

Topic Sentences

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.
- 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.
- A strong topic sentence focuses each paragraph around one main point.
- In published writing you'll sometimes find topic sentences in the middle or even at the end of a paragraph, but placing your topic sentences at the beginning of each of your paragraphs is useful
- A strong topic sentence helps your reader to see where you are headed with your ideas in a particular paragraph; topics sentences help your reader form a mental map of your essay.
- A strong topic sentence often contains transitional words and phrases that logically move the reader from one paragraph to the next.

In expository prose—writing that informs, explains or analyzes—the main point (claim) of a paragraph is often indicated in a single sentence called the topic sentence. 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 around one main point.
- **A strong topic sentence can help your reader** to see where you are headed with your ideas in a particular paragraph; topics sentences help your reader form a mental map of your essay.

What differentiates a strong topic sentence from a weak one?

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:

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 assist them in their studies and prepare them for their future careers.

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.

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.

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, comfortable service, the San Francisco Municipal Transit System is failing its ridership.

PRACTICE—TOPIC SENTENCE OR SUPPORTING CLAIM?:

Read the sentences below, and determine which are **points/claims** that would make good topic sentences and which are **facts** that would work better as supporting information:

Sample Sentence	This would work better as...
1. Preserving local food traditions is an important component of maintaining cultural diversity even as world food production becomes more industrialized and standardized.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.
2. The “locavores” are a San Francisco-based group that challenges people to try and eat food grown and produced within a 100-mile radius of their homes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.
3. Eating local, seasonal produce is better not only for the environment, but also for your taste buds.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.
4. Alice Walker’s restaurant Chez Panisse first opened in Berkeley, California in 1971.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.
5. Alice Waters writes that “food is the one central thing about human experience which can open up both our senses and our consciences to our place in the world.”	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.
6. Joining a CSA(Community Supported Agriculture) program is an easy, cost-effective way to enjoy seasonal produce from local farms.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.
7. The popularity of organic food is a good indication of the significant changes that are taking place in the American diet.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.

8. Former weeds now considered delicacies include dandelions, ramps (wild leeks), and fiddlehead ferns.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.
9. The CSA that I belong to, Eatwell Farms, is located in Winters, CA and is renowned for their heirloom tomatoes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Topic Sentence <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Info.

PRACTICE—CHOOSING THE BEST TOPIC SENTENCE

The topic sentence of the paragraphs below has been removed. Read them carefully and then choose the best topic sentence among the four choices below. Be prepared to explain your choice.

Paragraph 1:

This belief is especially common among weight lifters who often consume large quantities of high protein foods and dietary supplements, thinking it will improve their athletic performance. Like weightlifters, football players consume too much protein, expecting it to produce additional muscle energy. Although it is true that muscles contain more protein than other tissues, there is no evidence that a high protein diet actually constructs more muscle tissue than a normal diet. Nutritionists point out that muscle cells grow not from excess protein but from exercise: when a muscle is used, it pulls in protein for its consumption. This is how a muscle grows and strengthens. If athletes want to increase their muscle mass, then they must exercise in addition to following a well-balanced, normal diet.

1. Many athletes have false ideas regarding proper nutrition.
2. My brother, a weightlifter, is an example of someone who consumes a lot of protein because he thinks it will make him bulky.
3. Many athletes falsely believe that protein improves athletic performance by increasing muscle mass.
4. The public is often confused by the seemingly conflicting advice nutritionists give us about our health.

Paragraph 2:

Lately parents and critics across the country have been making a bigger fuss about the number and content of commercials aimed at children, and it seems as though the media has become a scapegoat for adults who have set questionable health guidelines for their children. It is both logical and factual to state that parents are the number one authority for most everything in their child's life, which of course includes food choices. Recent studies from the Institute of Medicine found that the easiest and most reliable measure of understanding a child's health and diet is to look at the health and diet of the parents. It is very likely that a child's obesity did not come from the media, but from behaviors within the family. Even if advertisements became restricted or more limited, if parents do not enforce healthy diets or teach nutrition, the children will have learned nothing. Timothy J. Muris of *The Wall Street Journal* realizes that without addressing the issues of parental control, the ban on child food advertisements are "appealing on the surface, but ultimately useless."

1. Despite increasing rates of childhood obesity, we should not ban junk food ads aimed at children.
2. According to Andrew Martin of the *Chicago Tribune*, "... the rates of obesity among 6 to 11-year-olds more than tripling during the last three decades, doubling for children ages 2 to 5 and increasing even more for adolescents 12 to 19 years old."
3. The staggering figures regarding childhood obesity alone are alarming enough to generate a stir.
4. Although junk food advertisements are being blamed for children's poor dietary habits, regulating these ads would not address the real source of the problem: lack of parental guidance.

PRACTICE—CREATING YOUR OWN TOPIC SENTENCE:

Now try creating your own topic sentences for the following paragraphs:

1)

Famous inventor Thomas Edison, for instance, did so poorly in his first years of school that his teachers warned his parents that he'd never be a success at anything. Similarly, Henry Ford, the father of the auto industry, had trouble in school with both reading and writing. But perhaps the best example is Albert Einstein, whose parents and teachers suspected that he was retarded because he responded to questions so slowly and in a stuttering voice. Einstein's high school record was poor in everything but math, and he failed his college entrance exams the first time. Even out of school the man had trouble holding a job-until he announced the theory of relativity.

2) Eating disorders afflict as many as five to ten million women and one million men in the Unites States. But why?

Young girls not only play with Barbie dolls that display impossible, even comical, proportions, but they are also bombarded with images of supermodels. These images leave an indelible mental imprint of what society believes a female body should look like. Carri Kirby, a University of Nebraska mental health counselor, adds

that there is a halo effect to body image as well: “We immediately identify physical attractiveness to mean success and happiness.”

3) From Deborah Blum’s “What’s the Difference between Boys and Girls?”

Boys tend to gather in large, competitive groups. They play games that have clear winners and losers and bluster through them, boasting about their skill. Girls, early on, gather in small groups, playing theatrical games that don’t feature hierarchy or winners. One study of children aged three to four found they were already resolving conflict in separate ways—boys resorting to threats, girls negotiating verbally and often reaching a compromise.

Topic Sentences Answer Key

PRACTICE—TOPIC SENTENCE OR SUPPORTING CLAIM?:

Sample Sentence	This would work better as...
1	Topic Sentence
2	Supporting Info.
3	Topic Sentence
4	Supporting Info.
5	Supporting Info.
6	Topic Sentence
7	Topic Sentence
8	Supporting Info.
9	Supporting Info.

PRACTICE—CHOOSING THE BEST TOPIC SENTENCE:

Paragraph 1: Many athletes falsely believe that protein improves athletic performance by increasing muscle mass (choice #3).

Paragraph 2: Although junk food advertisements are being blamed for children’s poor dietary habits, regulating these ads would not address the real source of the problem: lack of parental guidance (choice #4).

PRACTICE—CREATING YOUR OWN TOPIC SENTENCE:

Answers will vary