Chapter Goal: Construct an effective topic sentence to give direction to your paragraph.

The riddle above may be silly, but the comparison it makes is valid. A topic sentence is like a compass. It shows your reader exactly where your paragraph is headed, and it also helps to keep you on track as you write your paragraph. It gives direction to your paragraph. Direction is one of the four characteristics of effective writing that you will read about in this text and learn to develop in your own writing. Before exploring the topic sentence further, look at the four characteristics of effective writing.

A Silly Riddle

How is a topic sentence like a compass?

a. It always points to magnetic north.
b. It’s useful on a hiking expedition.
c. It shows exactly where you are headed.

The riddle above may be silly, but the comparison it makes is valid. A topic sentence is like a compass. It shows your reader exactly where your paragraph is headed, and it also helps to keep you on track as you write your paragraph. It gives direction to your paragraph.
Characteristics of an Effective Paragraph

1. **Direction** means that the paragraph has a strong topic sentence that states the main idea and sets the course that the paragraph will follow.
2. **Unity** means that the paragraph makes one main point and sticks to that point.
3. **Coherence** means that the ideas in the paragraph are logically connected and easy to follow.
4. **Support** means that the paragraph contains a specific and detailed discussion of the idea stated in the topic sentence.

Focus on Topic Sentences: Setting Up the Paragraph

Avid fans know what to expect from James Bond movies: action-packed openers. Whether it’s Sean Connery facing a SPECTRE agent, Pierce Brosnan diving off the Hoover Dam, or Daniel Craig maneuvering his Aston DB 5 through a spectacular chase scene, the openers grab the attention of moviegoers and make them want to see more. These opening scenes let audiences know that James Bond is an agent who can outmaneuver the toughest opponents and get out of the stickiest situations. The openers set up the entire movie.

Topic sentences do much the same thing. They are important because they help readers know what the paragraph will be about. And don’t forget that, like the opener of a James Bond movie, a topic sentence must fit the overall picture.

Reflect on It

Look through the anthology section of this book, and find a topic sentence that interests you. On the basis of that sentence alone, what do you think the paragraph will be about? Read the whole paragraph only after you consider what it should say to see if you predicted something close to what was actually written.
A topic sentence provides direction by stating the main idea of a paragraph and answering the reader’s unspoken question, “What is your point?”

**Functions of a Topic Sentence**

A topic sentence does two things. First of all, it states the general topic of the paragraph. Second, it makes a specific point about the topic.

**Example Topic Sentences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>topic</th>
<th>specific point about the topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✔</td>
<td>Carrying a homemade lunch instead of eating out has had unexpected benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔</td>
<td>Knowing how to research using a computer is an essential skill in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔</td>
<td>There are many creative ways to hide thinning hair.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exercise 1**

In each of the following topic sentences, underline the topic and double-underline the specific point the writer is making about the topic.

1. Stromboli’s Italian Grill is my favorite restaurant.
2. A successful letter of complaint has three essential elements.
3. My brother’s fondness for loud music irritates the rest of the family.
4. The woman who lives next door is incurably nosy.
5. Poor organization can make studying difficult.
EXERCISE 2  ANALYZING TOPIC SENTENCES

In each of the following topic sentences, underline the topic and double-underline the specific point the writer is making about the topic.

1. Peer pressure can weaken even the strongest will.
2. My experience working at the Burger Basket convinced me to avoid fast-food places.
3. Trying to find information on the Internet can be frustrating.
4. Gas prices vary in different parts of town.
5. My vacation will give me a chance to do some work around the house.

EXERCISE 3  COMPLETING TOPIC SENTENCES

Complete the following topic sentences. Then underline the topic and double-underline the point about the topic.

1. Taking an aerobics class ______________________________________________
2. _________________________________ is something no home should be without.
3. In the morning, _________________________ helps me prepare to face the day.
4. _________________________________ is my favorite piece of furniture.
5. To avoid last-minute cramming for tests, ________________________________

EXERCISE 4  WRITING TOPIC SENTENCES

Write five topic sentences. Underline the topic. Then double-underline your point about the topic.

1. ____________________________________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________________________________
3. ____________________________________________________________________
4. ____________________________________________________________________
5. ____________________________________________________________________
Writing Topic Sentences That Fit

A topic sentence also provides direction by precisely outlining the territory the paragraph will cover. A topic sentence that is too broad outlines more territory than a paragraph can comfortably cover. A topic sentence that is too narrow draws the boundaries of the paragraph uncomfortably small, usually by focusing on some fact that would make a good supporting detail but that does not lend itself to development.

Example of a Topic Sentence That Is Too Broad

✘ Computers have changed modern society.

This topic sentence is too broad. It promises more than one paragraph can deliver. Think of all the ways computers have changed modern life: they have changed the way stores keep track of inventories, the way banks work, and the way groceries are checked out. They have created new jobs and made others obsolete. They have altered our ideas about which skills are essential and have raised new concerns about privacy and access to information. The topic “how computers have changed society” could easily be the subject of a book.

Example of a Topic Sentence That Is Too Narrow

✘ My computer has six USB ports.

