

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.
.....

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: