

Session 3

Title: Topic sentences, Controlling Supporting details

In this session we will be looking at the importance of writing good topic sentences. A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph. It is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include and what to exclude. The reader, on the other hand, can see what the paragraph is going to be about and is, therefore, better prepared to understand it. An important point to remember is that a topic sentence is a complete sentence containing both a topic and a controlling idea.

ACTIVITY 1: Class discussion

1. What is a topic sentence?
2. What is a controlling idea?
3. Read the paragraphs on “ What is a topic sentence/Controlling idea”

HANDOUT 3A

What is a topic sentence/controlling idea?

The Parts of a Paragraph

A paragraph generally has three parts: a **topic sentence**, **support**, and a **conclusion**. The topic sentence tells the topic (what the paragraph is about) and the writer’s attitude or idea about the topic. The supporting part of the paragraph explains, describes, or develops the main idea given in the topic sentence. The conclusion of the paragraph usually summarises or comments on the main idea. The length of the paragraph depends on the complexity of the topic.

Look at the three main parts in the following paragraph. The topic sentence is in bold print and the concluding sentence is underlined. The rest of the paragraph is the support.

Parents can help their children be successful in school by encouraging them.
Children usually enjoy playing games instead of studying their boring lessons, so parents have to take the responsibility to monitor their studying and to remind them to do their homework at home after school. Parents should also encourage their children to study by buying story books with pictures, or they can buy text books or tapes that help children

learn to spell or read. The best way to encourage children to study efficiently is to reward them when they get an “A”. As a child, I experienced this. My parents gave me a gift if I had studied well. I was very excited. So, if parents really want their children to succeed in school, they need to pay attention to their children’s studies and encourage them.

The Topic Sentence

The **topic sentence** is the main-idea sentence. It is the most general and most iimportant sentence of the paragraph. It tells the following:

1. The topic ---- what the paragraph is about
2. The controlling idea ---- the writer’s attitude or idea about the topic

The **controlling idea** is a word or phrase that focuses or controls the information in the rest of the paragraph. The reader can ask questions about the controlling idea and expect to have them answered in the paragraph.

In the paragraph above, the topic sentence is:

Parents can help their children be successful in school by encouraging them.

The topic of the sentence is ***how parents can help children succeed in school***; the controlling idea is ***encouraging***. The reader might ask the following questions and expect the paragraph to answer them:

- How can parents encourage their children?
- What specific things should parents do to encourage their children?
- How will this encouragement lead to success?

The topic sentence gives the writer’s attitude, opinion, or idea about the topic. In it, the writer makes a judgement. Often, the topic sentence will include words

like helpful, easy, difficult, exciting, dangerous, disappointing, useful, encourage, deserve, protect, improve, forgive, value, and so on.

ACTIVITY 2: The topic and the controlling ideas in topic—sentences

Study the following topic sentences. Underline the topic and circle the controlling idea in each one. The first one is done as an example.

1. Receiving an 'F' on my report card was a humiliating experience.
2. When I was a child, my grandfather's backyard was a magical place.
3. One reason I admire Nelson Mandela is that he never gave up.
4. The first step in learning how to do word processing is the hardest.
5. The greatest difference in education between the two countries is the number of subjects students must take.
6. Another way to reduce the rate of inflation is to balance the federal budget.
7. A final advantage Martina Navratilova had on the court was her constant aggressiveness.
8. A properly planned science fiction course should include a unit on political implications.
9. Einstein's unsuccessful attempt to get nuclear weapons banned was disappointing to him.
10. One of the biggest problems with scholarships in athletics is that more attention is paid to sports than to education.
11. Some seeming English-Spanish equivalents are deceptive.

12. Another reason air pollution is hazardous is that it damages the earth's ozone layer.
13. Savings bonds are also a safe investment.
14. Although bright, Sheila is a very shy girl.
15. Another problem for students is finding a part-time job.

Since a paragraph is a short piece of writing, the topic sentence for a paragraph must be precise. A topic sentence that is too broad and vague will be difficult to develop adequately in one paragraph. Look at this topic sentence:

Pollution is a problem.

There are many kinds of pollution and they each create a variety of problems. The writer should limit the topic to a particular kind of pollution and focus on a particular problem. For e.g.

*The pollution of Tasik Bukit Merah in Taiping has caused problems for swimmers.*__ (Here, the topic sentence is more focused)

ACTIVITY 3: Identifying topic sentences

Study the following pairs of topic sentences.