This topic is too narrow. It tells the reader that the writer will discuss a specific computer, her own, and that the focus will be the computer’s USB ports. Although the sentence might work as a supporting point in a paragraph, it is too narrow to be a topic sentence. A topic sentence that is too narrow is a dead-end statement, a fact that does not invite exploration. A good topic sentence opens a door to discussion.

Example of an Effective Topic Sentence

✔ A computer can link a person who is disabled or homebound to the outside world.
This topic sentence is neither too broad nor too narrow. Within this paragraph, the writer can discuss how a computer helps a disabled person to bank or shop online. She can tell how a computer links a homebound person to people and information sources around the world. The sentence opens a door to an area of discussion and exploration that is neither too narrow nor too broad to develop in one paragraph.

**Exercise 5**  
**Analyzing Topic Sentences**

Each set of sentences below contains one topic sentence that is too broad, one that is too narrow, and one that would make a good topic sentence for a paragraph. In the blank to the left of each sentence, label it TB (too broad), TN (too narrow), or TS (topic sentence).

**Set 1**

__  a. The functions of a bank are many and varied.
__  b. Bank fees seem to target lower-income customers.
__  c. My checking account is with First National Bank.

**Set 2**

__  a. My brother Simon often stays awake until 2:00 or 3:00 A.M.
__  b. My brother Simon is a night owl.
__  c. My brother Simon has different levels of energy at different times of the day, week, month, and year.

**Set 3**

__  a. Ordering merchandise online has several advantages.
__  b. I received a promotional email from Land’s End today.
__  c. American businesses thrive in the digital age by maintaining a strong presence online and in social media.

**Set 4**

__  a. Coping with my father’s illness has been difficult for my family.
__  b. Life has its ups and downs.
__  c. Last year, my father had major surgery.

**Set 5**

__  a. The commercials for Mercedes project a classy image of the car.
__  b. CNN and MSNBC are news channels.
__  c. Television exerts a positive influence on American society.
EXERCISE 6  ANALYZING TOPIC SENTENCES

Each set of sentences below contains one topic sentence that is too broad, one that
is too narrow, and one that would make a good topic sentence for a paragraph.
In the blank to the left of each sentence, label it TB (too broad), TN (too narrow),
or TS (topic sentence).

Set 1

_ a. My cat has a marking on her back that looks like the number three.
_ b. Training a dog to sit on command is a simple process.
_ c. Pets are wonderful.

Set 2

_ a. Housing costs vary widely across the United States.
_ b. A one-bedroom apartment in the Aspen Forest apartment complex costs $570 per month.
_ c. A first-time homebuyer should consider several factors when searching for a home.

Set 3

_ a. Gasoline stations have been a part of the American landscape for almost a century.
_ b. In my grandfather’s time, gasoline cost fifty cents per gallon.
_ c. Gasoline stations of my grandfather’s time offered services that are unheard of today.

Set 4

_ a. Requiring fingerprints of citizens who obtain drivers’ licenses is a bad idea.
_ b. Many laws are unjust and should be repealed.
_ c. In some states, a driver’s license must bear the driver’s fingerprint.

Set 5

_ a. Fish are fascinating creatures.
_ b. My sister’s angelfish is named Gabriel.
_ c. An aquarium is like a small entertainment center for the home.
Group Exercise 1 Writing a Topic Sentence: Confident? Go Solo!

Have you had enough test taking? Form a test-making team with two or three of your classmates and write an exercise similar to the one on page 30. Choose three to five of the following topics, and for each topic, write a topic sentence that is too broad, one that is too narrow, and one that would fit a paragraph. Then trade tests with another group and see how your group’s performance—as test makers and as test takers—stacks up against theirs.

Topics

1. books 6. furniture
2. garbage 7. nature
3. beverages 8. people
4. music 9. food
5. schools 10. television

Where Should a Topic Sentence Go?

If you look carefully at the paragraphs in textbooks, essays, and news stories, you will see that a topic sentence may appear anywhere in a paragraph. However, the most common position for a topic sentence is at or near the beginning of a paragraph. Placing the topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph lets your reader know exactly where the paragraph is going and gives the impression that you have thought about the organization of your paragraph. And you will have thought about it. The very act of constructing a topic sentence places your focus on the main idea of your paragraph and helps keep you on track in supporting that idea.

Topic Sentence First

Placing the topic sentence first is often your best choice. A topic sentence conveys your main idea and provides a strong, clear opening for your paragraph.

Example of a Paragraph with the Topic Sentence First

Since I began carrying a homemade lunch to my part-time job at the mall, I have discovered the benefits of brown-bagging. The most obvious benefit is that bringing a lunch from home saves money. At the mall’s food court, the price of a sandwich and chips or a slice of pizza and a soft drink can easily exceed five dollars.
But for less than ten dollars, I can buy a loaf of bread and enough pimento cheese and peanut butter to make lunches for a week or more. Another benefit of brown-bagging—an unexpected one—is that I feel less rushed. Before I started bringing my lunch, my thirty-minute lunch break was consumed by a mad dash to the food court to stand in line, find a table, gulp down my food, and rush back to work. Now, I take a leisurely lunch in the employee break room, reading a magazine as I eat. Usually, I have an extra fifteen minutes to read and relax or take a stroll around the mall’s upper level. I also benefit from the improved nutrition of my homemade lunches. Turkey on whole wheat bread or even a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from home is lower in fat and calories than a hamburger or slice of pizza from the food court. For me, brown-bagging means that a healthier wallet, a more relaxed lunch break, and improved nutrition are “in the bag.”

