Topic Sentences

Topic sentences are a crucial part of any well-developed paragraph. They appear at the start of a body paragraph to inform the reader about the main point of that paragraph and give them an idea about what to expect next. Topic sentences might look like the following examples.

> "Forensic examiners are aware of and trained to avoid physical contamination in an effort to protect the integrity of the evidence. However, 'psychological contamination' has not received similar attention and is prevalent throughout the criminal justice system." ~ Kassin, Saul M. et al., "The forensic confirmation bias: Problems, perspectives, and proposed solutions," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition,* 2013.
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> "Our 20-year analysis of snakebites in California showed a well-correlated inverse relationship between snakebite incidence and severe drought phases, with a predictable increase of snakebites following precipitation." ~ Phillips, Caleb et al., "Snakebites and climate change in California, 1997-2017." *Clinical Toxicology,* 2019.

Why are topic sentences important?

Let's start with two examples of topic sentences and discuss how they forecast the main point of a paragraph.

> "**Forensic examiners are aware of and trained to avoid physical contamination in an effort to protect the integrity of the evidence. However, 'psychological contamination' has not received similar attention and is prevalent throughout the criminal justice system.** The sources of psychological contamination are numerous (e.g., knowing the context of the crime, police pressure to influence a forensic evaluation, information about a prior confession or eyewitness identification). Biasing context can take on other subtle forms as well. For example, forensic examiners work with a variety of technologies—including computerized systems that suggest a list of candidates for the human examiner to consider. In a recent study, Dror, Wertheim, Fraser-Mackenzie, and Walajtys (2012) independently varied the order of the candidates on the list and found that examiners spent less time on the same candidate when it was placed further down the list. Examining 55,200 forensic decisions, these investigators also found that examiners are more likely to make false positive errors on candidates on the top of the list and false negative errors on those near the bottom. This result illustrates how meta-data provided by computerized systems can also bias forensic examiners." ~ Kassin, Saul M. et al., "The forensic confirmation bias: Problems, perspectives, and proposed solutions," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition,* 2013.

The topic sentence is this case is actually two sentences (bold). A reader will understand from these two sentences that the paragraph will focus on what 'psychological contamination' is,

where it is prevalent, and why it has not been as widely studied. The authors define the keywords and provide examples to illustrate the idea introduced and set up in the topic sentences. The paragraph is tied together by the topic sentences and establishes a clear connection between its parts. Without the topic sentences, there is no introduction to the main idea of the paragraph.

> **"Our 20-year analysis of snakebites in California showed a well-correlated inverse relationship between snakebite incidence and severe drought phases, with a predictable increase of snakebites following precipitation.** This is in contrast to popular press reports of increased snakebites with drought conditions [29,30], and Central American research that reported increased incidence of snakebit during high temperatures of El Nine Souther Oscillation (ELSO) [9]. This study also analyzed the effect of altitude and precipitation on the periodicity of regional snakebites, and found that while climate changes had a predictable effect on incidence, snakebites clustered in regions with the highest precipitation [9]. These low altitude humid regions with the hottest temperatures also saw heavier precipitation [9], which is opposite the arid drought conditions of California…" ~ Phillips, Caleb et al., "Snakebites and climate change in California, 1997-2017." *Clinical Toxicology,* 2019.

In this example, the topic sentence forecasts that the paragraph will discuss the relationship between precipitation rates and snakebites. The paragraph contrasts the authors' research with other studies in the field and explains why those studies cannot be extrapolated to the authors' paper. Without this topic sentence, the paragraph would consist of interesting facts about the influence of the weather on snakebites, but it would lack a clear central idea. The topic sentence allows the authors to tie together the paragraph.

Topic sentences make the ideas and claims of each paragraph in a paper easy to identify and understand. They also demonstrate the relationship between each paragraph and the thesis. In other words, the topic sentence for each paragraph reveals and connects back to an aspect of the thesis statement.

