

Writing Academic English

Chapter 1: Paragraph Structure

A paragraph is a *group of related sentences* that discuss one (and usually only one) main idea. A paragraph can be as short as one sentence or as long as ten sentences. The number of sentences is unimportant; however, the paragraph should be long enough to develop the main idea clearly.

A paragraph may *stand by itself*. In academic writing, you often write a paragraph to answer a test question. A paragraph may also be one part of a longer piece of writing such as an essay or book. We mark a paragraph by *indenting the first word* half an inch (five spaces on a computer) from the left margin.

The Three Parts of a Paragraph:

- All paragraphs have a *topic sentence* and *supporting sentences*, and some paragraphs also have a *concluding sentence*.
- The topic sentence *states the main idea of the paragraph*. It *names the topic of the paragraph*, and limit the topic to one specific area that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph.
- *Controlling Idea*: the part of the topic sentence that announces the specific part to be discussed.
- The topic sentence states both the topic and the controlling idea.
- Supporting sentences develop the topic sentence: They explain or prove the topic sentence by giving more information about it.
- Concluding sentence signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember.
- Concluding sentences are customary for stand-alone paragraphs. Paragraphs that are parts of a longer piece of writing usually do not need concluding sentences.

The Topic Sentence:

A topic sentence clearly states the topic and the controlling idea of the paragraph.

A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph:

- It briefly indicates what the paragraph is going to discuss
- It is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include. The reader can see what the paragraph is going to be about.

Three important points to remember about a topic sentence:

- A topic sentence is a complete sentence: it contains at least one subject and one verb.
- A topic sentence contains both a topic and a controlling idea. It names the topic and then limits the topic to a specific area to be discussed in the space of a single paragraph.
- A topic sentence is the most general statement in the paragraph because it gives only the main idea, and no specific details.

Position of Topic Sentences:

The topic sentence is usually the first sentence in a paragraph. Sometimes a topic sentence comes at the end. In this case, the paragraph often begins with a series of examples. Other paragraph may begins with a series of facts, and the topic sentence at the end is the conclusion from these facts.

The Two Parts of a Topic Sentence:

A topic sentence has two essential parts: the topic and the controlling idea.

- The topic names the subject of the paragraph.
- The controlling idea limits or controls the topic to a specific area that you can discuss in the space of a single paragraph.

A topic sentence should not have controlling ideas that are unrelated.

Practice 2:

Writing Topic Sentences:

When you write a topic sentence, remember these three points:

1. A topic sentence must be a complete sentence, with a subject and a verb.
2. A topic sentence should be neither too general nor too specific. If it too general, the reader cannot tell exactly what the paragraph is going to discuss. If it too specific, the writer will not have anything to write about in the rest of the paragraph.
3. A topic sentence should not have unrelated controlling ideas.

Supporting sentences

Supporting sentences explain or prove the topic sentence.

- One of the bigger problems in student writing is that student writers often fail to support their ideas adequately.
- They need to use specific details to be thorough and convincing.

There are several kinds of specific supporting details: examples, statistic, and quotations.