

An effective topic sentence expresses a paragraph's main idea and can help the reader more readily understand a paragraph's purpose. Without topic sentences, paragraphs often lack coherence and place an increased burden on the reader to determine a paragraph's main point. Although not every well-written paragraph must have a topic sentence, in an academic essay a paragraph's effectiveness often directly relates to the strength of its topic sentence. Keep in mind that the placement of the topic sentence, or even whether a paragraph has such a sentence, is the individual writer's choice for each specific paragraph.

Purposes

- Makes a claim about the topic of the paragraph
- Unifies the paragraph's content
- Provides a road map
- Gives the reader a general sense of how the paragraph will discuss the topic
- Relates the paragraph to the paper's main claim
- Supports the paper's main claim

Placement

- Usually appears as the first or second sentence in a paragraph
- May end a paragraph

When a topic sentence may NOT be necessary

- If the writing is a narration of events
- If a paragraph continues to develop an idea already introduced in an earlier paragraph
- If the paragraph is relatively short and serves a primarily transitional purpose

Examples

1. The following example shows how a topic sentence (in bold) can unify a paragraph and how by introducing the paragraph's topic the sentence makes it easier for a reader to follow the main point.

Original: Cats love to snuggle up and share warmth with their elderly caretakers. When they want to be active, however, they can keep up with even the most rambunctious of children. They are also low maintenance, requiring only small amounts of food and water, and keeping their mess contained to a small litterbox.

Revised: **Cats are effective at assisting elderly people and children with their daily lives.** Because they are so affectionate, cats love to snuggle up and share warmth with their elderly caretakers. When they want to be active, however, they can keep up with even the most rambunctious of children. They are also low maintenance, requiring only small amounts of food and water, and keeping their mess contained to a small litterbox.

2. The example below shows how adding a topic sentence at the end of a paragraph (in bold) can give the reader a better context for understanding the paragraph's overarching point.

Original: Often, journal writing is a very personal and private activity. Some people who write journals never share a single word of their writing. Note-taking for a college course is also an act that writers usually undertake individually. At other times, however, writing is explicitly collaborative, such as when scientists coauthor publications or when more than one person writes a novel. But even single-authored pieces of writing are frequently the result of many people working together. For instance, published writing—from newspaper articles to scholarly texts to movie reviews—undergoes editing and revisions. Receiving outside feedback on a piece of writing is a common and crucial element of turning a good draft into something publishable.

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