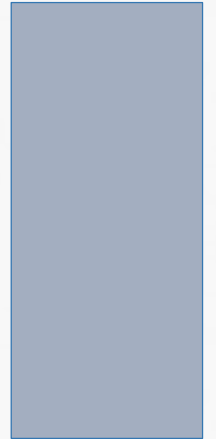


BUILDING STRONG PARAGRAPHS

**THE FOUNDATION IS THE
TOPIC SENTENCE**

LUNCH AND LEARN
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WHAT IS A TOPIC SENTENCE? WHAT IS ITS FUNCTION?

A topic sentence presents a limited topic for a single **paragraph**. The longer your reader spends trying to understand what the paragraph is about, the shorter time they will spend on your arguments.

- A topic sentence uses specific information so your reader knows what you are going to write about.
 - **Not specific:** All murderers should go to jail.
 - **Specific:** All murderers should go to jail because the law needs to be equal, they need to learn a lesson, and it will prevent them from murdering again.

FUNCTION OF A TOPIC SENTENCE

- Topic sentences do not merely repeat point headings. They should be more specific than point headings regarding applicable law or relevant facts.
- A topic sentence is usually the first sentence of your body paragraph and each subsequent paragraph has one.
- Topic Sentences begin the paragraph by explaining, as concisely and directly as possible, the concepts to be discussed and the conclusion they will point to.
- In general, topic sentences do not cite the record, law, or other legal sources.

PARTS OF A TOPIC SENTENCE

Topic + Subject + Controlling idea

- A topic sentence is the main idea/subject of the paragraph.
- It tells what the author is going to say about the subject or controlling idea.
- The controlling idea limits the subject. It tells what the author intends to say about the subject.

A TOPIC SENTENCE IS LIKE AN UMBRELLA OVER THE PARAGRAPH

- A topic sentence must be long enough to cover all the points made in the paragraph.
- Likewise, all the points must FIT under the umbrella.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Topic Sentence: An accused cannot be convicted for fraud if her allegedly false representations were not material to the transaction.

Points: Whether Madame Sosostriis will be convicted depends on whether her conduct is deemed to be fraudulent. The mere telling of a fortune is not *per se* illegal, as the Crown must prove an intent to delude or defraud. *R. v. Dazenbrook* (2004), 64 O.R. (3d) 27 (Ont. C.A.). The offence in s.365(b) does not require proof that the predictions were false or that the accused expressly claimed to have the power to predict the future. *R. v. Labrosse* (2006), 82 O.R. (3d) 522 (Ont. C.A.).

CONTINUED

In *Labrosse*, the Supreme Court of Canada held that an accused may be convicted if she did not honestly believe she could predict the future, but the court left open the question of whether conviction is appropriate if she had an honest belief about this ability. Because blameworthy conduct is an essential requirement for criminal liability in Canadian law, Madame S. will likely be acquitted if she shows that she had an honest belief about her abilities.

What is the topic of this paragraph?

What is the subject?

What is the controlling idea?

CONSTRUCTING A TOPIC SENTENCE

Although the chemical weapons used during the Gulf War were effective winning the war quickly, we are just now discovering the effects they have had on our own soldiers.

➡ Topic: Gulf War

➡ Subject: chemical weapons used during the Gulf War

➡ Controlling Idea: effects they have had on our own soldiers

The Paragraph will talk about the effects of the weapons.

A BAD EXAMPLE: THE POINT IS BURIED AT THE END

In *Beddoes v. Tulkinghorn* (1982) 344 O.R. (2d) 319 (Ont. C.A.), the court held that where the owner of Tulkinghorn's Properties, Inc. refused to sell rent space for a law office to an Indian-Canadian attorney, the landlord was not liable under s.3 of the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, because even though (1) the neighborhood was zoned for residential housing; (2) the office space was in the same building as an apartment complex, and (3) the office space included a kitchen, the office itself was not a "dwelling" and residential use of the space was specifically prohibited in the lease.

A BETTER EXAMPLE: THE POINT APPEARS AT THE OUTSET

Courts have consistently held that a refusal to rent office space does not violate s.3 of the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. For example, the Ontario Court of Appeal has held that where a landlord refused to rent space in an office building to an Indian-Canadian attorney who wanted to open a law office, the landlord's refusal did not "make unavailable [to the attorney] . . . a dwelling," but the plaintiff might have a cause of action under various other civil rights statutes. *Canard v. Petts* (1998), 22 O.R. (3d) 817 (Ont. C.A.).

