

Shaping Paragraphs

Topic Sentences

A topic sentence has two purposes beyond identifying the main idea of the paragraph. It must present a statement that introduces all of the ideas contained within the paragraph, and the topic it introduces must be narrow enough to be completely developed in the paragraph. If the topic is too broad, you won't be able to discuss it completely in one paragraph. If it is too narrow, you will run out of ideas before you have a complete paragraph written.

The topic sentence must also grab the reader's attention. Like a headline in the newspaper, a topic sentence announces the main idea using language that will make the reader want to continue reading. This is also known as a "hook."

Topic Sentence as the First Sentence

The most common place to put the topic sentence is at the beginning of the paragraph. This gives the reader the clearest idea of what is going to be discussed in the paragraph.

The topic sentence can go elsewhere in the paragraph, but if it is the first sentence, the reader will be prepared for what is to come.

Example

Computer programmers perform two main tasks when programming a computer. First, they must break down the instructions into clear, step-by-step tasks. Second, they must give directions in a computer-based language such as DOS. When these two tasks are completed properly, the computer will be able to do what the programmer has asked.

The topic sentence in this example is "Computer programmers perform two main tasks when programming a computer." This is the main idea of the paragraph, and it is explained by the supporting sentences.

Topic Sentence in the Middle

While putting the topic sentence at the beginning of the sentence is the clearest way to write, it is not the only option. It can be placed in the middle of the paragraph, also.

Example

Who is the greatest cyclist of all time? Many people would choose Lance Armstrong. Lance Armstrong overcame cancer to win the grueling Tour de France multiple times. Diagnosed with testicular cancer that had spread to his lungs and brain, Lance underwent surgery and chemo therapy. He lost a significant amount of weight during his illness and was dropped by his cycling team. In a little over three years, however, he returned victorious to the Tour de France, becoming only the second American rider to win the coveted yellow jersey signifying the overall best time in the race.

In this example, the main idea of the paragraph is revealed in the third sentence, “Lance Armstrong overcame cancer to win the grueling Tour de France multiple times.”

Topic Sentence at the End of the Paragraph

The topic sentence can be placed at the end of the paragraph. When it is at the end, it can effectively conclude the ideas that have led up to it.

Example

It is not a life of dinner parties and dancing. It is not an occupation that most practitioners find fun and light and easy. Writing is a solitary pursuit that most writers find repetitive and dull and the daily work a drudgery.

The topic of this short paragraph is, “Writing is a solitary pursuit that most writers find repetitive and dull and the daily work a drudgery.” Placing it at the end of the sentence allows the reader to wonder what the paragraph is about and gives the topic sentence more impact.

In some cases, the topic sentence may be implied. This means that you can’t locate it in a particular sentence, but the main idea is clearly developed enough in the paragraph that it is understood. Most often, this occurs in narrative writing, in which certain paragraphs may be devoted to describing a scene or explaining the plot of a story.

Exercise 1

Circle the letter of the topic sentence in each of the following paragraphs.

1. **a.** He won Rookie of the year in 1947. **b.** He broke the color barrier in professional baseball. **c.** He excelled despite encountering racist players, managers, and fans and receiving death threats. **d.** Jackie Robinson single-handedly brought equality and civil rights to professional sports.

2. **a.** There are two primary approaches to learning a foreign language. **b.** First, there is the textbook approach of understanding the grammar and linguistics while studying vocabulary. **c.** Second, there is immersion in a foreign language, either in a school or in a foreign country where the language is spoken. **d.** Ideally, learning a foreign language involves a combination of both methods. **3. a.** Did I come to Venice to see the beautiful St. Mark's Basilica? **b.** Am I here to walk across the elegant white stone Bridge of Sighs? **c.** The main reason I am in Venice is to learn to pilot a gondola. **d.** A gondola is the traditional boat taxi of Venice's canals. **e.** It has a low hull and a steel prow and is rowed by a gondolier who wears an old-fashioned striped shirt and steers with a long oar.

Topic Sentences in Persuasive Writing

The topic sentence often does not appear at the beginning of a sentence if the piece of writing is persuasive. Instead, the first sentence would be some kind of a lead sentence or a hook. It is always a good idea to capture your reader's attention as quickly as you can, but it is even more important to engage it immediately in a persuasive piece. Here are three recommended types of lead sentences.

Startling Statistic

If you can find a statistic about your topic that will make your readers interested right away, then you have a good lead. It is ineffective if you use a statistic that does not provoke them to think.

Example

In the roaring twenties, 30% of the money in the United States was controlled by 5% of the richest families.

