

Improving writing: Topic sentences

What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of about 6–12 sentences about one *topic*. Every sentence in a strong paragraph is about the same topic. All of the sentences explain the writer's *main idea* (most important idea) about that topic. When the writer wants to write about a new main idea, he / she begins a new paragraph.

A paragraph can give information, tell an opinion, explain something, or even tell a short story. The sentences are arranged logically, so the reader can easily understand what the writer wants to say.

In academic writing, a paragraph has a *topic sentence* that directly tells the reader the main idea. The other sentences in the paragraph, called *supporting sentences*, give more information about the topic. They add specific details and explanations. In academic English, the topic sentence is usually (but not always!) first or last.

Work with a partner. Read the groups of sentences below and on page 10. Circle the letters of the strong paragraphs. If you think the sentences make a weak paragraph, say why. Choose one or more of these reasons:

- The sentences are not all about the same topic.
- There are not enough sentences.
- There is no topic sentence.
- Some sentences say the same thing.

When I need a good place to study, I go to the library. It's always quiet there, so I can concentrate. It's easy to find the books I need, and I can search for information on the Internet because there are several computers. The other people in the library are also reading or working, so the mood is good for studying. I study better and faster in the library than in any other place.

a.
.....

I need to buy a motorbike. With a motorbike, I could get to my job more quickly. It takes two hours to get to work by train. That's very slow. A motorbike is much faster. If I had a motorbike, I could save a lot of time. Taking the train is not fast enough for me.

b.
.....

4.HAK – SJ 16/17

First, insert a blank CD into the computer. Then, select the song list that you want to copy. You will see a button that says, 'Click here to burn.' Click on that button. Then just wait a few minutes. That's all!

c.
.....

I will never forget my first day of secondary school. I was very nervous because I didn't know any of the other students. In my first class, I looked around for someone friendly. I saw a girl at the front of the room who also looked nervous, so I decided to make friends with her. Even though I was shy about talking to her, I went up to her and said, 'Don't be nervous. I will help you. Do you want to sit with me?' She looked a little surprised and said, 'Actually, I am the new teacher.'

d.
.....

Mobile phones are very popular. They are really convenient. They're small and light.

e.
.....

Sports instructor is a good part-time job. You can enjoy your favourite activity and earn money at the same time. Some other jobs pay better. You can also volunteer as an instructor. I had a difficult time learning to swim, because my instructor wasn't very good. My tennis instructor was much better. If you get a lot of experience as a sports instructor, you can get a job at a gym or as a coach in the future.

f.
.....

4.HAK – SJ 16/17

5 In the following pairs, circle the number of the best topic sentence. Then explain your choice to a partner. Say why the sentence you didn't choose is weak. Use one or more of these reasons:

- It's too broad.
- It's too narrow.
- There is no main idea or opinion.
- There is more than one main idea.

a. 1. Many people in England and the United States have cats.

2. Cats are good company for their owners.

There is no strong opinion or idea about the topic: it is too broad.

b. 1. Studying English at secondary school helps you get a better job.

2. We study English at secondary school.

c. 1. The food and people in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea are very interesting and different, and so are the buildings.

2. Traditional Japanese food is different from Korean food.

d. 1. My grandfather has helped me in many ways.

2. My grandfather is 86 years old.

e. 1. I really like sports.

2. Rugby has taught me many things about life.

f. 1. There are many environmental problems around the world.

2. It's important to save the rainforests in South America.

g. 1. I got an A on my last maths test.

2. I have a secret technique for learning maths.

6 Improve these topic sentences. Circle the topic. Choose a main idea for each topic and write a topic sentence. Then share your new sentences with a partner or small group.

a. I have a photo of my girlfriend.

idea: *The photo reminds me of her.*.....

topic sentence: *I carry a photo of my girlfriend to remind me of her.*.....

b. I have a new jacket.

idea:

topic sentence:

c. The Internet is good.

idea:

topic sentence:

d. My friend is nice.

idea:

topic sentence:

e. I learn English at school.

idea:

topic sentence: