

Student Feature - Advice on Constructing Topic Sentences

Written by Antony Martel

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ANTONY MARTEL, FEB 1 2017

A topic sentence is a vital and often overlooked element of writing. It clearly and concisely introduces an idea and stresses the importance of themes mentioned later in the paragraph. It can be a reader's guiding light or the bane of their existence. In that sense a topic sentence acts like a road map that when drawn accurately can be essential, but can also be disastrous if it guides the reader down the wrong path. The aim of this feature is to provide the tools to write well-structured topic sentences and avoid those that are wordy and logically inconsistent with your thesis. The information presented here is by no means an exhaustive discussion about topic sentences, and there are many places to look for further information about this convention of writing. Feel free to take what you think is useful and you will be well on your way to developing a more cohesive style of writing.

A good topic sentence is like cohesive glue. It binds the paragraph's context with its concepts, which altogether connect to the larger ideas mentioned in the thesis statement. It is the reader's map to your ideas. The writer must use purposeful language to strike a careful balance among these forces. Expressing thematic terms to explain the concepts that form an idea accomplishes these three tasks at once.

Themes generate logical consistency to guide the reader's attention toward your argument. They can be thought of as phrases in a musical composition. The topic sentence is the overture that introduces the reader to your ideas with key thematic terms, like phrases in a composition, as close to the ending as possible. The first few words of the sentence will address the issue and follow by directing the reader toward your perspective. In this way your topic sentence introduces the familiar and ends by stressing emphasis on what is new to the reader, your idea.

Writing topic sentences is like constructing a building. If an essay is your house, then the topic sentences of each paragraph are the framework that gives it structure. The framework connects to the roof, in this case the thesis statement, which is secure as long as these two elements are mutually reinforcing. The framework is strong when there is evidence at the foundation to stand on. The foundation, no matter how firm it may be, will not fortify the roof unless there is a framework to support it. A topic sentence is essential to the construction of your argument in the same way that the framework fortifies a house.

Introducing the paragraph's topic is the beginning of your analysis, which does not involve listing the points that will be discussed. If we return to the house analogy, beginning your paragraph with a summary builds a weak frame that collapses under the weight of the roof, which in this case would be your argument. A topic sentence does more than summarize. A good topic sentence keeps the reader in the loop by using conceptual terms that flow back to your thesis statement. It analyzes an idea and expands the reader's insight to better their understanding of the topic.

Topic sentences are similar to micro thesis statements that explain the relationship between individual ideas in an essay and its larger focus. Therefore the introduction of your topic should be thought as more of a segment than a sentence. It can consist of two or three sentences with concepts that orbit and illuminate the topic. It is important to keep in mind that your introductory segment consists of all the important elements of your idea that you will discuss in the paragraph. This introductory segment of your paragraph is the set of promises that you will deliver in the discussion that follows.

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A good example to demonstrate an effective topic sentence is found in Ann Florini's *The Evolution of International Norms*:

Norms, like **genes**, carry instructions. In organic evolution, the entity being instructed is a single biological organism. The evolutionary analogy is broadly appropriate for norms operating in any type of social grouping. In the norm analogy, the entity being instructed could be an individual, a state, or whatever other social grouping is most useful for purposes of analysis. To examine changes in state behavior, as we do here, obviously the appropriate entity to consider is the state as the "organism" that carries out the behavioral instructions of the norm (Florini, 374).

Florini starts this paragraph concretely by defining a connection between the functions of ideas (**Norms**) with evolutionary biology (**Genes**). She expands this original concept in an analogy to explain how states are a complete organism that behaves according to a set of ideas. Her idea in this paragraph is central to her thesis about the adaptive nature of norms. She creates an image and clearly presents it to the reader. This is an example of good academic writing.

The key take away when thinking about topic sentences is to be mindful of the paragraph's purpose. Use your introductory segment to generate coherence within your work by mentioning themes that will guide the reader in your line of thinking. The topic sentence is a signpost that directs the reader in the direction of your idea. Writing topic sentences that illuminate your idea is a skill that is central to becoming a better writer. You will begin to prioritize your information as you write, which will make your prose clearer and more succinct.

About the author:

Antony Martel is a Masters candidate in International Relations at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) in Ås, Norway where he advises students on principles of academic writing at NMBU's Writing Center. He is a member of the editorial board for NMBU's Student Journal of Life Sciences.