

Topic Sentences*

Every paragraph should include a topic sentence that identifies the main idea of the paragraph. A **topic sentence** (also known as a focus sentence) encapsulates or organizes an entire paragraph. Although topic sentences may appear anywhere in a paragraph, in academic essays they often appear at the beginning.

It might be helpful to think of a topic sentence as working in two directions simultaneously. It relates the paragraph to the essay's thesis, and thereby acts as a signpost for the argument of the paper as a whole, but it also defines the scope of the paragraph itself.

When drafting a topic sentence, remember these guidelines:

- The topic sentence should identify the main idea and point of the paragraph. To create an appropriate topic sentence, read the paragraph and think about its main idea and purpose.
- The supporting details in the paragraph (the sentences other than the topic sentence) will develop or explain the topic sentence. Read all the supporting details in the paragraph and think about the ideas they discuss.
- The topic sentence should not be too general or too specific. When considering the options, look for a topic sentence that is general enough to show the paragraph's main idea instead of just one of its details. The answer should be specific enough that the reader understands the main idea of the paragraph.

Sample Paragraph

From "Propaganda Techniques in Today's Advertising" by Ann McClintock

In the bandwagon technique, advertisers pressure, "Everyone is doing it. Why don't you?" This kind of propaganda often succeeds because many people have a deep desire not to be different. Political ads tell us to vote for the "winning candidate." Advertisers know we tend to feel comfortable doing what others do; we want to be on the winning team. Or ads show a series of people proclaiming, "I'm voting for the Senator. I don't know why anyone wouldn't." Again, the audience feels under pressure to conform.

Here, the topic sentence is the first sentence, and it names the technique to be discussed as well as explaining the advertisers' intention behind the technique. The writer then develops the paragraph by further defining the bandwagon technique with examples and insight on why the technique works. The paragraph concludes with a sentence that answers the question asked in the topic sentence.

* Adapted from <http://www.writingcentre.uottawa.ca/hypergrammar/partopic.html> and http://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/index.php?category_id=2&sub_category_id=1&article_id=29