



DBB 308 WRITING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Paragraph Structure

- ▶ A **paragraph** is a group of related sentences that discuss one (and usually only one) main idea.
- ▶ The number of sentences is unimportant; however, the paragraph should be long enough to develop the main idea clearly.
- ▶ A paragraph may stand by itself.
- ▶ A paragraph may also be one part of a longer piece of writing such as an essay or a book.
- ▶ We mark a paragraph by indenting the first word about a half inch (five spaces on a typewriter or computer) from the left margin.
- ▶ The following model contains all the elements of a good paragraph.

Gold

¹Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics. ²First of all, gold has a lustrous¹ beauty that is resistant to corrosion.² ³Therefore, it is suitable for jewelry, coins, and ornamental purposes. ⁴Gold never needs to be polished and will remain beautiful forever. ⁵For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished³ today as the day it was made 25 centuries ago. ⁶Another important characteristic of gold is its usefulness to industry and science. ⁷For many years, it has been used in hundreds of industrial applications, such as photography and dentistry. ⁸The most recent use of gold is in astronauts' suits. ⁹Astronauts wear gold-plated heat shields for protection when they go outside spaceships in space. ¹⁰In conclusion, gold is treasured not only for its beauty but also for its utility.

lustrous: glowing

corrosion: chemical damage

untarnished: unchanged in color

- ▶ Writing Technique Questions
 1. What is the topic of the paragraph?
 2. What two main points does the writer make about the topic?
 3. In which two sentences does the writer say that there are two main points?
 4. What examples does the writer use to support each point?

The three parts of a paragraph

- ▶ All paragraphs have a **topic sentence** and **supporting sentences**, and some paragraphs also have a **concluding sentence**.
- ▶ The **topic sentence** states the main idea of the paragraph. It not only names the topic of the paragraph, but it also limits the topic to one specific area.
- ▶ The part of the topic sentence that announces the specific area to be discussed is called the **controlling idea**.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
(Gold), a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics.

- ▶ **Supporting sentences** develop the topic sentence. That is, they explain or prove the topic sentence by giving more information about it. Following are some of the supporting sentences that explain the topic sentence about gold.
- ▶ First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion.
- ▶ Another important characteristic of gold is its usefulness to industry and science.
- ▶ The most recent use of gold is in astronauts' suits.

- ▶ The **concluding** sentence signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember:
- ▶ In conclusion, gold is treasured not only for its beauty but also for its utility.
- ▶ Concluding sentences are **customary** for stand-alone paragraphs. However, paragraphs that are parts of a longer piece of writing usually do not need concluding sentences.

The topic sentence

- ▶ Every good paragraph has a topic sentence, which clearly states the topic and the controlling idea of the paragraph.
- ▶ A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph. It briefly indicates what the paragraph is going to discuss.
- ▶ For this reason, the topic sentence is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include (and what information to exclude).
- ▶ The reader can see what the paragraph is going to be about and is therefore better prepared to understand it. For example, in the model paragraph on gold, the topic sentence alerts the reader to look for *two* characteristics.

► Here are three important points to remember about a topic sentence.

1. **A topic sentence is a complete sentence**; that is, it contains at least one subject and one verb. The following are **not** complete sentences because they do not have verbs:

Driving on freeways.

How to register for college classes.

The rise of indie films.

2. **A topic sentence contains both a topic and a controlling idea.** It names the topic and then limits the topic to a specific area to be discussed in the space of a single paragraph.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
Driving on freeways requires skill and alertness.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
Registering for college classes can be a frustrating experience for new students.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
The rise of indie films is due to several factors.

- ▶ **3. A topic sentence is the most general statement in the paragraph** because it gives only the main idea. It does not give any specific details.
- ▶ A topic sentence is like the name of a particular course on a restaurant menu. When you order food in a restaurant, you want to know more about a particular course than just "meat" or "soup" or "salad." You want to know generally what kind of salad it is. Potato salad? Mixed green salad? Fruit salad? However, you do not necessarily want to know all the ingredients. Similarly, a reader wants to know generally what to expect in a paragraph, but he or she does not want to learn all the details in the first sentence.

- ▶ Following is a general statement that could serve as a topic sentence.
- ▶ The Arabic origin of many English words is not always obvious.
- ▶ The following sentence, on the other hand, is **too specific**. It could serve as a supporting sentence but not as a topic sentence.
- ▶ The slang expression *so long* (meaning "good-bye") is probably the corruption of the Arabic *salaam*.
- ▶ This sentence is **too general**.
- ▶ English has been influenced by other languages.

Position of topic sentences

- The topic sentence is usually (but not always) the first sentence in a paragraph.
- Experienced writers sometimes put topic sentences in other locations, but the best spot is usually right at the beginning. Readers who are used to the English way of writing want to know what they will read about as soon as they begin reading.