Circle the letter (a or b) of the better topic sentence in each pair. The first one is

- done as an example.



1. (a) Divorce creates problems for parents and children.

(b) When their parents divorce, children often feel insecure.

2. (a) Bukit Tinggi, Pahang is an interesting place to visit.

(b) The French-themed attraction at Bukit Tinggi, Pahang has a quaint, European
_____ charm.

3. (a) Walking is good for your heart.

(b) Exercise is good for you.

4. (a) Computers are more important now than ever before.

- (b) Computers make revising an essay easy.
- 5. (a) My parents have taught me to be persistent.
 - (b) My parents have had a great influence on me.
- 6. (a) There are many things that make learning the English language difficult.
 - (b) What makes English particularly difficult to learn is pronunciation.
- 7. (a) Enrolling in college is not an easy task.
 - (b) Registration at [ImpianState](#) College is a painful process.
- 8. (a) Gone with the Wind may be an old film, but it is still a good film.
 - (b) The acting in Gone with the Wind was superb.
- 9. (a) The wide variety of merchandise makes Jusco convenient.
 - (b) The home repair department in Jusco is convenient.
- 10. (a) The architecture in Kuala Lumpur reflects trends in modern design.
 - (b) Kuala Lumpur is an interesting city because of its history, architecture and sports activities.

The topic sentence can appear in a number of places in a paragraph. Often, it is the first sentence of the paragraph. Writing the topic sentence at the beginning helps the writer to remember the controlling idea. It also helps the reader to focus quickly on the important information in the paragraph.

The topic sentence can also appear in the middle or at the end of the paragraph. It is possible for the topic sentence not to appear in the paragraph at all; it can be implied. In this case, the writer has the topic sentence in his or her mind and uses it to control the

paragraph. If the writer uses an implied topic sentence, he or she must be sure that the reader can clearly understand the writer's attitude or controlling idea from the flow of ideas in the paragraph.

ACTIVITY 4: Practice in writing topic sentences

1. Study the following paragraphs.
2. Underline the topic.
3. Circle the controlling idea in each topic sentence.
4. Write out the topic sentence for each paragraph.

HANDOUT 35

A. Ads on TV give consumers a lot of information. They let consumers know what products look like, how much they cost, and where they are available. For example, a Toyota dealer wants to sell the Toyota Camry. The dealer's ads will show the new Camry over and over again and tell the consumer that the Camry has power windows, six

cylinders, etc. The ads may compare the Camry with the Mercedes. They may say that the Camry runs as well as the Mercedes but the Camry's price is much cheaper. The ads may also tell where to buy the Camry. It is only sold at the Toyota dealer, which is located along [Jalan Syed](#) Ahmad. When consumers see these ads, they think about all this information about the Camry. Then they can decide if it is the car they want.

Topic Sentence: _____

B. The next time you go shopping at the [Mesra](#) Superstore, pay attention when the salesman is checking out items. You can see the price of each item coming up on the computer screen one at a time, and you can also hear the computer repeating the price. The only thing that the salesman has to do is just pass the items over the surface of the computer, and it takes care of the rest. Then, when the salesman finishes checking the items, the computer prints out a total list of all your items, including taxes. A salesman, depending on how fast he moves, can check out hundreds of items in eight to ten minutes. Thus, the computer has really speeded up the checkout process in stores.

Topic Sentence: _____

C. People can learn whatever language they want on Flatbush Avenue, the central street in Brooklyn, New York. On this street are many little stores, for example, Chinese, Cuban, Jamaican, Italian, Puerto Rican, American, and Haitian. This diversity of stores reflects the different ethnic backgrounds of the people living there. On this street, people can learn a new language because they interact with people of different nations. For example, I went to a store and one of the employees who looked Spanish asked me in my language, "Ou pa we sa ou vle." In Haitian Creole that means "Did I see anything I wanted?"

I was surprised to hear him speak my language, so I asked him where he had learnt Creole. He said that Haitian people had taught him when they came into his store shopping. Another example is my uncle. One day, I heard him speaking Spanish, and I

asked him where he had learnt it. He said, " Oh from the Spanish people I know, on the street, and going into their stores." He said I could easily learn Spanish without any courses at school. Flatbush Avenue is the place to learn foreign languages.

