

# Lesson 5

## Writing a Topic Sentence

### Objective

- To write an effective topic sentence

### Notes to the Teacher

A well-constructed topic sentence provides a firm foundation for writing a good paragraph. It states a limited subject and implies a specific direction for paragraph development. This lesson shows students how to write effective, focused topic sentences that are neither too general nor too specific.

### Procedure

1. Introduce Part 2 by explaining that students will be learning skills that will help them in English, in assignments for other courses, and in everyday activities such as writing letters. You might want to give a general overview of Part 2.
2. Review with students what a topic sentence is. (The topic sentence is the sentence containing the main idea of a paragraph—often, but not always, the first sentence in the paragraph.) Put a couple of good models from the daily newspaper on the overhead— or read the following:

Cats have a magnificent variety of ways of communicating with each other. Some of their methods are so subtle that we human beings are not sensitive enough to understand what they are saying. Their use of body language is most often quiet, controlled and dignified. A mere flick of the tail, the slightest movement of the ears, the mildest dilation of the pupils—these messages are worth a thousand words to another cat. Because their body language is so restrained, and because we find it so difficult to understand, we make mistakes interpreting it.'

Emphasize that all the other sentences in the paragraph support the main idea expressed in the first, topic sentence. The second, third, and fourth sentences all develop the idea that cats communicate with other cats and list ways that they communicate. The subtlety of their movements explains why human beings do not always understand what their cats are saying.

The next day went a little better. It didn't rain, even though it was supposed to. We spent all morning scraping the roof. This took longer than it should have because there was not just one layer of shingles, but four. Then we replaced rotten boards with good ones. It was a lot of hard work, and I broke a lot of nails, but when the day was over and Mrs. Sammy came outside to look at her roof, I got that funny feeling in my stomach again.'

Elicit from students that the topic sentence is "The next day went a little better." Point out that all the other sentences provide details that illustrate and support that topic sentence by telling how the day was better.

Explain that a good topic sentence is not too narrow (broad enough so that you can think of plenty of details to support it) and not too broad (narrow enough so that you don't need to write a whole book to cover it).

3. Also point out that some perfectly good paragraphs do not have a topic sentence at all—because while all sentences support one idea, that idea is not stated. Here's how Marissa Lefland began an essay about helping her father knot his tie when she was young:

"Let's try this one more time, sweetie. Put the larger part over the smaller part and flip through. Wrap the large portion around the back—no, not

'Bruce Fogle, D.V.M., *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Cat Care and Behavior* (San Diego, Calif.: Thunder Bay Press, 1999), 10.

'Wendy Almon, "Mission Trip," *Teen Ink*, June 2000, 27.

'Marissa Lefland, "Morning Ritual," *Teen Ink*, June 2000, 10.

the front—there you go. Then back around the front again. Bring it up through the opening. Put the long part through the loop. Let me do the slipknot, Marissa. It's the daddy's job."<sup>3</sup>

All of the sentences support the idea that Marissa remembers helping her father with his tie—but that idea is not directly stated. Explain that the aim of this lesson, however, will be to help students write focused topic sentences.

- Write on the board the question, "Would you like to go to a party?" Direct students to react by asking questions they would want answered before they could decide whether or not to go to the party; write or have a student write the questions on the board (e.g., Who's giving the party? Who else is going to be there? What should I bring? When is it? Where will it be held? Why—Is this a birthday party or just a chance to hang out? How should I dress?).

Point out that the students' questions were designed to discover specific details behind a general reference to "a party." Explain that these questions are sometimes called the "5 Ws and H" as you circle key words in the questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?). Remind students that these are the same questions they answered in writing the informative piece about their objects in Lesson 2. They are also questions that a writer can use to focus his or her topic sentence and later to elaborate on it (more on that in the next lesson).

- On the board or overhead, write three different nouns or noun phrases, naming a person, a place, and an activity (e.g., the president, art museum, football).
- Ask students to give ten to fifteen spontaneous one-word associations for each of the three. A finished list might look something like this:

<b>Art Museum</b>	
<i>paintings</i>	<i>statues</i>
<i>desk</i>	<i>somber</i>
<i>quiet</i>	<i>relics</i>
<i>spotlights</i>	<i>holy</i>
<i>glass</i>	<i>solemn</i>
<i>reflection</i>	<i>dusty</i>

- Go over each list and have students suggest groupings of words that convey a similar feeling.
- Have students write a sentence about each noun, stating the major feeling revealed in a grouping of words (e.g., The stillness of an art museum reflects the quiet mood that overcomes its visitors). Have student volunteers share sentences with the class and name the feeling conveyed in each.
- Distribute **Handout 6** and point out that a topic sentence names the limited subject of a paragraph, reveals the author's attitude toward it, and indicates a need for development. Have students work in pairs on **Handout 6**.