Synonyms

Synonyms, words that have the same basic meaning, do not always have the same emotional meaning. For example, the words *stingy* and *frugal* both mean “careful with money.” However, calling someone stingy is an insult, but calling someone frugal is a compliment. Similarly, a person wants to be slender but not skinny, aggressive but not pushy. Therefore, you should be careful in choosing words because many so-called synonyms are not really synonymous at all.

Practice

- ▶ Remember that a topic sentence is a complete sentence and is neither too general nor too specific.
- ▶ **Step 1.** Read the sentences in each group, and decide which sentence is the best topic sentence. Write **best TS** (for "best topic sentence") on the line next to it.
- ▶ **Step 2.** Decide what is wrong with the other sentences. They may be too general, or they may be too specific, or they may be incomplete sentences. Write **too general, too specific, or incomplete** on the lines next to them.

- The first one has been done for you as an example.

Group 1

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| <u>too specific</u> | a. A lunar eclipse is an omen of a coming disaster. |
| <u>too general</u> | b. Superstitions have been around forever. |
| <u>best TS</u> | c. People hold many superstitious beliefs about the moon. |
| <u>incomplete</u> | d. Is made of green cheese. |

Group 3

- _____ a. It is hard to know which foods are safe to eat nowadays.
- _____ b. In some large ocean fish, there are high levels of mercury.
- _____ c. Undercooked chicken and hamburger may carry *E. coli* bacteria.
- _____ d. Not to mention mad cow disease.
- _____ e. Food safety is an important issue.

Group 4

- _____ a. Hybrid automobiles more economical to operate than gasoline-powered cars.
- _____ b. The new hybrid automobiles are very popular.
- _____ c. Hybrid cars have good fuel economy because a computer under the hood decides to run the electric motor, the small gasoline engine, or the two together.
- _____ d. The new hybrid automobiles are popular because of their fuel economy.

- ▶ **B.** Remember that the topic sentence is the most general statement in a paragraph. Read the following scrambled paragraphs and decide which sentence is the topic sentence. Write **TS** on the line next to that sentence.

Paragraph 1

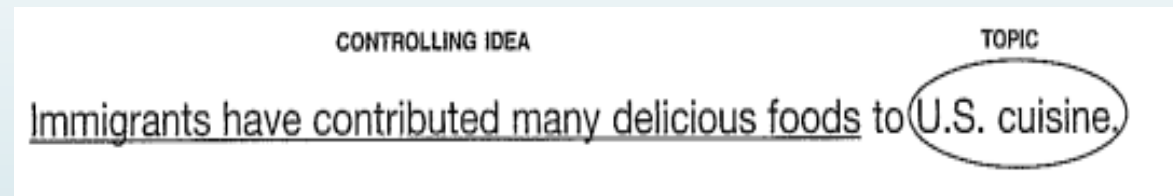
- _____ a. A notes/memo function lets you make quick notes to yourself.
- _____ b. Other capabilities include word processing, spreadsheets, and e-mail.
- _____ c. A voice recorder that uses a built-in microphone and speaker works like a tape recorder.
- _____ d. Basic tools include a calendar to keep track of your appointments, an address and phone number book, to-do lists, and a calculator.
- _____ e. MP3 playback lets you listen to digital music files, and a picture viewer lets you look at digital photos.
- _____ f. Most personal digital assistants (PDAs) have tools for basic tasks as well as for multimedia functions.
- _____ g. A few models also include a built-in digital camera and keyboard.

Paragraph 3

- _____ a. Another important change was that people had the freedom to live and work wherever they wanted.
- _____ b. The earliest significant change was for farming families, who were no longer isolated.
- _____ c. The final major change brought by the automobile was the building of superhighways, suburbs, huge shopping centers, and theme parks such as Disney World in Florida.
- _____ d. The automobile revolutionized the way of life in the United States.
- _____ e. The automobile enabled them to drive to towns and cities comfortably and conveniently.
- _____ f. In fact, people could work in a busy metropolitan city and drive home to the quiet suburbs.

The two parts of a topic sentence

- ▶ As noted earlier a topic sentence has **two essential parts: the topic and the controlling idea**. The topic names the subject of the paragraph. The controlling idea limits or controls the topic to a specific area that you can discuss in the space of a single paragraph.



- ▶ The reader of this topic sentence expects to read about various ethnic foods popular in the United States: tacos, egg rolls, sushi, baklava, pizza, and so on.

- ▶ A topic sentence should not have controlling ideas that are unrelated. The three parts of the following controlling idea are too unrelated for a single paragraph. They require three separate paragraphs (and perhaps more) to explain fully.

**TOO MANY IDEAS**

Indie films are characterized by experimental techniques, low production costs, and provocative themes.

Good

Independent films are characterized by experimental techniques.

Identifying parts of a topic sentence

Circle the topic and underline the controlling idea in each of the following sentences. The first one has been done for you as an example.