**Topic Sentence after an Introductory Sentence**

Sometimes, you may wish to include background material before you state the main point of your paragraph. In these instances, condense the background material to one introductory sentence. After your introductory sentence, state the topic sentence.

**Example of a Paragraph with a Topic Sentence after an Introductory Sentence**

Baldness runs in my family, and at thirty-five, I have come to accept my hair loss. But as my hairline receded over the years, I discovered several creative ways to hide thinning hair. My first solution to baldness was to wear a hat. Baseball caps in summer and knit caps in winter were only the beginning. During an “arty” phase in my mid-twenties, I wore a beret, and in the back of a closet somewhere, I still have a dashing Indiana Jones–style hat. Another method I used to hide my thinning hair was the “comb-over”—combing hair over a bald spot. In the earliest stages of baldness, the method worked well for me. But as my hairline receded further, I stopped using the comb-over. I had seen too many men who looked ridiculous with just a few strands of foot-long hair covering a completely bald dome. The best method I have found to hide thinning hair is the one I use now. I have shaved my head completely. Now, no one can tell whether I am bald by nature or by choice. Shaving my head has helped me to get over my embarrassment at being bald. I have finally come to realize that bald is beautiful.
EXERCISE 7  FINDING TOPIC SENTENCES

One of the following paragraphs begins with an introductory sentence, while the other starts with the topic sentence. Underline the topic sentence in each paragraph.

Paragraph A

It has been said that fashion models are essentially walking, strutted sashaying coat hangers to showcase designer fashions and that thin models show off clothing best. But as models have gone from thin to emaciated, public outcry has risen against showcasing designer fashions on models who barely have any flesh on their prominent bones. Some of the outcry followed the anorexia-related deaths of three models, including the French model Isabelle Caro, who was featured on several anti-anorexia billboards. Others who protest the presence of rail-thin models on the catwalk cite the influence on preteen and teenage girls, who may try to mimic an unrealistic and unhealthy body image. Health experts worry about the damage that compulsive dieting can wreak on still-developing bodies. The controversy has spilled into the fashion industry, which has responded with a greater awareness of the issue, with some designers, model agencies, and fashion shows refusing to use models whose body mass index (BMI) falls below a certain level and some working with underweight models to help them reach a healthy weight.

Paragraph B

My brothers, Eric and Michael, are very different in their attitudes about money. Eric and his wife Alexis believe in living for today. They have a new house on the north side of town, a new sport utility vehicle, and a two-year-old Volvo. Their clothes are always designer labels in the latest fashions, and their home is a showplace of fine furniture. But they seldom have time to enjoy these things because they both work two jobs to pay off the massive debt they have accumulated. It is as though their possessions own them. My brother Michael goes a bit too far in the opposite direction. He puts every spare penny away for the future. Though he has a good job, he drives a thirteen-year-old car that rattles as if only habit is holding it together. He argues constantly with his wife, who simply wants decent clothes for herself and their children. Worse yet, he insists on
Progressive Writing Assignment: Topic Sentence

If your instructor has assigned the Progressive Writing Assignment, you have already completed your prewriting for one of the topics below. In this chapter, you will complete your topic sentence.

Topics and Tips for Writing a Topic Sentence

The Topics

- Topic 1: Discuss the results of taking a specific piece of advice from a friend or family member.
- Topic 2: Discuss your decision to attend college.
- Topic 3: Discuss your greatest fear.
- Topic 4: Discuss the types of stress experienced by college students.

Tips for Writing a Topic Sentence

- Decide on the points you will cover in your paragraph and the order in which you will present them. Then write a tentative topic sentence.
- Make sure that the topic sentence presents a specific topic and makes a point about that topic.
- Check to make sure that your topic sentence is not too broad. For example, for Topic 4, “Discuss the types of stress experienced by college students,” the following topic sentence would be too broad:
  - Everybody experiences stress at one time or another.
  The sentence is too broad because the paragraph is not about “everybody”; it is about college students. Two better topic sentences are shown below:
  - College students are prone to certain kinds of stress.
College students most often experience stress related to academic performance and lack of time.

Check to make sure that your topic sentence is not too narrow. For example, for Topic 2, “Discuss your decision to attend college,” the following topic sentence would be too narrow:

I began college just two months ago.

The sentence is too narrow because it does not address the idea of a decision to attend college. Although the sentence might be appropriate as a supporting detail, it is too narrow to be a topic sentence. Two better topic sentences are shown below:

Stuck in a dead-end job, I decided to attend college so that I could do something that will make a difference.

Attending college will help me realize my lifelong dream of being a nurse.

For support in meeting this chapter’s goal, log in to www.mywritinglab.com and select The Topic Sentence.