INTRODUCTION

The paragraph is the basic unit of organization of academic writing. It is defined as a group of sentences revolving around one subject. This means that all of the sentences in the paragraph must be related to one another, specifically as controlled by the topic sentence. Paragraphs consist of three basic parts: 1) the topic sentence, 2) supporting sentences, and 3) the concluding sentence.

THE TOPIC SENTENCE

The topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph because it controls or regulates the content of the rest of the paragraph. In a standard paragraph, the topic sentence is the first sentence of that paragraph, although in more complex writing it may occur in other places as well — in the middle or even at the end. Placing the topic sentence in the beginning of that paragraph, however, this gives the reader a good idea of what they will be reading, that is, what to expect in the paragraph, thus making it easier for the reader to understand the content.

Because the topic sentence must control all of the sentences in the paragraph, it is the most general sentence in the paragraph. This means that topic sentences must not contain many details, which are later given instead in the supporting sentences that follow. Topic sentences then should not be too specific. Conversely, they should not be too general.
**Too specific:** Early childhood education involves learning how to read and write, learning how to perform mathematical operations, and learning social skills.

**Too general:** Early childhood education is important.

**Just right:** Early childhood education has a huge impact on a person’s later intellectual development.

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Topic sentences consist of two parts: the topic and the controlling idea. The topic simply states what the subject of the paragraph is. The controlling idea narrows the focus of the topic. Without a controlling idea, it would be impossible to write a paragraph as there would just be too many ideas to cover. Notice how the same topic could have different controlling ideas, which would then yield completely different paragraphs.

1) **Smartphones** have made our lives easier in several ways.

   topic                                controlling idea

2) **Smartphones** have had a negative impact on our socialization skills.

   topic                                controlling idea

3) **Smartphones** keep improving every year.

   topic                                controlling idea
The first example would yield a positive paragraph about smartphones, the second a negative one, and the third a neutral one. Clearly, then, the controlling idea in a topic sentence has a significant impact on the content that follows in the paragraph.

THE SUPPORTING SENTENCES

Recall that the topic sentence states the main idea of a paragraph. Of course, the topic sentence by itself is not enough. It only states a proposition that needs to be explained, or supported, by evidence. Otherwise, it is just an idea that may or may not be true. The reader has no information with which to decide whether or not the statement should be believed without evidence.

Topic sentences, then, create a question in the reader’s mind that must be explained or argued. For example, if the topic sentence is “Tokyo is an interesting place to visit,” the reader will immediately ask, “Why is Tokyo interesting?” If the topic sentence is “There are several things people can do to reduce the impact of climate change,” the reader will immediately ask, “What can we do?” If the topic sentence is “Studies show that a lack of sleep can academic performance,” the reader will want to know how it may impact academic performance.

Therefore, topic sentences must then be explained, or supported, in the body of the paragraph. This is done through the use of supporting sentences. Supporting sentences develop the main idea that was stated in the topic sentence. Support can come in the form of reasons, advantages, categories, or events in narration. Supporting sentences are themselves supported through the use of details, such as examples, facts and statistics, descriptions, explanations, definitions, and quotes/expert opinions.
EXAMPLES OF SPECIFIC SUPPORT

1) Facts - Facts provide objective evidence which can serve to strengthen the point you are trying to make. Instead of relying solely on the subjective nature of your opinion, you can support your position through the weight of real-world scientific, historical, or statistical evidence. For example: Smoking is bad for you is a statement which can be construed as merely the opinion of one individual, based perhaps on a dislike of cigarette smoke rather than on any type of objective reality. However, adding the statement It has been shown that thirty percent of all smokers will eventually die from lung cancer, heart disease, or some other respiratory ailment now adds the weight of science behind your argument, strengthening the force and persuasiveness of your contention.

2) Descriptions - Descriptions are mental images a writer creates of objects, people, places, etc. Good descriptions paint a clear and vivid picture of what you are talking about. Descriptions can serve to persuade the reader by adding the force of imagery to the message you are trying to convey. For example: If you are writing about how animals are mistreated, just saying I found a cat which was mistreated is not enough to make the reader feel what you really mean. However, if you talk about the kitten’s large, sad, sorrowful eyes, or about its small, trembling body and dirty matted fur – these details make the reader feel much more strongly about what you are writing about.
3) **Examples** - Examples are used when there are too many cases of a thing, person, or action for you to write about; instead, you write about just one or two, and those examples help to understand all of the cases. **For example:** You want to tell the reader about violent movies. However, there are hundreds of violent movies produced each year and of course you cannot describe them all. Instead, you choose one or two which you believe will best show your main idea to be true, and then describe them with details you believe will best make your point.