Topic Sentence: _____

D. Another interesting area of research has to do with the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. We are intrinsically motivated when we do something "for the fun of it", or for no other reason than to perform the behaviour. We sing in the shower, not because we expect applause or because we are trying to earn money, but merely because we like to do it. We do crossword puzzles, paint pictures, and look at the sunset because it is intrinsically rewarding to do so. We do not expect any external reward. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to situations in which we do something because we expect some external reward. We may only show up at the office because we need the money. We may only go to school to please our parents. We may be exceptionally polite to a particular individual because we want something from him/her.

Topic Sentence: _____

E. In the last few decades, computer technology has made tremendous progress in the world of communication to benefit humankind. The computer has the capability to communicate across long distances. Furthermore, an information superhighway has been created for the computer, in which huge amounts of data can be transmitted around the world at high speed. Computer technology also makes it possible for computer networks to link academic, research, and government organisations globally. For example, a primary means of communication using the computer is through the Internet. It enables scientists and scholars as well as educators and students to link with worldwide research institutions and libraries. They can also access publications in their specific fields. Besides, using Electronic mail, or E-mail, allows scholars, researchers, and businesses as well as families and friends to communicate quickly and easily by typing a document into

one computer, which then appears on another one, perhaps across the country or to another in a short time.

| _Topic Sentence: _____

F We write because we want to understand our lives. This is why my closets are filled with boxes and boxes of musty old journals. It is why I found pages of poetry under my stepdaughter Mira's mattress when she went off to camp. It is why my father tells me he will soon begin his memoirs. As John Cheever explains, "When I began to write, I found this was the best way to make sense out of my life."

Topic Sentence: _____

ACTIVITY 5(i): Further practice on writing topic sentences, controlling and supporting ideas

1. Read the paragraphs on "Support".
2. Write out the topic sentence for the paragraph given below.
3. Underline the topic and circle the controlling idea.
4. List the support.

Support

The support in a paragraph explains or develops the topic sentence. The supporting part can be narratives, details, facts, examples, explanations, or statistics. All

of the support relates to the main idea stated in the topic sentence and shows why the topic sentence is true.

Here is a brief list of the support in the paragraph about what parents can do to help their children succeed in school. Notice that all of the support explains ways that parents can encourage their children.

Topic sentence:

Parents can help their children be successful in school by encouraging them.

Support:

- i. Parents can encourage children by reminding them to do their homework.
- ii. Parents can encourage children by buying them books and tapes to help them learn.
- iii. Parents can encourage children by rewarding them.



A. The internet is a very useful tool for students. For example, students can learn about different cultures. They can have a friend in China and compare cultures using email. As a result, they can understand and appreciate other cultures better. If they have a Math problem, they can easily find a tutor or help on the Internet. Students who want to learn a different language can find places where they can listen to tapes to simulate a teacher. If they have to do a research paper on a specific topic, all they have to do is go to the Internet and they will find the information instantly. The Internet is useful to students in many ways.

Topic Sentence: _____

Support:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

ACTIVITY 5(ii): Practice on writing supporting details

Below are some topic sentences. Write three possible sentences of support that could be included in a paragraph. Then, discuss your support with your trainer and friends to determine if it relates to the main idea.

1. Topic sentence: Parents can help their children succeed in school by offering financial support.

Support: _____

Support: _____

Support: _____

2. Topic sentence: Using a cell phone while driving is dangerous.

Support: _____

Support: _____

Support: _____

3. Topic sentence: Watching TV is a good way to learn spoken English.

Support: _____

Support: _____

Support: _____

4. Topic sentence: Smoking cigarettes can be an expensive habit.

Support: _____

Support: _____

Support: _____

5. Topic sentence: We quickly spruced up our apartment before our guest
arrived.

Support: _____

Support: _____

Support: _____

Source: 1. *Focus on Writing: Refining composition skills through instruction and practice* by Smalley, Ruetten and Kozyrev (2004) Learners Publishing Pte Ltd, Singapore. 2.

Developing Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar, 2nd ed by Ruetten, Mary K (2003) Thomson Learning, Boston, USA.

ACTIVITY 6: A five-minute reflective writing activity “A Remarkable Experience I Have Had”

1. Think of a memorable experience you have had in the past. This may be a holiday, meeting an old friend, having a meal out, an enjoyable walk, etc.
2. Recapture the memory by writing about it, including how it made you feel and why it was such a remarkable experience. Use what you have learnt in writing paragraphs- use of topic sentence, controlling and supporting ideas
3. Write out your experiences in the spaces provided below.

