The Framework of a Paragraph: Topic Sentence

*Writing.* *Full and Complete Sentences. Paragraphs. Essays.* Do these words make you thrill with anticipation or cringe with dread? For many students, it’s the latter because all too often they pull up a blank document to “write something,” and then are faced with the dreaded blinking cursor, unsure of what to say or how to say it. Like learning to ride a bike, play a musical instrument, or master a sport, developing writing skills takes time and practice. With solid instruction and encouragement, you can grow into an excellent and confident writer, and that’s what English 1 is all about.

However, English 1is also for you who enjoy writing. Maybe you’ve started your first novel (or second or third!). Maybe you like to choose interesting words and write exciting stories, or perhaps you’ve started a blog recently. Some students love to prove an argument or engage in debate. English 1 is a great fit for you, too. If your heart skips a beat when faced with a blank document with a blinking cursor, we’ll build on that. Here you’ll learn more sophisticated ways of expressing yourself by practicing with different types of compositions. Whether you’re a reluctant or enthusiastic writer, you’ve come to the right—or should I say, *write*— place.

No matter what kind of piece you’re most accustomed to writing, each one starts at the same spot: the paragraph. For the next several weeks, we will look at the structure of the expository paragraph. We’ll talk about arguments and evidence and topic sentences and examples. Once we’ve established a basic understanding of the building block of any piece of writing, we’ll dive into our first essay.

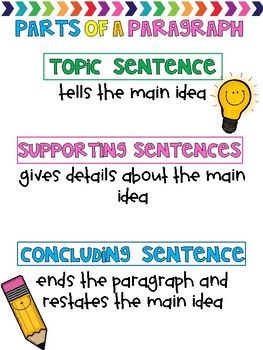
**What is a paragraph?**

A paragraph contains several sentences (think 7-10) that discuss and develop one thought. However, it is not the number of sentences that makes a paragraph; instead, a paragraph communicates one main idea. The common thread of the main idea separates just a random group of sentences from a paragraph.

Paragraphs consist of three main elements: a strong topic sentence that tells the main idea

support and evidence to prove or develop the main idea

a closing sentence to wrap up the main idea



# Our Focus Today: A strong topic sentence

A solid topic sentence will be specific, concise, and arguable. Your entire paragraph (and later, essay) will be presenting and developing an argument. Of course, I don’t mean the kind of argument that involves yelling or throwing the nearest dish, but instead I’m referring to a claim, opinion, or debatable statement that requires proof or evidence for support. If your topic sentence states a fact or requires no explanation or evidence, it’s actually not a topic sentence; it is **evidence**. Instead, you want to form a topic sentence that engages your readers’ attention because they want to answer *why* or *how* they can know you are right. If your topic sentence naturally leads to asking *why* or *how*, then you’ve been successful in framing an **argument**.

Let’s see if you can tell the difference between argument and evidence statements.

* Bakers follow recipes to create delicious confections.
* Bakers who disregard conventions and craft their own creative recipes make the best desserts.
* Fantasy novels introduce readers to imaginary locations outside real time and space.
* Readers choose fantasy novels because they offer an escape from reality.
* Studying grammar builds knowledge of the parts of speech.
* Studying grammar provides a helpful foundation for writing well.
* Students play many sports for both physical fitness and skill development.
* Soccer offers kids the best outlet for excess energy.

See the difference?

Remember: A strong topic sentence will either

* + **include debatable or arguable words (often adjectives),**
  + **speak to cause and effect, OR**
  + **raise “How?” or “Why?” questions**

Weak topic sentences simply state a fact. These are actually **evidence**.

**Your Assignment:**

Read the paragraphs below. Identify the best topic sentence for each one.

1.

TS: C

Before leaving home, people need to think about how much money to allot for things like transportation, food, and hotels. Waiting until the last minute can increase costs for lodging and car rental or plane tickets. However, those who book them with plenty of time in advance can get great deals. Tourists should also plan the amount of time they want to spend sightseeing and doing different sorts of activities. Even though travelers may want to do everything, they have to remember that there are only so many hours in the day, so prioritizing activities can help families keep the peace and look forward to what is ahead. Overall, organizing a trip carefully will allow for a more relaxed trip.

1. Traveling can be stressful.
2. Travelers have to think about many details before leaving home.
3. When preparing for a trip, smart travelers plan carefully.

2.

TS: C

Learning at home lets families choose the schedule that works best for them rather than having to follow what someone else says. Some students participate in highly competitive sports and spend many hours in the gym, at the rink, or on the court. Homeschooling allows these teens to learn at times that best suit them, whether early morning, late at night, or in-between practice sessions. Other families may be night owls or early birds, and the freedom of schooling at home means that the time for studying can fit the family dynamic. The autonomy of school at home makes this a great choice for families.

1. Homeschooled students have invaluable educational flexibility.
2. Homeschooling is an alternative form of education.
3. Families who homeschool make the best decision.

3.

TS: C

From the gurgling rivers, to the snowy peaks, to the covered forest trails, there is always something lovely to experience.  A mountain vacation often involves gorgeous views of fresh, clear water bubbling and babbling over boulders that rolled down centuries ago. Clean and cold, few drinks provide sweeter refreshment after a long hike. In winter, a view from a mountain cabin provides glimpses of snow-capped peaks dotted with the dark green of pine trees reaching up to the bright blue sky. Inside, a roaring fire provides warmth against the cold and a lovely sense of relaxation. For those who wish to get outside, a trip to the mountains offers multiple trails to hike. Whether a short walk or long, hikers will see striking scenes of color and life, hear the happy chirp of birds, and leave the cares of city life behind. No matter the season, the mountains make a great choice for a getaway.

1. The mountains are beautiful all year long.
2. The mountains provide a vacation destination outside of the busy city life.
3. Going to the mountains offers vacationers relaxation and refreshment.

When this is completed, take the poll saying so. Bring this document to class for discussion next week. Be prepared to explain your choice.