**Guidelines: Topic Sentence**

Writing effective topic sentences, however, involves more than merely stating the subject of the paragraph. **A good topic sentence is specific and well-focused,** guiding the entire paragraph. A good topic sentence:

**Has new information**. It is not a fact that everyone already knows to be true (for example, **A dictionary has meanings for words.**).

**Is specific**. If the topic is too general (for example, **I like camping.**), the reader will not know what to expect in the paragraph.

**Is general enough to invite exploration of the topic**. If the topic sentence is too specific (for example, **Webster's New World Dictionary has more than 40,000 words.**), there will be nothing else to say on the subject.

**Is strong**. Starting a topic sentence with **there is/are** (as in **There are several ways to cook rice.**) is a weak opener.

**Is stated in positive language**. Negative language (for example, **You might hate to do it, but you should keep your room clean.**) should not be part of the topic sentence.

**Is not an announcement**. A topic sentence should draw the reader into the paragraph. Announcements (like **This paragraph will discuss how to build a bird house.**) hold little attraction for readers. **\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**The Controlling Idea**

Even if all of the above conditions for a topic sentence are met, an effective topic sentence needs one additional element, the "**controlling idea**." The controlling idea is **the point** of the paragraph. It **guides** the ideas that provide support for the paragraph and limits the scope of the paragraph. Here is an example of a topic sentence with a controlling idea that guides the support for the paragraph:

Running provides many healthful benefits.

The topic of this topic sentence is **running**. The controlling idea is **healthful benefits**. That is, the reader knows from this sentence that the paragraph is generally about running. And the reader also knows that the point of the paragraph will be to enumerate the healthful benefits of running. **Limiting the scope of the paragraph through the controlling idea may happen in one of two ways.**

1. The controlling idea **may reveal the writer's opinion**, point of view, or attitude toward the subject of the paragraph, which automatically will set parameters for discussion of the topic. OR…

2. The controlling idea itself **may provide specific limitation**. In either case, this limited scope, then, serves to unify the paragraph, since any discussion must be within the parameters of the controlling idea.

Here is an example of a topic sentence with a controlling idea that states the writer's opinion-the first way to limit the scope of the paragraph:

The basics of using an digital camera can be mastered with considerable practice.

The topic of this sentence is **a digital camera**. The controlling idea is **mastered with considerable practice**. From this single sentence the reader knows that the topic of the paragraph is the digital camera and that the paragraph will discuss mastering the basics of using this camera. Additionally, the reader knows that such mastery comes with practice, the **writer's opinion or perspective.**

Here is an example of a topic sentence with a controlling idea that specifically sets limitations for the scope of the paragraph.

When writing a laboratory report, you must complete four sections.

The topic of this sentence is a **laboratory report**. In this sentence, the controlling idea specifically states the limitation-**four sections**. Thus, the reader can predict that the writer will list and describe the four sections in order.

**Tips for writing a Topic Sentence**

1. **Use new information**

Create a topic sentence that gives readers something interesting to think about instead of an obvious statement (something everybody knows). When you create a topic sentence, **present the information in a new way that is not just a fact statement.**

**Obvious statement**: Performance art has become more popular in the past 30 years.

**Interesting Statement**: Performance art has become a more radical expression of theatre in the past 30 years.

**2. Make your topic sentence complex or compound**

Compound and complex sentences make topic sentences sound stronger and more high-level. Create a compound sentence with two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction and a comma. Compose a complex sentence with a subordinate clause and an independent clause joined by a comma and a subordinating conjunction.

**Compound Sentence**: The Reformation was a time of great theatrical production, but it was also characterised by double-standards in real life.

**Complex Sentence**: When students start studying for exams, they fall into unhealthy habits that can negatively influence their performance.

1. **Try transition words**

Words like "although," "another" and "even though" act as transitions to begin a new paragraph. You can use these in a topic sentence that starts a support paragraph or possibly in your opening statement topic sentence.

**Example:**

Even though reduced tickets are available for matinees, few theatre-goers take advantage of them.

**USEFUL TIP:** The topic sentence is general and controls the paragraph. Think about the type of questions the reader will develop in their minds as they read the topic sentence.

**Remember**: The topic sentence doesn’t always have to be the first sentence in a paragraph. You can start with an interesting fact to ‘hook’ the reader.

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| **Exercise:** Select the most appropriate **topic sentence** for each of the paragraphs from the choices provided.  A. Thousands of new people are born on our planet every day. The number of inhabitants in the world has already reached over six billion. If the present growth rate remains unchecked, the world may soon face wide-spread starvation, poverty, and serious health problems. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (topic sentence). | | |
|  |  |  | Therefore, it is predicted that the world will face serious health problems in the near future. |
|  |  |  | The rapid growth of the world's human population is the most important problem the world needs to address. |
|  |  |  | One of the burning issues is the population explosion in third world countries. |
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| B. | \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (topic sentence). Arriving in the land below the Rio Grande River, the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez was surprised to see the local inhabitants raising crops that included avocados, corn, garlic and nuts. Onions, tomatoes, chilli peppers and pumpkins were also grown in the rich soil. Irrigation systems were employed in some of the drier regions. The Aztec farmers also were skilful in creating terraced gardens to make the most of the rainfall and to minimise soil erosion. Evidence shows that they employed crop rotation as well as natural fertilisers to enhance the production of their farm products. | | |
|  |  |  | The Aztecs of Mexico were a nation of accomplished farmers. |
|  |  |  | Hernando Cortez discovered farming in Mexico. |
|  |  |  | Mexico is blessed with rich farmland and an abundance of food products. |
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