

# Topic Sentences

A topic sentence is the first sentence of a single paragraph. Being the first sentence, it has a big job. It should tell the reader what the paragraph is about. It should give the reader a sense of what the paragraph will cover, as well as how it will be covered. Because of all of that, it is important to use specific language in your topic sentences and avoid making broad, sweeping generalizations.

In a multi-paragraph essay, there are **three important things to keep in mind**:

- Each paragraph should have its own topic sentence and should focus on only one main idea or point. When the writing shifts to a new idea, a new paragraph—with a new topic sentence—should be started.
- Another important point to consider in a multi-paragraph essay is that the topic sentence will also show how the new paragraph is related to the one that comes before it. This is often accomplished with the use of transitional words or phrases.\*
- Lastly, the topic sentence will also indicate how the idea, presented in the paragraph, relates to the thesis statement or main idea of the entire essay.\*\*

There are two types of topic sentence: obvious and implied. Most of the time, instructors are looking for obvious (directly stated) topic sentences in academic writing. Keep in mind that this type of writing tends to be more direct and concise than creative writing, and being clear is a top priority.

**There are a few things that should be avoided in academic writing that might be acceptable in creative writing:**

- **A topic sentence should not be a quote or a paraphrase.** A topic sentence should be your own idea expressed in your own words. In this type of writing, your ideas and arguments should be the primary focus, and using a quote as a topic sentence puts someone else's idea first. The rest of the paragraph will do the work of supporting your idea. Quotes should only be used for support.
- **A topic sentence should not be a question.** While this is a device that some authors use to engage a reader, in academic writing, it is important to remember that your audience is coming to you for answers.
- **A topic sentence should not be written using vague language.** Remember that the job of the topic sentence is to clearly identify the main point of the paragraph for your reader. The body of the paragraph will support that information by including specific examples and clear explanation.

Consider the following examples:

- a. "It is important to do well in high school."
- b. "To get into college and earn scholarships, it is important to do well in high school."

Which do you think is a stronger topic sentence? What elements makes one better than the other? Notice, option "b" tells the reader why it is important to do well.

In the following examples, notice how the core statement (a) is the same, but the intention changes when the statement is made more specific. The paragraphs that follow each statement would have very different points of view, and use very different supporting details.

- a. It is important to get regular exercise.
- b. It is important to get regular exercise if you want to stay fit and healthy.
- c. It is important to get regular exercise, but you need to do more than that if you want to run a marathon.
- d. It is important to get regular exercise in order to stay strong and avoid injury as you get older.

\*Be sure to see the ASC's [transition handout](#) for more information.

\*\*For more information about thesis statements, including what they are, what they do, and how to write them, be sure to see the ASC's handout.