Main Idea and Topic Sentence

Many of the paragraphs that you will use in compositions are topical paragraphs. *Topical paragraphs* contain a **topic sentence**—a sentence that expresses the key point or main idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence is supported or developed by the facts, details, restatements, and explanations provided in the other sentences in the paragraph.

In some paragraphs, the **main idea** is directly stated. One sentence provides the main idea around which the other sentences are organized. Some paragraphs, however, may have an **implied main idea**—the sentences in the paragraph work together to suggest, without directly stating, the main idea of the paragraph.

**Exercise 1**

Identifying a Stated Topic Sentence Identify the stated topic sentence of the following paragraph.

In the 1920’s, New York City’s Harlem, which had a large African American population, was a vital social, political, and cultural center. Black artists, writers, and musicians came from all over. The writers wrote poetry and novels, the artists painted, and the musicians played music in Harlem’s renowned theaters and clubs. Reminded of the Renaissance in Europe, people called this period the Harlem Renaissance.

**Exercise 2**

Identifying an Implied Main Idea Identify the implied topic sentence of the following paragraph.

I collapse on the towel and remain there, immobilized, like a beached whale. The warmth of the summer sand sinks into my bones. The gulls cry overhead. The sun beats down. The waves lap at the shore. I drift off into a peaceful, mindless slumber.

**Writing a Topic Sentence**

A topic sentence expresses the main point in a paragraph. As you plan your essay, you will already have some of your main points in mind. Other points may occur to you as you gather details. To write a topic sentence, consider the point you want to make and the details you have or will find. Then, write a single sentence that covers the details and expresses your point.

**EXAMPLE:**

The lake is icy cold. The shoreline is rocky. A strange film floats on the surface. Snapping turtles have been seen patrolling the murky water.

**TOPIC SENTENCE:**

The lake is unfit for swimming.

**Exercise 3**

Writing Topic Sentences Write a topic sentence for each group of sentences below.
1. Supplies were low, and the soldiers were discouraged. Although the snow had stopped, the temperature remained below freezing. Across the river was the enemy. As soon as the river froze, the enemy would attack.
2. Max, the main character in the story, always has a plan. No matter what goes wrong, he comes up with an idea for solving the problem. Sometimes, he makes clever gadgets; other times, he just has an idea that no one else has.

**Writing Supporting Sentences**

A topic sentence, whether stated or implied, contains a paragraph’s main idea. The remaining sentences in the paragraph are called **supporting sentences**. They develop, explain, or illustrate the main idea or topic sentence.

You can use one or more of the following strategies to support or develop the main idea:

- **Use Facts**  Facts are statements that are provable. They support your main idea by offering proof.

  **TOPIC SENTENCE:**  Our soccer team will probably make it to this season’s championship game.

  **SUPPORTING FACT:**  They’ve won all of the games they’ve played this season.

- **Use Statistics**  A statistic is a fact, usually stated with numbers.

  **TOPIC SENTENCE:**  Our soccer team will probably make it to this season’s championship game.

  **SUPPORTING STATISTIC:**  The team’s record so far is 8–0.

- **Use Examples, Illustrations, or Instances**  An example, illustration, or instance is a specific person, thing, or event that demonstrates a point.

  **TOPIC SENTENCE:**  Our soccer team will probably make it to this season’s championship game.

  **ILLUSTRATION:**  The team has beaten all of their opponents, including the Wolverines, who hadn’t lost a game in the three previous seasons.

- **Use Details**  Details are the specifics—the parts of the whole.

  **TOPIC SENTENCE:**  Our soccer team will probably make it to this season’s championship game.

  **DETAIL:**  In last week’s game, there were only seconds left in the final quarter when the striker scored the winning goal.

**Exercise 4**

**Writing Supporting Sentences**  Write two supporting sentences for each of the following topic sentences. Use a variety of types of support.

1. Good nutrition is important for good health.
2. Hiking is a great way to exercise and to get in touch with nature.
3. Life is full of unexpected adventures.
4. Caring for a pet can be a rewarding experience.
5. Playing team sports teaches responsibility and cooperation.

