENTENCE?

The main point (claim) of a paragraph is often indicated in a single sentence called the topic sentence. A topic sentence is like a thesis in that you can also ask yourself: Can I disagree? You want to be able to answer YES to show that there is an arguable claim that needs to be proven. While it is true that in published writing you'll sometimes find topic sentences in the middle or even at the end of a paragraph, placing your topic sentences at the beginning of each of your paragraphs is useful because:

- **A strong topic sentence can help you, the writer,** to focus each paragraph on one main point.
- **A strong topic sentence can help your reader** to see where you are headed with your ideas in a particular paragraph; topic sentences help your reader form a mental map of your essay.

WHY USE TOPIC SENTENCES?

A strong topic sentence connects back to your overall thesis and connects forward to the specific supporting point you are making in the paragraph to prove and illustrate your thesis and this makes the paragraph focused and unified. Here is a visual:



The chart below points out some of the main differences between a topic sentence that is genuinely helpful to you and your readers, and one which is not:

A weak topic sentence:	A strong topic sentence:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't "fit" your paragraph—that is, it misleads your reader into thinking you will be writing about one thing, but the paragraph itself is about something else 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Fits" your paragraph, accurately reflecting what you've actually written
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is so general that your reader can't form a clear image about what is to come 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is specific enough that your reader can predict what you will cover in that paragraph
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simply states a fact, a piece of information that can be confirmed with observation or reference to reputable sources. Your reader is left wondering, "What is the point of this paragraph? What is the writer trying to prove with this piece of information?" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like a thesis statement, it sets up the controlling idea of the paragraph, clearly indicating the point or claim the writer will illustrate, describe, explain, analyze in the body of the paragraph
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not seem clearly related to your thesis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps your reader see how this paragraph relates to and advances/supports your thesis

SOME GUIDELINES FOR WRITING STRONG TOPIC SENTENCES:

- I. A topic sentence must predict or promise what follows, so it cannot be a question. To orient the reader, you may use a question as the first sentence, with the topic sentence as the answer to that question.

Weak: Should schools provide free computers for their students?

Strong: Schools must provide free computers for their students to prepare them for their future careers.

- II. Phrases such as “I think” or “in my opinion” may muddle or weaken topic sentences. Your writing is always your opinion, so you don’t need these phrases unless they are central to the idea that you are trying to convey.

Weak: I think that it is important for every woman to carry pepper spray.

Strong: As violent criminals take over the city streets, women must carry pepper spray to protect themselves.

- III. The topic sentence should provide clear relationships among all of its elements so that it can provide a framework for understanding the rest of the paragraph.

Weak: Historians record only dry statistics; we should read novels.

Strong: Accurate historical novels give us a deeper understanding of the past than do the dry collections of facts and statistics that pass for history texts.

- IV. A topic sentence needs to be clear and specific, so that it can predict and summarize the rest of the paragraph for the reader.

Weak: Public transit is terrible.

Strong: Incapable of providing reliable service, the San Francisco Municipal Transit System is failing its ridership.

- V. **A topic sentence must be coherent so that the reader can use it as a key to the rest of the paragraph.**

Weak: The differences of their socioeconomic classes, indeed, were not more potent than the already inherent differences among the population.

Better: Bosnia is split apart not by any economic class differences, but by racial and ethnic conflicts.

VI. **A topic sentence provides an accurate indication of what will follow in the rest of the paragraph.**

Weak example: First, we need a better way to educate students.

Explanation: The claim is vague because it does not provide enough information about what will follow, and it is too broad to be covered effectively in one paragraph or short unit of support.

Stronger example: Creating a national set of standards for math and English education will improve student learning in many states.

Explanation: The sentence replaces the vague phrase “a better way” and leads readers to expect supporting facts and examples as to why standardizing education in these subjects might improve student learning in many states.

VII. **A good topic sentence is the most general sentence in the paragraph and thus does not include supporting details.**

Weak example: Salaries should be capped in baseball for many reasons, most importantly so we don't allow the same team to win year after year.

Explanation: This topic sentence includes a supporting detail that should be included later in the paragraph to back up the main point.

Stronger example: Introducing a salary cap would improve the game of baseball for many reasons.

Explanation: This topic sentence omits the additional supporting detail so that it can be expanded upon later in the paragraph, yet the sentence still makes a claim about salary caps – improvement of the game.

VIII. **A good topic sentence is clear and easy to follow.**

Weak example: In general, writing an essay, thesis, or other academic or nonacademic document is considerably easier and of much higher quality if you first construct an outline, of which there are many different types.

Explanation: The confusing sentence structure and unnecessary vocabulary bury the main idea, making it difficult for the reader to follow the topic sentence.

Stronger example: Most forms of writing can be improved by first creating an outline.

Explanation: This topic sentence cuts out unnecessary verbiage and simplifies the previous statement, making it easier for the reader to follow. The writer can include examples of what kinds of writing can benefit from outlining in the supporting sentences.