Imagine reading one long block of text, with each idea blurring into the next. You are likely to lose interest in a piece of writing that is disorganized and spans many pages without breaks. Paragraphs separate ideas into logical, manageable chunks, each paragraph focusing on only one main idea and presenting coherent sentences to support that one point. Because all the sentences in one paragraph support the same point, a paragraph may stand on its own. For most types of informative or persuasive academic writing, writers find it helpful to think of the paragraph analogous to an essay, as each is controlled by a main idea or point, and that idea is developed by an organized group of more specific ideas. Thus, the thesis of the essay is analogous to the topic sentence of a paragraph, just as the supporting sentences in a paragraph are analogous to the supporting paragraphs in an essay.

In essays, each supporting paragraph adds another related main idea to support the writer’s thesis, or controlling idea. Each related supporting idea is developed with facts, examples, and other details that explain it. By exploring and refining one idea at a time, writers build a strong case for their thesis. Effective paragraphing makes the difference between a satisfying essay that readers can easily process and one that requires readers to mentally organize the piece themselves. Thoughtful organization and development of each body paragraph leads to an effectively focused, developed, and coherent essay.

An effective paragraph contains three main parts:

- a topic sentence
- body, supporting sentences
- a concluding sentence

In informative and persuasive writing, the topic sentence is usually the first sentence or second sentence of a paragraph and expresses its main idea, followed by supporting sentences that help explain, prove, or enhance the topic sentence. In narrative and descriptive paragraphs, however, topic sentences may be implied rather than explicitly
stated, with all supporting sentences working to create the main idea. If the paragraph contains a concluding sentence, it is the last sentence in the paragraph and reminds the reader of the main point by restating it in different words. The following figure illustrates the most common paragraph structure for informative and persuasive college essays.

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**Paragraph Structure Graphic Organizer**

**Topic Sentence (topic + comment/judgment/interpretation):**

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

**Supporting Sentence 1:** _____________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Supporting Sentence 2:** _____________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Supporting Sentence 3:** _____________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Supporting Sentence 4:** _____________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Supporting Sentence 5:** _____________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Supporting Sentence 6:** _____________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Concluding Sentence (summary of comment/judgment/interpretation):**
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

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**Note**

The number of supporting sentences varies according to the paragraph’s purpose and the writer’s sentence structure.

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**Creating Focused Paragraphs with Topic Sentences**

The foundation of a paragraph is the topic sentence, which expresses the main idea or point of the paragraph. The topic sentence functions two ways: it clearly refers to and supports the essay’s thesis, and it indicates what will follow in the rest of the paragraph. As the unifying sentence for the paragraph, it is the most general sentence, whereas all supporting sentences provide different types of more specific information, such as facts, details, or examples.
An effective topic sentence has the following characteristics:

- **A topic sentence provides an accurate indication of what will follow in the rest of the paragraph.**
  - **Weak example:** First, we need a better way to educate students.
  - **Explanation:** The claim is vague because it does not provide enough information about what will follow, and it is too broad to be covered effectively in one paragraph.
  - **Stronger example:** Creating a national set of standards for math and English education will improve student learning in many states.
  - **Explanation:** The sentence replaces the vague phrase “a better way” and leads readers to expect supporting facts and examples as to why standardizing education in these subjects might improve student learning in many states.

- **A good topic sentence is the most general sentence in the paragraph and thus does not include supporting details.**
  - **Weak example:** Salaries should be capped in baseball for many reasons, most importantly so we don’t allow the same team to win year after year.
  - **Explanation:** This topic sentence includes a supporting detail that should be included later in the paragraph to back up the main point.
  - **Stronger example:** Introducing a salary cap would improve the game of baseball for many reasons.
  - **Explanation:** This topic sentence omits the additional supporting detail so that it can be expanded upon later in the paragraph, yet the sentence still makes a claim about salary caps – improvement of the game.

- **A good topic sentence is clear and easy to follow.**
  - **Weak example:** In general, writing an essay, thesis, or other academic or nonacademic document is considerably easier and of much higher quality if you first construct an outline, of which there are many different types.
  - **Explanation:** The confusing sentence structure and unnecessary vocabulary bury the main idea, making it difficult for the reader to follow the topic sentence.
  - **Stronger example:** Most forms of writing can be improved by first creating an outline.
  - **Explanation:** This topic sentence cuts out unnecessary verbiage and simplifies the previous statement, making it easier for the reader to follow. The writer can include examples of what kinds of writing can benefit from outlining in the supporting sentences.

### Location of Topic Sentences

A topic sentence can appear anywhere within a paragraph or can be implied (such as in narrative or descriptive writing). In college-level expository or persuasive writing, placing an explicit topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph (the first or second sentence) makes it easier for readers to follow the essay and for writers to stay on topic, but writers should be aware of variations and maintain the flexibility to adapt to different writing projects. The following examples illustrate varying locations for the topic sentence. In each example, the topic sentence is underlined.