3.1 Placing Your Topic Sentence

Often, the most effective placement for your topic sentence is at the beginning of a paragraph, where it introduces the subject of the paragraph. Sometimes, however, you may choose to place your topic sentence in the middle or at the end of a paragraph. You might place the topic sentence in the middle when you need to lead up to it or provide background. You might place the topic sentence at the end to create emphasis or summarize the details you’ve provided.

Paragraph Patterns  By identifying the function of different sentences within a paragraph, you can analyze the arrangement of sentences and choose the pattern that is most effective. One way to look at the paragraph pattern is through TRI (Topic, Restatement, Illustration). With these basic elements, you “construct” a paragraph.

**TOPIC SENTENCE:** State your key idea.

**RESTATEMENT:** Interpret your key idea—put it into other words.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Support your key idea with an illustration or an example.

After you have identified the basic parts of your paragraph, try variations of the TRI pattern, such as TIR, TII, or ITR, until you are satisfied with the results.

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<td>It’s fun to watch movies on a bleak and rainy weekend. Comedies are especially entertaining and can brighten an otherwise dreary day. Last Saturday it was pouring. We rented two hilarious videos and had a great time watching them with our friends Jake and Rebecca.</td>
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Exercise 5

**Placing a Topic Sentence** Arrange the following sentences in a paragraph. First, identify the topic sentence. Next, rearrange the sentences, using the TRI pattern. Then, rearrange the sentences in a variation of TRI. Evaluate which arrangement is most effective.

A layer of cheese provides the foundation for a medley of olives, peppers, and onions. These ingredients turn pizza into pizzazz! They add color, texture, and taste to the pie. They turn dough and cheese into a smorgasbord of tasty treats. The key to a good pizza is the toppings.

Maintaining Unity and Coherence

**Achieving Unity**

A paragraph or composition has **unity** when all of its parts relate to the main idea. Every sentence supports, explains, or develops the main idea of the paragraph. Every paragraph
supports or develops the main idea, or **thesis statement**, of the composition. Details that are not related to the main points can undermine the unity of your writing and should be deleted.

In the following paragraph, one sentence is marked for deletion because it interferes with the unity of the paragraph.

The ancient Romans were successful in gaining territory and building an empire for many reasons. First of all, the Romans had a fine military organization. More important, the government of Rome could adapt to new situations. **Ancient Roman ruins are fascinating.** Probably the most important reason of all was that the Romans treated captured people fairly.

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**Exercise 6**

**Revising for Unity**  On a separate sheet of paper, copy the following paragraph. Mark for deletion any sentences that interfere with the unity of the paragraph.

Pompeii was an ancient Roman city founded in the eighth century B.C. The city was located less than one mile from Mount Vesuvius, a volcanic mountain. In A.D. 79, Mount Vesuvius erupted violently. Volcanic mountains exist throughout the world. The volcanic eruption showered Pompeii with hot ashes and stones. Pompeii was soon completely buried in ashes. Pompeii remained buried until 1748, when a peasant digging in a vineyard accidentally struck a wall of the city. Italian vineyards are known for their fine grapes. After the chance discovery, archaeologists began to excavate the city. Today, about one fourth of Pompeii is uncovered, and tourists can now walk the ancient streets.

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**Establishing Coherence**

A paragraph or composition has **coherence** when the ideas are logically connected and the reader can see how one idea is related to another. To establish coherence, choose and maintain a **logical organization**, and connect sentences and paragraphs with **transitional words and phrases**.

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**Exercise 7**

**Revising for Coherence**  On a separate sheet of paper, rewrite the following paragraph.
Establish coherence by reorganizing details with one of the organizational patterns explained above. Use transitional words and phrases to show connections. Add details, or make other changes as needed.

The English language contains many words that have been borrowed from other languages. Some words come from French, which had been influenced by the classical languages of Greek and Latin. French was the language of the rulers so words like government and legal became part of the language used by the conquered Anglo-Saxons. Some words were borrowed from Native American languages to name things for which early American settlers had no names. In 1066, France invaded England. Modern scientists borrow directly from Latin or Greek to name new discoveries. Prefixes and suffixes that are used in English also come from Greek and Latin. Explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who traveled from England to far-off places often incorporated words from the places they visited.