

Topic 4: Paragraphs – Topic sentences, supporting sentences, definitions & examples

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1. Topic sentences

The topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph and is usually the first sentence. It indicates what the paragraph is going to discuss, and thus serves as a useful guide both for the writer and the reader; the writer can have a clear idea what information to include (and what information to exclude), while the reader will have a clear idea of what the paragraph will discuss, which will aid in understanding. As it presents the main idea, without supporting information, the topic sentence is the most general sentence in the paragraph. A good topic sentence is therefore not overly long and complex.

The topic sentence comprises two separate parts: the topic of the paragraph, and the controlling idea, which limits the topic to one or two areas that can be discussed fully in one paragraph.

The popularity of fast food has had a dramatic impact on worldwide health.

In this case, the topic is the **popularity of fast food**. The controlling idea is **impact on worldwide health**, which limits the discussion to this one idea. We can therefore predict that this paragraph will explain the topic and then give supporting ideas (reasons, facts, etc.) to show how it has impacted on worldwide health.

Task 1: Read the paragraph. Which aspect of the topic do the supporting sentences relate to?

[1] The popularity of fast food has had a dramatic impact on worldwide health. [2] Usually inexpensive, convenient and tasty, fast food chains such as McDonalds have come to dominate what we eat. [3] McDonalds, for example, now serves meals to over 62 million people every day (O'Grady 2018). [4] This number is equivalent to approximately 1% of the world's population. [5] However, typically high in trans fats, sugar and salt, such food is associated with a range of modern health problems, including obesity, heart disease and high blood pressure. [6] These conditions are increasingly common in almost every developed country and some developing countries – a trend that researchers link to the spread of fast food (O'Grady 2019).

Task 2: Read these topic sentences and highlight the Topic and the Controlling Ideas.

1. There are several important reasons for the collapse of the Roman Empire.
2. Obtaining nutrition and energy from food is a multistep process.
3. The final step in digestion is the elimination of undigested food content and waste products.
4. The amount of sleep we get varies across the lifespan.
5. There are a number of factors which affect our body weight.
6. Sleep debt has significant negative psychological and physiological consequences.

2. Supporting sentences

Supporting sentences develop the topic sentence. They are more specific than the topic sentence, giving *explanation, reasons, examples, facts, statistics, and citations* in support of the main idea of the paragraph.

Task 3: Re-read the above paragraphs. What kind of supporting sentences are used?

[2]	[5]
[3]	[6]
[4]	

Task 4: Read the following four paragraphs and write a topic sentence for each one.

Paragraph 1

First, Tsukuba has excellent transportation links. It only a one-hour drive from Narita international airport and a 45 minute train-ride from downtown Tokyo. Second, Tsukuba has a high standard of education. The university of Tsukuba is among the top ranking in Japan and public schools have an excellent reputation. Finally, the city is clean and efficiently managed. The city has many parks and is spacious compared to other Japanese cities. It is therefore not surprising that Tsukuba consistently ranks highly on national quality of life surveys.

Paragraph 2

It is proven that aerobic exercise is good for the heart, which is very important for overall health. Strength training is important for maintaining muscle mass and improving bone density. Both muscle mass and bone density can decrease as we age, so improving them through strength training is important. All kinds of exercise have been shown to relieve depression, anxiety, and stress.

Paragraph 3

It has not only become popular among younger people, but even those aged 65 and over are now shopping online more than ever before. Men are also shopping online as much as women, as reported by the Office for National Statistics in 2019. One of the reasons for this proliferation is likely due to the fact that we are spending more time online in general. However, despite the general upward trend in sectors such as clothing, household and entertainment, most money continues to be spent in stores, especially when purchasing groceries and medicines.

Paragraph 4

Although student surveys always show students like to have access to materials online, the take up of purely online courses is low. When questioned, students find that studying online can be a lonely and unsatisfying experience. Not only do students miss the human interaction with other students, they also find the time lag in getting answers to their questions very frustrating

3. Definitions

Another way of starting a paragraph is with a definition. **Basic definitions** are formed by giving a category and the application:

Word	Category	Application
A car	is a motorized vehicle	that the client can be used as a regular means of personal transportation.
A master's degree	is an academic award	for post-graduate students, which is given on completion of a dissertation

Task 5: Choose an appropriate general noun.