TOPIC SENTENCES IN PARAGRAPHS THAT ANALYZE AND ARGUE

Topic sentences are particularly useful for writers who have difficulty developing focused, unified paragraphs (i.e., writers who tend to sprawl). Topic sentences help these writers develop a main idea or claim for their paragraphs, and, perhaps most importantly, they help these writers stay focused and keep paragraphs manageable.

Topic sentences are also useful to readers because they guide them through sometimes complex arguments. Many well-known, experienced writers effectively use topic sentences to bridge between paragraphs.

EXAMPLE

¹The punishment of criminals has always been a problem for society. ²Citizens have had to decide whether offenders such as first-degree murderers should be killed in a gas chamber, imprisoned for life, or rehabilitated and given a second chance in society. ³Many citizens argue that serious criminals should be executed. ⁴They believe that killing criminals will set an example for others and also rid society of a cumbersome burden. ⁵Other citizens say that no one has the right to take a life and that capital punishment is not a deterrent to crime. ⁶They believe that society as well as the criminal is responsible for the crimes and that killing the criminal does not solve the problems of either society or the criminal.

ANALYZE THE PRECEDING PARAGRAPH

Sentence **1** puts forth the main claim: *The punishment of criminals has always been a problem for society.* Sentence **2** specifies the exact nature of the problem by listing society's choices: *Citizens have had to decide whether offenders such as first-degree murderers should be killed in a gas chamber, imprisoned for life, or rehabilitated and given a second chance in society.* Sentence **3** further develops the topic by stating one point of view: *Many citizens argue that serious criminals should be executed.* The reasons for this point of view are then provided in sentence **4**: *They believe that killing criminals will set an example for others and also rid society of a cumbersome burden.* Sentence **5** states an opposing point of view: *Other citizens say that no one has the right to take a life and that capital punishment is not a deterrent to crime.* Sentence **6** states the reason for the opposing point of view: *They believe that society as well as the criminal is responsible for the crimes and that killing the criminal does not solve the problems of either society or the criminal.*

REVISING

Goals of Revision:

- 1 Clarify the Facts
- 2 Clarify the Argument
- 3 Streamline Your Sentences
- 4 Make Your Citations Easy to Understand

Front-load your most important ideas and arguments; put the secondary ones later. Consider relegating minor points to the footnotes. This applies to the argument as a whole, and to each section and paragraph.

REVISING

One way to check for effective use of topic sentences is to read only the topic sentence of each paragraph. That should allow you to track the development of the argument.

When possible, use verbs instead of nouns. E.g.,
“administered a test” → “tested”

“raised the argument” → “argued”

“presented a claim” → “claimed”

Be sparing of adverbs, but be aware that a well-chosen adverb can be your friend.

E.g.: The defendant states that the test for “good faith” includes motive, but that is incorrect. → The defendant incorrectly treats motive as a factor in the test for “good faith.”

STREAMLINE YOUR SENTENCES

Keep subjects and verbs close together.

S ... V ... DO → S – V- DO

(bad) “The **Court**, despite failing to point to any proof that Ms. Barr was even aware of the relevant regulations, **proposes** to saddle her with **liability for** ‘knowing’ violation of the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act.”

→ “The Court charges Ms. Barr with ‘knowingly’ violating the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act even though there is no evidence that she had ever heard of the relevant regulations.”

CONTINUED

Keep verbs close their complements, and if possible, build the complement into the verb.

(bad) “The court **held** that the statute, **which required all persons wishing to post handbills to register in advance, was unconstitutional.**”

→ (better) “The court held unconstitutional the statute, which required preregistration for all persons wishing to post handbills.”

→ (even better) “The court rejected [struck down, invalidated] the statute requiring preregistration for all persons wishing to post handbills.”

TRANSITIONS

- Transitions can be one word, a phrase, a sentence, several sentences, even a paragraph.
- Transitions are not just verbal decorations that embellish your paper by making it sound or read better. Transitions establish logical connections between sentences, paragraphs, and sections of your papers.
- Transitions are “clues” that tell the reader to think and react in a particular way to your ideas.
- Without transitions, your paper will be “choppy,” “jumpy,” and/or too “abrupt.”

TRANSITIONS

- Make sure to vary the transition words that you use. Using “however” throughout your essay will sound repetitive and confuse the reader.
- Transitions can be used at the end of most paragraphs to help the paragraphs flow one into the next.
- Usually short (sometimes as short as one or two sentences), a transitional paragraph is most commonly used to summarize the ideas of one part of a text in preparation for the beginning of another part.

WORKS CITED

- Bahrych, Lynn and Marjorie Dick Rombauer. Legal Writing in a Nutshell. West Publishing Co. 2003.