Quote

For a persuasive piece about literature, or if you took good notes at a speech, for example, you can take a quote from your source and use it as your lead.

Example

The governor, in his speech about water rights, called the attempts to limit consumption “a waste of the taxpayers’ time and effort.”

Question

A rhetorical question is a question that does not necessarily need an answer, and is used by writers or speakers to persuade their audience to agree with an argument, or to raise a provocative issue. The answer to such a question is usually obvious and does not need to be stated, but you may choose to provide an answer at a later point in your paper. A question can be an effective way to start a paragraph, especially if it catches the reader’s attention.

Example

Did the invention of barbed wire really change the pace of the westward movement?

If you are writing an academic paper, it is usually not acceptable to use the second person “you,” as in “Have you ever wondered how many stars there are in the night sky?”

Supporting Sentences

Since the topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph, the supporting sentences must give enough information to develop that main idea clearly. A good, solid paragraph has at least two supporting details. A specific topic sentence serves to direct both the writer and the reader toward specific supporting details.

Example

There are different stances used when hitting a baseball (topic sentence). One stance involves keeping weight on the back foot and striding into the pitch. This swing is generally designed for power (supporting sentences developing the first idea). Another swing is called the “weight shift swing.” Both of the batter’s feet remain on the ground and the batter’s weight shifts as the bat comes through the strike zone. This swing is designed for contact hitters, as it tends to keep the bat level and allows the batter to hit to any field more easily (**supporting sentences developing the second idea**).

Some paragraphs are best developed using details from the five senses: taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell. These sensory details can support a topic sentence.

Example

The police arrived at the home of the alleged dog abuser. It smelled bad and the kennels were cold and dirty. The dogs were neglected.

Edited Example

The police arrived at the home of the alleged dog abuser and found the smell overwhelming. The dogs had not been let out of their kennels for days, and they had no clean place to lie down and no food or water. The generator used to heat the kennels emitted a piercing whine but no heat. Clearly, this was a case of animal neglect.

Facts, statistics, and specific examples can also be used to develop your paragraphs. When you revise, look for paragraphs that seem weak and lack solid evidence. You may have to do some more research to find information, but your paragraphs need to have enough information to deliver on their promise of supporting the topic sentence. An anecdote or incident can tell a lot about a subject as well.

An anecdote is a short story—often humorous about an attention-grabbing event. Anecdotes can be very effective in making the reader visualize and identify with your main idea.

Paragraph Organization

Once you have all your information for a paragraph, you must figure out how to organize it in a way that makes sense. There are several ways to organize information, such as *chronological order*, *order of importance*, *comparison/contrast*, *spatial order*, and *order of familiarity*.

Chronological Order

Chronos means time. Dividing the word *chronological* into two parts—*chrono* and *logical*—is a good way to remember that it means “logical time” order. Chronological order describes events in the order in which they took place. This is particularly effective for explaining a process. Perhaps you have to write an office memo explaining how the mail will be collected and delivered. Or maybe someone has borrowed your tent and needs directions from you for assembly. Step-by-step instruction is chronological order. Plot

summaries for literature usually use chronological order. Used appropriately, chronological order adds to clarity.

Exercise 2

Rewrite the following sentences in the correct chronological order on the lines provided.

4. Then you should find ways to speak to the students about the issues.
5. The results will be posted on the bulletin board in the main hall.
6. Finally, the students vote in the cafeteria.
7. The first step is to put up posters advertising your campaign for student body president.
8. The day before the election, you will speak at an assembly in the auditorium.

If your paragraph gives information that makes sense in a chronological order, make sure it appears that way.

Order of Importance

One idea can have many aspects. If your topic sentence introduces an idea that can be supported by several details, you may want to present the supporting details in order of importance.

Example

Part-time jobs can be perfect for a student if they do not interfere with school. Most importantly, the employer must follow the state and federal regulations for employing minors. An employer should also offer flexibility with scheduling to accommodate major projects or extra-curricular activities for school. Some employers even offer incentive programs designed to encourage students to keep up their grades.

Compare and Contrast

To *compare* means to discuss the similarities between two or more things and to *contrast* means to discuss the differences between things. If your piece looks at two topics and the ways in which they are alike, you should use the comparison method of organizing your paragraph. If it examines differences, use the contrast method. If it looks at both similarities and

differences, then you should consider organizing your paper so that you discuss similarities in one paragraph or group of paragraphs and differences in another. That way, the comparison is very clear for your reader.