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Powered by
After reading the new TV guide this week I wondered why we are still being bombarded with reality shows, a plague that continues to darken our airwaves. Along with the return of viewer favorites, we are to be cursed with yet another mindless creation. Prisoner follows the daily lives of eight suburban housewives who have chosen to be put in jail for the purposes of this fake psychological experiment. A preview for the first episode shows the usual tears and tantrums associated with reality television. I dread to think what producers will come up with next season and hope that other viewers will express their criticism. These producers must stop the constant stream of meaningless shows without plotlines. We've had enough reality television to last us a lifetime!

The first sentence tells readers that the paragraph will be about reality television shows, and it expresses the writer’s distaste for these shows through the use of the word bombarded. Each of the following sentences in the paragraph supports the topic sentence by providing further information about a specific reality television show and why the writer finds it unappealing. The final sentence is the concluding sentence. It reiterates the main point that viewers are bored with reality television shows by using different words from the topic sentence.

Paragraphs that begin with the topic sentence move from the general to the specific. They open with a general statement about a subject (reality shows) and then discuss specific examples (the reality show Prisoner). Most academic essays contain the topic sentence at the beginning of the first paragraph.

Last year, a cat traveled 130 miles to reach its family, who had moved to another state and had left their pet behind. Even though it had never been to their new home, the cat was able to track down its former owners. A dog in my neighborhood can predict when its master is about to have a seizure. It makes sure that he does not hurt himself during an epileptic fit. Compared to many animals, our own senses are almost dull.

The last sentence of this paragraph is the topic sentence. It draws on specific examples (a cat that tracked down its owners and a dog that can predict seizures) and then makes a general statement that draws a conclusion from these examples (animals’ senses are better than humans’). In this case, the supporting sentences are placed before the topic sentence and the concluding sentence is the same as the topic sentence. This technique is frequently used in persuasive writing. The writer produces detailed examples as evidence to back up his or her point, preparing the reader to accept the concluding topic sentence as the truth.
When the Topic Sentence Appears in the Middle of the Paragraph

For many years, I suffered from severe anxiety every time I took an exam. Hours before the exam, my heart would begin pounding, my legs would shake, and sometimes I would become physically unable to move. Last year, I was referred to a specialist and finally found a way to control my anxiety—breathing exercises. It seems so simple, but by doing just a few breathing exercises a couple of hours before an exam, I gradually got my anxiety under control. The exercises help slow my heart rate and make me feel less anxious. Better yet, they require no pills, no equipment, and very little time. It’s amazing how just breathing correctly has helped me learn to manage my anxiety symptoms.

In this paragraph, the underlined sentence is the topic sentence. It expresses the main idea—that breathing exercises can help control anxiety. The preceding sentences enable the writer to build up to his main point (breathing exercises can help control anxiety) by using a personal anecdote (how he used to suffer from anxiety). The supporting sentences then expand on how breathing exercises help the writer by providing additional information. The last sentence is the concluding sentence and restates how breathing can help manage anxiety. Placing a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph is often used in creative writing. If you notice that you have used a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph in an academic essay, read through the paragraph carefully to make sure that it contains only one major topic.

Implied Topic Sentences

Some well-organized paragraphs do not contain a topic sentence at all, a technique often used in descriptive and narrative writing. Instead of being directly stated, the main idea is implied in the content of the paragraph, as in the following narrative paragraph:

Heaving herself up the stairs, Luella had to pause for breath several times. She let out a wheeze as she sat down heavily in the wooden rocking chair. Tao approached her cautiously, as if she might crumble at the slightest touch. He studied her face, like parchment, stretched across the bones so finely he could almost see right through the skin to the decaying muscle underneath. Luella smiled a toothless grin.

Although no single sentence in this paragraph states the main idea, the entire paragraph focuses on one concept—that Luella is extremely old. The topic sentence is thus implied rather than stated so that all the details in the paragraph can work together to convey the dominant impression of Luella’s age. In a paragraph such as this one, an explicit topic sentence would seem awkward and heavy-handed. Implied topic sentences work well if the writer has a firm idea of what he or she intends to say in the paragraph and sticks to it. However, a paragraph loses its effectiveness if an implied topic sentence is too subtle or the writer loses focus.

Exercise 16

In each of the following sentence pairs, choose the more effective topic sentence.
1. a. This paper will discuss the likelihood of the Democrats winning the next election.
   b. To boost their chances of winning the next election, the Democrats need to listen to public opinion.

2. a. The unrealistic demands of union workers are crippling the economy for three main reasons.
   b. Union workers are crippling the economy because companies are unable to remain competitive as a result of added financial pressure.

3. a. Authors are losing money as a result of technological advances.
   b. The introduction of new technology will devastate the literary world.

4. a. Rap music is produced by untalented individuals with oversized egos.
   b. This essay will consider whether talent is required in the rap music industry.

Exercise 17

Read the following statements and evaluate each as a topic sentence.

1. Exercising three times a week is healthy.
2. Sexism and racism exist in today’s workplace.
3. I think we should raise the legal driving age.
4. Owning a business.
5. There are too many dogs on the public beach.

Exercise 18

Create a topic sentence on each of the following subjects. Write your responses on your own sheet of paper.

1. An endangered species
2. The cost of fuel
3. The legal drinking age
4. A controversial film or novel