Without topic sentences, the paragraphs in an essay will not feel connected to the thesis or even one another. Each one will seem to exist independently without a clear flow to tie them together. Even the sentences inside a paragraph will feel disjointed, too. Therefore, we can see how topic sentences are crucial for establishing the structure of a paper and its ideas. Let's look at another example below:

> Dogs, depending on the breed, can offer the greatest amount of love, affection, and desire-for-playtime. Cats, despite the prevalence of aloof behavior in many of their kind, can be deeply affectionate and amusing when playing with rubber bands or other pieces of random "junk" one may have taken for granted. Birds can provide sweet songs or funny "talk back" moments if they are of a more sophisticated intelligence. Even reptiles, fish, or amphibians can be entertaining or calming to watch.

This paragraph about pets and animal companionship offers interesting ideas, but it reads like a list without a strong topic sentence or context. A reader will be able to draw connections between the sentences or the rest of the paper, but they will likely have to read through the whole paragraph at least once to fully link all the ideas together. In American academic writing, it is best to avoid ambiguous situations where the reader has to build all the connections. Instead, let's see what happens when the author adds a pair of clear topic sentences:

> **Pets, whether furry, scaly, or feathery, offer valuable companionship and entertainment to individuals who otherwise might experience acute loneliness. Coming home to an empty apartment can be a depressing situation for many people; however, coming home to an animal, no matter how big or small, can be more rewarding.** Dogs, depending on the breed, can offer the greatest amount of love, affection, and desire-for-playtime. Cats, despite the prevalence of aloof behavior in many of their kind, can be deeply affectionate and amusing when playing with rubber bands or other pieces of random 'junk' one may have taken for granted. Birds can provide sweet songs or funny "talk back" moments if they are of a more sophisticated intelligence. Even reptiles, fish, or amphibians can be entertaining or calming to watch.

The topic sentences, indicated in bold, provide important context. We understand that the paragraph will be examining pets through an angle of relieving loneliness and depression. Instead of needing to read through the full paragraph before developing the connections between ideas and the greater paper, the reader is focused on the main point from the start.

What are some best practices for topic sentences?

There are a few critical strategies that should be kept in mind when writing topic sentences.

- **Stick to one idea:** Including just one main idea will keep the topic sentence focused and direct for the reader. Having one idea per paragraph is an important guideline for writing clear body paragraphs.
- **Link it to the paragraph's content:** By connecting the topic sentence to its paragraph, the main idea stands out more strongly. You can use keywords or rephrase critical ideas in a topic sentence so that it reflects the content that appears later.
- **Place it at the beginning:** A topic sentence informs readers about what to expect, so placing it at the beginning of a paragraph fulfills this function most effectively.
- **Use more than one sentence when necessary:** There's no need to shove everything into just one sentence if the main idea of the paragraph is complex. Instead, see if you can use two sentences to illustrate the topic.

Activity 1: Writing Topic Sentences

For the paragraphs below, write topic sentences that best fit the information.

"For example, in 2020, the Turtle Survival Alliance saw more than a two-thirds reduction in funding support from zoos and aquariums, which impacted the management of some of its international tortoise rescue centers (Hudson et al. 2020). Similarly, due to both budgetary and staffing constraints, some zoos have also found it difficult to allocate staffing and other logistical support to assist with local, domestic and international research and conservation projects. For some projects, inconsistent staff participation has led to gaps in data collection that may impact the results of studies and lead to delays in publication." ~ Mendyk, Robert W., "Zoo Herpetology in an Era of Uncertainty," *Herpetological Review*, 2021.

"Data are currently not available for large areas of the southern Atlantic Ocean, southern Indian Ocean and much of the Pacific Ocean. There are also very few records for subpolar and polar waters (which may be because atlantids do not live in these areas). Most species have geographically restricted distributions, so it is important that all areas of the ocean are sampled. Improved sampling techniques and species identification will also reveal more accurate distributions." ~ Wall-Palmer, Deborah et al., "A review of the ecology, palaeontology and distribution of atlantid heteropods (Caenogastropoda: Pterotracheoidea: Atlantidae)," *Journal of Molluscan Studies*, 2016.

Sample Answer Key (Answers will vary.)

1. Zoos and aquariums have been financially impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which in turn has caused many conservation programs to receive less funding, as well as experience reduction in staffing and administrative support to conduct their projects.

2. More information needs to be gathered through systematic sampling to determine the full distribution and range of atlantid populations.

References

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