4) **Explanations/Reasons** - Sometimes when you wish to make a reader understand a difficult point, simple facts, descriptions, or examples are not enough. Explanations and reasons answer the questions **HOW?** and **WHY?** respectively, and are useful for detailing a process, situation or event, particularly one that involves some degree of complexity. **For example:** How does one study a foreign language effectively? Why did the North Korean Ambassador walk out of the peace talks? What makes black-and-white photographs more artistic than color photographs? All of these questions require some detailed explanation or reason in order for the writer to effectively convey an idea.

*Examples of Unsupported and Supported Paragraphs*

**Unsupported:**

Macintosh computers are much easier to use than PC-based systems. Macintosh computers are easy to use; very little training is needed to operate them. Although they do not have a very large share of the computer market, their users feel very strongly about them. On
the Internet, fights sometimes break out over which computer system is best, and Macintosh users speak very passionately on the subject. This is because the ease of use makes people feel very strongly about their computers.

More Support:

Macintosh computers are much easier to use than PC-based systems. Macintosh computers are easy to use; very little training is needed to operate them. The programs are very “intuitive,” which means that people can understand how to use them just by looking at them. Since computers are complex machines, this ease of use makes a big difference. That difference makes their users feel very strongly about them, even though they do not have a very large share of the computer market. Often, on the Internet, fights break out over which is the best computer platform. PC users often talk about how many more programs are available for the PC, or how it costs less; Mac users, however, always stand by the strong point that using a Mac is more comfortable because you don’t have to study as hard to use it, and fewer problems come up. Macs, they argue, are simply a pleasure to use; that certainly explains why they feel so strongly about it.

Most Support:

Macintosh computers are much easier to use than PC-based systems. Macintosh computers, usually called “Macs,” are easy to use; very little training is needed to operate them. The programs are very “intuitive,” which means that you can understand how to use one just by looking at it. For example, when you put a floppy disk in the computer, a little picture of it, called an “icon,” shows up on the screen. That icon can be moved around just like an object in your hand. On the PC, you have to search for the floppy, and sometimes it is hard to find. Macs have been easy to use since the beginning; back in 1984, when PCs were
still text-only systems using a very complicated computer language, the first Mac came out. I saw it in a store, was interested, and started to use it. Without any training or instructions, I was able to open programs, draw pictures, and even redesign the appearance of the computer screen. The sales people in the shop enjoyed having me play on that computer because I was an excellent example to customers of how easy it was to learn. I probably sold more computers than they did -- and I am still hooked on the Mac’s ease-of-use today.

THE CONCLUDING SENTENCE

The concluding sentence signals that the reader has reached the end of the paragraph. For longer paragraphs, you should include a concluding sentence to make the paragraph complete. There are two types of concluding sentences.

The first type of concluding sentence is one that 1) restates the controlling idea of the topic sentence and 2) summarizes the supporting points in the body. “Restate” means to say the main idea using different words. That is, don't simply repeat the main idea of the topic sentence. “Summarize” means to express the supporting points in a short form. These sentences often begin with a concluding signal, such as:

In conclusion,
To conclude,
In brief,
In short,
To sum up,
In summary,
In brief,

or with grammatical expressions such as:

It is/seems clear that…
These examples show that…

For foregoing reasons…

**Example of the first type of concluding sentence.**

If the topic sentence is:

People become vegetarians for several reasons.

A concluding sentence might read:

In sum, people chose vegetarianism for a variety of reasons.

Restatement of main idea

including improved health, moral reasons, and protection of the environment.

Summary of supporting points

The second type of concluding sentence is one that leave the reader with a final thought or comment about the topic expressed in the paragraph.

**Example of the second type of concluding sentence.**

If the topic sentence is:

People become vegetarians for several reasons.

A concluding sentence might read:

It seems clear that as time goes on, vegetarianism will become increasingly popular.
For more information on paragraphs, click on the OWL at Purdue link below.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/paragraphs_and_paragraphing/index.html

**Example Paragraph**

Japanese students have difficulty learning English for three reasons: its complex grammar, unusual spelling, and troublesome pronunciation. First, English grammar is much more complex compared to many other languages. For example, English contains a great number of irregular verb forms. Another difficulty Japanese students have is dealing with the unusual spellings of English words. While some words like cat and sit follow regular spelling rules, words like knight and though contain “silent letters” which are not pronounced when spoken. Finally, the English language contains a great many sounds that do not exist in the Japanese language. For instance, Japanese learners must learn complex new sounds such as the two *th* sounds, the *r* and *l* sounds, and the *v* sound in order to properly speak the English language. In conclusion, learning English presents several difficulties for the Japanese learner.

- = Topic Sentence
- = Supporting Points
- = Details
- = Concluding Sentence