1. A barometer is a scientific _____ designed to measure atmospheric pressure.
2. Kidneys are the _____ that separate waste fluid from the blood.
3. A multi-national company is a business _____ that operates in many countries.
4. Reinforced concrete is a building _____ consisting of cement, sand and steel rods.
5. Bullying is a pattern of anti-social _____ found in many schools.
6. Recycling is a _____ in which materials are used again.
7. A recession is a _____ of reduced economic activity.

Task 6: The definitions in the table have been mixed up. Rewrite them including, where necessary, an appropriate article (the, a / an) and incorporating 'is a' after the class.

Word	Category	Application
(1) oxygen	person	who spends a lot of their time looking for funds for projects.
(2) university	tool	which is essential for our survival.
(3) researcher	grains	which has revolutionized the world.
(4) Cereals	gas	which has made vast quantities of money through cutting-edge technologies.
(5) Internet	company	widely grown for food production.
(6) Apple	place	that is widely considered to be man's best friend.
(7) gold	animal	where in theory people go to study but in reality often spend most of their time just having fun.
(8) dog	metal	that tends to go up in value during financial crises.

Task 7: Complete and expand the following definitions by adding examples or extra information.

- Tsukuba **is a city**.
- Tsukuba is a city **in Japan**.
- Tsukuba is a **planned** city in Japan.
- Tsukuba is a planned city in **northeast** Japan.
- Tsukuba is a planned city in northeast Japan **that is well-known for its University**.
- Tsukuba is a planned city in northeast Japan ~~that is well-known for its University~~ **and high concentration of research institutes**.

a) The University of Tsukuba is a prestigious national university located 45 minutes north east of Tokyo.

b) Buddhism is a which is practised in

c) Maglev is a which uses

d) Research is a(n)

e) A smartphone is a

f) English is ...

g) [*a term of your choice*]

h) [*a term of your choice*]

Extending definitions

A definition may be extended further in order to be more precise and/or to give more information about the subject. An extended definition usually begins with a general one-sentence definition and then becomes more specific as additional details are added. Ways that we might extend a definition include:

- analysing the components
- providing examples (e.g. of the applications)
- giving a sense of the historical change and development
- outlining the current understanding or research related to the topic
- outlining the effect (e.g. problems, benefits related to the topic)

Task 8: Study the definitions below. Underline the definitions. How does the writer extend the definition? How does the writer develop the paragraph?

Paragraph	Extension
(1) <u>A microscope is an optical instrument with which the apparent size of an object can be enhanced.</u> There are two types of microscope. A simple microscope consists of a double convex lens and a magnifying glass. A compound microscope, on the other hand, will contain more than one of each of these lenses, which are situated at the ends of a cylinder.	
(2) Pollution is a form of environmental contamination resulting from human activity. Some common forms of pollution are wastes from the burning of fossil fuels and sewage running into rivers. Even litter and excessive noise can be considered forms of pollution because of the impact they can have on the environment.	
(3) An acrylic plastic is a polymer which can take a high polish, is clear and transparent, and can be shaped while hot. Because of these and other characteristics, acrylic plastic is used in situations where glass is not suitable or desirable, for instance, in certain types of windshields.	
(4) Perspective is a technique in art that is used to represent three-dimensional objects and depth relationships on a flat surface. Modern linear perspective (which involves making objects seem smaller the more distant they are from the observer) was probably first used in the 1400s by the artist Masaccio and the architects Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti in Florence, Italy. Before this time, artists paid little attention to realistic perspective. In recent decades, many modern artists have returned to the practices of early artists and have abandoned realistic perspective.	
(5) Migration may be defined as the movement of people from one place to another with the aim of permanent settlement. There are two main types – within a country and between countries. For example, people often move from rural to urban areas within the same country as is happening in China at the moment. The population of the city of Shanghai in China grew by 10 million between 1980 and 2005, mainly due to poor people from the country looking for jobs in the city. An example of movement of people between countries is that from Ireland to the USA in the 19th century which took place as a result of poverty and hunger.	

3. Examples

Examples are used in academic writing for support and illustration. Suitable examples can strengthen the argument, and they can also help the reader to understand a point.