Example

The San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington State and Cape Cod in Massachusetts are alike in many ways, but they are also different. Both areas are in coastal climates and have similar weather patterns. Both offer a similar, low-key lifestyle to the residents. Both are surrounded by natural beauty. The fish that provide a living to the local fishing population, however, differ considerably. The other wildlife, like birds and rodents, are also different. Finally, Cape Cod enjoys beautiful sunrises, while the sun sets over the ocean in the San Juan Islands, making the evening the most colorful time of the day.

Spatial Order

Spatial order means order in space. For example, if you wanted to describe to someone where your seats are for the concert, you might start with a seat number, then a row, then the section. You might have to expand further out into space by telling them what side of the stage you will sit on and how far back your seat is. This is spatial order.

Example

From the observation deck of the Empire State Building, one can see Central Park to the north. To the south are lower Manhattan, SoHo, and the financial district. One can see the the Statue of Liberty and the beautiful New York Harbor.

Order of Familiarity

If you are writing about a well-known topic, you might choose to organize your information into the order of familiarity. Start with the most commonly known information and move to information your reader may not know, or write it the other way around. Whether you go from the familiar to the unknown or the unknown to the familiar, you are organizing your information in order of importance.

Example

The Human Genome Project's goal is to define all human genes. Scientists have already described, in detail, the genes of simple species such as yeast,

bacteria, roundworms, and fruit flies. Recently, they began to unlock the genomes of the cow, rat, and dog. What many people do not know is that scientists have been decoding the genes of the common house cat and finding similarities to human genes. The study shows that humans are more closely related to cats than to any other animal group studied so far except primates.

Different types of writing call for different organizational methods. Expository, persuasive, narrative, and descriptive writing all follow different patterns, and the way you organize each paragraph in each type of writing affects how the piece works as a whole. You must look at the purpose of your piece to determine the best way to organize it. Often, this kind of organization occurs during revision.

Expository Writing

If your paragraph explains something or presents information, it is an expository paragraph. If it explains a process, it usually does so in chronological order. Transitional words such as *first*, *next*, and *finally* make the order clear. Paragraphs that define are also expository paragraphs. In this type of paragraph, your topic sentence would place the topic in a general category and then provide supporting details that describe specific characteristics to the reader. In this way, you narrow down your topic and clarify the way the topic differs from other topics.

Paragraphs that give reasons are also expository paragraphs. This kind of paragraph supports the main idea with facts. It may explain that something is true because of certain facts, or it may explain that an action or opinion is right because the facts support it. The most common way to organize this type of paragraph is using the order of importance method.

Persuasive Writing

Persuasive writing is expository because it gives facts, but it also presents an opinion. There are many ways to organize persuasive writing. One common way is to present possible arguments against your opinion and show why these arguments are weak; then give the arguments in your favor. Another way is to state an opinion and then give evidence to support it. A persuasive technique gives your supporting information in order of importance, with the last fact or statistic being the strongest or most effective reason.

Narrative Writing

Narrative writing tells a story. The structure and methods for organizing narrative writing are different from expository writing because narrative writing has a different purpose. Simple narratives describe the events that happened, usually in chronological order. Complex narratives focus on the resolution of a conflict and usually have a theme, characters, setting, and other elements of a short story.

Descriptive Writing

Using words to create a picture is called descriptive writing, which uses sensory details to establish a mood and point of view. Descriptive paragraphs often contain many adjectives to describe the subject at hand clearly. Descriptive writing can stand alone as a descriptive piece, or it can be included as part of a narrative. Regardless, it should be organized into a well-shaped paragraph.

Transitional Concluding Sentences

Well-shaped paragraphs have the same components as a well-shaped composition: a beginning, middle, and end. Once you have a topic sentence and some supporting sentences, it is time to end the paragraph. Concluding sentences are a form of transition. Moving smoothly from one paragraph to the other requires transitions. Transitional concluding sentences sum up what has come before, and can be used in any paragraph.

Because paragraphs themselves mirror the structure of an essay, the longer the paragraph, the more likely it will need some kind of summing up. The concluding sentence might restate an idea expressed in the paragraph's topic sentence, summarize the main points, or add a comment to the ideas expressed in the paragraph. When revising, it is up to you to decide if a paragraph needs a concluding sentence, but a general rule would be to use them only with paragraphs that have many supporting details.

Always avoid weak concluding sentences like, "Now I have given four reasons why Italian food is better than Mexican food." The idea of a concluding sentence is not to tell what you just wrote, but to wrap up the subject. In general, you should avoid talking directly to the reader in academic essays because it is considered by many to be too familiar.

In business writing, it depends on your audience, but it is better to be overly formal than overly familiar at any time.