#### **Suggested Responses:**

Part A.

- a, c*
- a, c*
- b*
- d, because it names the limited subject, reveals the author's attitude, and indicates a need for development*

Part B.

- c*
- b*
- d*

- Distribute **Handout 7** for additional practice with topic sentences.

#### **Suggested Responses:**

- W-Reading science fiction expands imaginative power and stimulates creativity.*
- W-Surviving preseason training challenges the track runner's physical and emotional endurance.*
- W-The current popularity of sewing results from several factors.*
- E**
- W-Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea reflects humans in conflict with nature.*
- W-Autumn, a beautiful but chilly season, is the best time for housecleaning.*

7. *W-Going away to college broadens one's horizons and develops an increased sense of self-confidence.*
8. *E*
9. *E*
10. *W-Food provides enjoyment through color, texture, smell, and taste.*
11. *E*
12. *E*
13. *E*
14. *W-Living with a pet not only provides companionship, but also helps alleviate stress.*

## Recognizing Topic Sentences

### Part A.

**Directions:** Review the following information about effective topic sentences. Then read the statements and answer the questions.

#### An Effective Topic Sentence

- names the limited subject
  - reveals the author's attitude
  - indicates a need for development
- a. Television is a form of entertainment.
  - b. Television has exerted a negative influence on American culture.
  - c. Many people watch soap operas.
  - d. Yesterday's *60 Minutes* exemplifies television's potential as a tool for combining education with entertainment.

1. Which sentences do not reveal any attitude?
  2. Which are basically fact? \_\_\_\_\_
  3. Which is too broad to be a topic sentence?
  4. Which is the best topic sentence? \_\_\_\_\_ Why?
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### Part B.

**Directions:** For each of the sentences below, underline all words that reveal an attitude. Then place a check to the left of the best topic sentence in each group; identify the elements of a topic sentence in each of the sentences you selected as best topic sentences.

1.
  - a. Hard rock was one of the major types of music in the sixties.
  - b. Duke Ellington's music reveals many of the intricacies of jazz.
  - c. Listening to music enables me to relax after a long and tiring day at school.
  - d. During the mid-1970s, Paul McCartney was a popular singer.
  
2.
  - a. In Western Civilization, a course taught by the history department. First-year students learn about ancient Rome.
  - b. Students should receive academic credit for lunch, the most important period of the school day.
  - c. The school day consists of eight periods.
  - d. Biology is the study of plants and animals.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_ a. This year's freshman class has 102 boys and 104 girls.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. The junior class is the largest class in the high school.  
\_\_\_\_\_ c. The student council presidents for the last ten years have all undertaken interesting educational pursuits.  
\_\_\_\_\_ d. The sophomore class has a lot of school spirit.

**Part C.**

**Directions:** Write a specific topic sentence for a paragraph about each of the following topics. Make sure your sentences include the three elements of an effective topic sentence listed in part A.

1. Family

2. Religion

3. Recreation

4. Education

5. Work

6. Stress

7. Poverty

8. Death

### Topic Sentence Practice

W

**Directions:** A group of high school students studying composition wrote the following topic sentences. Read them carefully, and rate them as either effective (E) or weak (W). Revise the ones that you find inadequate.

- \_\_\_\_\_1. All books teach us something.
- \_\_\_\_\_2. When track runners begin their preseason training, their muscles always ache.
- \_\_\_\_\_3. Sewing is a popular craft.
- \_\_\_\_\_4. Today many Americans can stay at home and enjoy entertainment that once could be seen only in theaters and sports arenas.
- \_\_\_\_\_5. Ernest Hemingway is one of the well-known authors in American literature.
- \_\_\_\_\_6. Autumn is a beautiful and chilly season.
- \_\_\_\_\_7. School is a good way to meet new friends and broaden one's horizons.
- \_\_\_\_\_8. Unlike soccer and football, rugby demands true physical endurance.
- \_\_\_\_\_9. The governments of Russia and many other countries are experiencing profound changes.
- \_\_\_\_\_10. Food is one of the things I most enjoy.
- \_\_\_\_\_11. More and more Americans are becoming vegetarians as a result of ethical and medical considerations.
- \_\_\_\_\_12. Instead of spending millions of dollars on space exploration and defense weapons, our government should provide medical care for those unable to afford it themselves.
- \_\_\_\_\_13. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* realistically portrays the plight of the immigrant worker in the Chicago stockyards.
- \_\_\_\_\_14. Owning a pet is healthy.