Generalisations are commonly used to introduce a topic: *Many plants and animals are threatened by global warming.*

But if the reader is given an example for illustration the idea becomes more concrete: *Many plants and animals are threatened by global warming. Polar bears, for example, are suffering from the lack of Arctic ice.*

Phrases to introduce examples	
1. <i>for instance, for example</i> (with commas)	<i>Some car manufacturers, for instance Toyota, now offer five-year guarantees.</i>
2. <i>such as, e.g.</i>	<i>Many successful businessmen such as Bill Gates have no formal qualifications.</i>
3. <i>particularly, especially</i> (to give a focus)	<i>Certain Masters courses, especially American ones, take two years.</i>
4. <i>a case in point</i> (for single examples)	<i>A few diseases have been successfully eradicated. A case in point is smallpox.</i>

Task 8: Add a suitable example to each sentence and introduce it with one of the phrases above. Examples:

- *A number of sports have become very profitable due to the sale of television rights.*
- *A number of sports, **for instance motor racing and football**, have become very profitable due to the sale of television rights.*

(a) Some twentieth-century inventions affected the lives of most people.

(b) Many musical instruments use strings to make music.

(c) Various companies have built their reputation on the strength of one product.

(d) In recent years more women have become political leaders.

(e) Certain countries are frequently affected by earthquakes.

(f) Citrus fruits constitute an important source of vitamin C.

Task 9: Study the following text and add examples from the box where suitable, using one of the introductory phrases in (2) above.

- free delivery or discounted prices bookshops
- clothing and footwear
- books and music
- many supermarkets offer delivery services for online customers

Widespread use of the internet has led to a major change in shopping habits. It is no longer necessary to visit shops to make routine purchases. With more specialised items, internet retailers can offer a wider range of products than bricks-and-mortar shops. They can also provide extra incentives to customers, in addition to the convenience of not having to visit a real shop. As a result, stores selling certain types of products are disappearing from the high street. Other products, however, appear to require personal inspection and approval, and, in addition many people enjoy the activity of shopping. It, therefore, seems unlikely that the internet will completely replace the physical shops.

Restatement

Another small group of phrases is used when there is only one 'example'. (Brackets may also be used for this purpose.) This is a kind of restatement to clarify the meaning:

The world's leading gold producer, namely South Africa, has been faced with a number of technical difficulties.

<i>in other words</i>	<i>namely</i>	<i>that is (to say)</i>	<i>i.e.</i>
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Add a suitable phrase from the box below to the following sentences, to make them clearer.

(a) The company's overheads doubled last year.
(b) The Roman empire was a period of technological advancement.
(c) The Indian capital has a thriving commercial centre.
(d) Survival rates from the most common type of cancer are improving.
(e) Participation rates in many democracies are in decline.

<i>that is to say fewer people are voting</i> <i>(27 BC – 476 AD)</i> <i>in other words the fixed costs</i>	<i>i.e. breast cancer</i> <i>namely New Delhi</i>
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Task 10: Choose the appropriate term - *e.g.*, *for example*, *i.e.*, *such as*, *that is to say*, *etc.*

1. Several countries speak English as the official language (**e.g.** / **etc.** / **i.e.** Australia and India).
2. Only two languages are completely phonetic (**e.g.** / **etc.** / **i.e.** Italian and Finnish).
3. These conditions manifest themselves in a range of environmental conditions **i.e.** / **such as** light rain, light wind and fog, and heavy conditions **i.e.** / **such as** monsoons, hurricanes...
4. These conditions include **e.g.** / **for example** / **etc.** / **i.e.** / **such as** light rain, light wind and fog and are thus not a serious threat to...
5. Such environmental conditions (**e.g.** / **for example** / **i.e.** light rain, light wind, fog) are very common.
6. There are two environmental conditions that can cause such damage **i.e.** / **such as** / **that is to say** tornadoes and hurricanes.
7. Only two countries, **i.e.** / **such as** / **that is to say** Yemen and Syria, are known to have had these problems.

Task 11: Using the notes, extend this paragraph to give a sense of the historical development of the University of Tsukuba. Pay attention to grammatical voice and tense.

Topic sentence: The University of Tsukuba is a prestigious Japanese national university located about 60km north east of Tokyo.

- 1973: older Tokyo University of Education → Tsukuba
- well-known: STEM and physical education
- Since 1973: 3 Nobel prize winners, 60 Olympic athletes
- Currently – 16,500 students – 2000 from overseas