

Suggested Topic Sentence Revisions

The following responds to the Practice activity presented on p. 358 of *Acting on Words*.

Paragraph #1

Original version

Euthanasia is serious. No one person should ever bear bureaucratic responsibility for decisions such as these that affect such a large number of others. The wishes of the suffering patients need to be heard and respected, however.

Revised version

Euthanasia is so serious that no one should have to bear ethical responsibility for such sweeping decisions. The wishes of the suffering patients need to be heard and respected, however.

Commentary

Caren's unrevised topic sentence concisely states an indisputable fact, but in doing so states only the indisputably obvious, not any particular position on the topic. The revised topic sentence combines the original topic sentence and the paragraph's second sentence to assert a position *about* the seriousness of euthanasia: "so serious that . . ."

Paragraph #2

Original version

Who can say what's morally right? So, what authority can decide a view, one way or the other? If the patient is dying painfully, beyond the help of medicine and the comfort of family, his or her view might be the most informed view.

Revised version

If nobody can make publicly convincing moral assertions about such a divisive topic in a pluralistic society, then what authority can assert a view, case by case, one way or the other? If the patient is dying painfully, beyond the help of medicine and the comfort of family, his or her view might be the most informed view.

Commentary

Usually, offering rhetorical questions as topic sentences is a weak strategy, signalling to your reader that you are likely writing until you find something to say. If you feel, however, that your question is serious and genuinely opens up the issues in a debate, then use this technique, sparingly. Caren's revised topic sentence is still a question, and now one that names specifically some of the social implications of asserting morality as public policy.

Paragraph #3

Original version

Life is very random. We didn't choose our parents, our genetics, our talents and often our disposition. Let me tell you about that someday. Philosophically speaking, randomness is fair because it's a neutral quality. A raffle best represent this random quality of life.

Revised version

Life is almost entirely random, since we do not choose our parents, our genetics, our talents and often our disposition. Philosophically speaking, the randomness of a euthanasia raffle is fair because neutral. A raffle represents the random quality of life.

Commentary

Caren's unrevised topic sentence is too general to help further her thesis, her claim that euthanasia should be legalized and administered by a medical raffle. By the fourth sentence of her paragraph, however, Caren has written her way into an assertion that can be repositioned as a solid topic sentence. Such shuffling of sentences—a cut-and-paste reworking of your draft—is an important and sometimes surprising part of the revision process.

The other revisions to these sentences in paragraph #3 make the diction more specific and therefore the assertions clearer and stronger.

Paragraph #4

Original version

A euthanasia raffle will thus satisfy the winners. It will alleviate guilt, indecision, and responsibility in the authorities. This will also be true for administrators. A raffle will imitate the quality of life itself, which is random.

Revised version

A Euthanasia raffle will thus satisfy winners and solve indecision in the authorities. The raffles accurately imitate the random quality of life itself.

Commentary

Caren's fourth paragraph, which is her conclusion, can best be revised for conciseness and compression. The revised topic sentence can assert tersely the alleged benefits of a euthanasia raffle to both patients and administrators.

Since the essay's topic is extremely controversial—and Caren's argument for a medical raffle highly unusual, perhaps insupportable in a humane society—her conclusion should steer clear of whatever ethical dimensions the essay has not satisfactorily addressed. The euthanasia raffle will not “alleviate guilt,” for example, because only those patients, families, doctors, and administrators already in favour of euthanasia would endorse such an idea as a medical raffle. So, logically, we can ask what guilt is alleviated? As well, medical and legal administrators will not be freed from “responsibility” merely because a raffle operates on a principle of randomness.

Remember to ensure that your conclusion doesn't attempt to take credit for more than you have argued. Also keep in mind that for all arguments, especially controversial ones, there will be opposing views. Many readers may be fully prepared to argue against your position, so argue as carefully and convincingly as you can. A further counter-argument to Caren's position on the administration of euthanasia through a raffle, which she justifies by citing the principle of randomness in life itself, might be the response that our public organizations and policies exist to alleviate the effects of randomness, not enforce them.