

Revision Activity: Topic Sentences

Your topic sentences need to convey your own ideas to your audience in your own voice! Good topic sentence help convey your purpose for writing, and in doing so, they help to keep your reader focused on your contribution to the discussion, which makes your essay appear more organized. This revision activity will call your attention to the first line of each paragraph, helping you to guide your reader through your essay.

Topic Sentences ARE NOT:

- Vague (“There are many important aspects of culture.”)
- Source introductions (“In Wesley Yang’s essay...”)
- Quotes (“To be or not to be. That is the question.”)
- Items in a list (“The next idea I want to talk about is...”)

Topic Sentences ARE:

- Specific, detailed, expressive
- Expressions of purpose or focus for a given paragraph
- Reflective of your positions and ideas
- Signals for your reader to follow
- Connected to your main point in a meaningful way

Getting Started

Starting at the beginning of your draft, read ONLY the first sentence of each paragraph out loud. Take a moment to reflect on this exercise. How would you describe the picture of your project that emerges when you read your essay in this way? Does it sound like an outline of your project? Does it make sense? Is it logical? Do the points seem connected? If you answered “no” to any of these questions, then you’ve got some revision to do!

The most likely situation is that you’ve got some strong topic sentences and some weak ones. Use the criteria in the bulleted lists above to determine which ones are which. Underline strong topic sentences with a solid line, and underline weak topic sentences with a wavy line. When you see a paragraph that has no topic sentence at all, mark it with a star (or some other notation that’s meaningful to you).

When you have no topic sentence...

Read the paragraph as a whole and ask yourself, “What am I trying to accomplish in this paragraph?”

<i>Am I trying to integrate discussion of one of my sources?</i>	Write a topic sentence that explains how a central idea from your source comes to bear on your own project. Avoid mentioning the author’s name or quoting from the source in your topic sentence.
<i>Am I trying to introduce a personal experience that relates to my project?</i>	Write a topic sentence that describes the concept your experience helps you to illustrate. Ideally, you should do this in a way that allows you to connect the concept in question to your larger project.
<i>Am I trying to change the subject?</i>	Write a topic sentence that connects your previous topic of discussion to the new one in a meaningful and specific way. What does your discussion of this subject add to the conversation about this problem?

When you need to strengthen/develop a topic sentence...

The most common weakness in topic sentences is lack of detail. Most of the time, you can strengthen your topic sentences by revising out vague, abstract language in favor of specific, detailed language that says something explicit about your problem, issue, or question you've decided to focus on in your project.

Vague Topic Sentence:

Revise to address:

<i>Many factors and issues must be considered.</i>	Which factors? Which issues? Who must consider them? Why?
<i>There has been a lot of debate on this issue.</i>	In a given paragraph, focus on a <i>single aspect</i> of the debate that you wish to consider specifically. Explain why/how you want to consider it.
<i>Americans can't live without their cell phones.</i>	America is very diverse! Which Americans are you talking about? What do you mean by "can't live"? Avoid using hyperbole, and try not to make generalizations.

When you are just listing points...

When you use an organizational strategy like "order of importance" or "chronological order" to structure your essay, it can be easy to fall into the trap of merely listing ideas. When you do this, you are relying on your reader to guess at and fill in your reasons for putting a discussion of a specific idea at the beginning of your essay, in the middle, or at the end. Most of the time, you need to be more explicit with your readers. Don't assume they'll figure out that you've put your ideas in order of importance; tell them! But don't stop there; explain to them WHY one idea is more important than another.

Vague Topic Sentence:

Revise to address:

<i>My first point is that family influences us.</i>	What prompted you to discuss this point first? What do we need to know about this point in order to understand what's coming next? Discuss the significance.
<i>Another issue related to people's use of stereotypes is...</i>	How is this issue related to people's use of stereotypes? How is it related to the last issue you discussed?
<i>My final point is that people need to make choices.</i>	Why is this your final point? And what kinds of choices? What do you expect this point to clarify for your audience? How does it relate to the broader purpose of your essay?

This is *your paper*, so your reader will assume that you are speaking from your own point of view. However, you still need to distinguish your own ideas from those of your sources, so language like "My point is..." can be very useful – just NOT in your topic sentences!

Remember: Once you change something in a draft, other things will need to change as well! Let peer feedback and this revision activity lead you to other changes. Don't be afraid to throw things out, rewrite them, reorganize them, and/or add new material!