

# Topic Sentences

## What is a topic sentence?

A topic sentence is a summary of the content—often a sub-argument—contained in a paragraph (or, in more complex essays, a multi-paragraph section). It usually, but not always, comes at the beginning of the paragraph. **Not every effective paragraph needs a topic sentence**, especially in genres of writing they're not suited to, like the narrative case study.<sup>1</sup> That said, especially in argumentative writing, strong topic sentences can mean the difference between a wholly convinced reader and a totally confused one. We'll briefly outline how topic sentences work in argumentative and descriptive writing.

## Argumentative Topic Sentences

**An argumentative topic sentence (TS) is like a mini thesis for the paragraph.**<sup>2</sup> It should briefly summarize your paragraph's portion of the argument in a way that keeps the reader oriented within the paragraph. This means:

- **Signposting** for the paragraph! It can be a good idea to use specific language in the TS that links it to specific parts of your paragraph.
  - You should also allude to those ideas in the right order, the same way your thesis would indicate the order in which you'll address ideas in your paper.

**A TS is also an extension of the paper's thesis**, linking back clearly to whichever part of the thesis you're trying to prove with this particular paragraph. This means:

- Repeating specific words and phrases signposted in your paper's thesis and/or roadmap.

Basically, in a well-organized essay, each TS simultaneously answers (a) what this paragraph is about and (b) what part of your thesis this paragraph corresponds to and/or proves.

Does an argumentative TS need a transition sentence before it?

- In most cases, you will want a short transition phrase or clause—typically between a few words and 1.5 whole lines—at the start of the TS ("However, despite the significance of [main idea from prior paragraph], [TS]"). In some cases, one transition word or phrase ("However," "Additionally," "On the other hand," etc.) is enough, as long as it meaningfully communicates the relationship between this paragraph and the last.
- In some cases, especially in longer papers (say, 15+ pages), a whole transition sentence before the TS might be appropriate. But be wary: Having a TS start each paragraph is a way of setting up parallel structure in your essay. If the reader always knows where to expect each TS, they easily stay oriented in the essay.

## Examples

1. *Poor topic sentence*: "In 'The Friar's Tale,' a devil disguised as a yeoman tells the protagonist that Hell's powers are limited by God's will."<sup>3</sup>
  - Your paragraph isn't just about what does or doesn't happen in the text you're analyzing; it's about whatever you want to argue using that evidence!

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<sup>1</sup> "Paragraphs." *Texas A&M University Writing Center*, <https://writingcenter.tamu.edu/faculty-advisors/resources-for-teaching/instruction/paragraphs>. Accessed 12 August 2023.

<sup>2</sup> "Paragraphs: Topic Sentences." *Walden University*, <https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/paragraphs/topicsentences#:~:text=A%20strong%20topic%20sentence%20should,creating%20an%20effective%20topic%20sentence>. Accessed 12 August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, writing samples are used anonymous with the permission of their Vanderbilt student authors.

2. *Stronger topic sentence*: “Through the words and actions of its yeoman devil, 'The Friar's Tale' sketches out a **robust theology** in which devils are instruments of God's plan, tempting men only so that they can earn salvation by resisting.”
  - This TS doesn't try to argue the whole thesis, or even the whole argument about "The Friar's Tale," but it clearly delineates the part that it does argue. It's also linked through signposting to the thesis, which includes the phrase "a robust theology."

### Descriptive Topic Sentences

A descriptive topic sentence is often easier to craft than an argumentative one: It typically only has to concisely preview and summarize your paragraph. It doesn't need to keep a reader oriented in a progressing argument; it just needs to progress the narrative, summary, or description you're providing. A descriptive topic sentence might introduce a providing-background paragraph in a paper from any discipline, a summary section of a literature review, or the outlining-variables section of a lab report. It provides:

1. **Context** for what's about to be discussed.
2. **An organized structure** that makes it easier for the reader to process and retain information.
  - To make sure your reader understands your structure, signposting is still a good idea, and you should keep the order in which you describe different elements in mind.

#### Example 1: History paper outlining and assessing Johnson's presidency

“Just after winning the election in November 1964, Johnson created an interagency task force chaired by William P. Bundy to review the Vietnam policy and settled on a graduated response.”<sup>4</sup>

- This topic sentence contains a transition (underlined) and moves the reader from one section of this narrative of Johnson's presidency to the next. It walks the line between argumentative and descriptive.

#### Example 2: Review of a psychological research article

“To test these theories, EG's performance on behavioral tasks and her brain activity measured by fMRI were compared to those of control groups of individuals with neurotypical brains.”

- This topic sentence concisely signals the transition from summarizing the article's theoretical foundations to describing its methods. The author goes on to describe the behavioral tasks and then how brain activity was measured, in that order.

### Final Notes

1. Topic sentences should be specific, since they're much more narrowly focused than a thesis. A paragraph-level TS should not be applicable to multiple paragraphs. It should only summarize the paragraph it applies to.
2. Avoid putting a quotation in any topic sentence! Quotations are for evidence, and a TS should primarily reflect your own ideas, arguments, or organizing principles.
  - One exception is when a source has some sort of specialized vocabulary; in that case, you might quote a word or phrase for concision and specificity.
3. If you write your topic sentences before your paragraphs, make sure to check if they need revision after the paragraphs are written. Often, the main point of the paragraph will change as you write it.

<sup>4</sup> Gupta, Ashwin. "The Turning Point of the Vietnam War and Johnson's Legacy." *Scaffold*, vol. 1, 2019, [https://ejournals.library.vanderbilt.edu/index.php/UWS/issue/view/scaffold\\_2019](https://ejournals.library.vanderbilt.edu/index.php/UWS/issue/view/scaffold_2019). Accessed 12 August 2023.