1. Driving on freeways requires skill and alertness.
2. Driving on freeways requires strong nerves.
3. Driving on freeways requires an aggressive attitude.
4. The Caribbean island of Trinidad attracts tourists because of its calypso music.
5. Spectacular beaches make Puerto Rico a tourist paradise.
6. Moving away from home can be a stressful experience for young people.
7. Many religious rules arose from the health needs of ancient times.
8. A major problem for many students is the high cost of tuition and books.
9. Participating in class discussions is a problem for several different groups of students.
10. In my opinion, television commercials for cosmetics lie to women.
11. Owning an automobile is a necessity for me.
12. It is an expensive luxury to own an automobile in a large city.
13. Taste and appearance are both important in Japanese cuisine.

Writing Topic Sentences

When you write a topic sentence, remember these three points:

1. A topic sentence must be a complete sentence, with a subject and a verb.
2. A topic sentence should be neither too general nor too specific. If it is too general, the reader cannot tell exactly what the paragraph is going to discuss. If it is too specific, the writer will not have anything to write about in the rest of the paragraph.
3. A topic sentence should not have unrelated controlling ideas.

Practice

- ▶ Write good topic sentences for the following paragraphs. Remember to include both a topic and a controlling idea.

- ▶ **Paragraph 2**

In European universities, students are not required to attend classes. In fact, professors in Germany generally do not know the names of the students enrolled in their courses. In the United States, however, students are required to attend all classes and may be penalized if they do not. Furthermore, in the European system, students usually take just one comprehensive examination at the end of their entire four or five years of study. In the North American system, on the other hand, students usually have numerous quizzes, tests, and homework assignments, and they almost always have to take a final examination in each course at the end of each semester.

Paragraph 3

For example, the Eskimos, living in a treeless region of snow and ice, sometimes build temporary homes out of thick blocks of ice. People who live in deserts, on the other hand, use the most available materials, mud or clay, which provide good insulation from the heat. In Northern Europe, Russia, and other areas of the world where forests are plentiful, people usually construct their homes out of wood. In the islands of the South Pacific, where there is an abundant supply of bamboo and palm, people use these tough, fibrous plants to build their homes.

Supporting sentences

- ▶ **Supporting sentences** explain or prove the topic sentence. One of the biggest problems in student writing is that student writers often fail to support their ideas adequately. They need to use specific details to be thorough and convincing.
- ▶ There are several kinds of specific **supporting details**: examples, statistics, and quotations.

Paragraph A: Paragraph without Support

Red-Light Running

Although some people think that red-light running is a minor traffic violation that is no worse than jaywalking,¹ it can, in fact, become a deadly crime. Red-light runners cause accidents all the time. Sometimes people are seriously injured and even killed. It is especially a problem in rush hour traffic. Everyone is in a hurry to get home, so drivers run red lights everywhere. The police do not do much about it because they are too busy. The only time they pay attention is when there is an accident, and then it is too late. In conclusion, running a red light is a serious offense.

Paragraph B: Paragraph with Support

Red-Light Running

¹Although some people think red-light running is a minor traffic violation that is no worse than jaywalking, it can, in fact, become a deadly crime. ²Red-light runners cause hundreds of accidents, including deaths and injuries as well as millions of dollars in damages. ³Each year more than 900 people die, and nearly 200,000 are injured in crashes that involve red-light running. ⁴Motorists run red lights all the time. ⁵For example, in Fairfax, Virginia, a five-month-long survey at five busy intersections revealed that a motorist ran a red light every 20 minutes. ⁶Red-light runners are seldom caught. ⁷According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, “Communities don’t have the resources to allow police to patrol intersections as often as would be needed to ticket all motorists who run red lights” (“Q&A”).²

- ▶ Examples are perhaps the easiest kind of supporting detail to use because you can often take examples from your own knowledge and experience. You don't have to search the library or the Internet for supporting material. Furthermore, examples make your writing lively and interesting, and your reader is more likely to remember your point if you support it with a memorable example.
- ▶ Words and phrases that introduce examples include ***for example***, ***for instance***, and ***such as***.

Language and Perception

Although we all possess the same physical organs for sensing the world—eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, noses for smelling, skin for feeling, and mouths for tasting—our perception of the world depends to a great extent on the language we speak, according to a famous hypothesis³ proposed by linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They hypothesized that language is like a pair of eyeglasses through which we “see” the world in a particular way. A classic example of the relationship between language and perception is the word *snow*. Eskimo languages have as many as 32 different words for snow. For instance, the Eskimos have different words for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed as hard as ice, slushy snow, wind-driven snow, and what we might call “cornmeal” snow. The ancient Aztec languages of Mexico, in contrast, used only one word to mean snow, cold, and ice. Thus, if the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is correct and we can perceive only things that we have words for, the Aztecs perceived snow, cold, and ice as one and the same phenomenon.⁴

Writing Technique Questions

1. What is the main idea of this paragraph? Underline the part of the topic sentence that expresses the main idea.
2. What examples does the writer use to support this idea? Put brackets [] around them.
3. What words and phrases introduce the examples? Circle them.

The concluding sentence

- ▶ A concluding sentence serves **two purposes**:
 1. It signals the end of the paragraph.
 2. It leaves the reader with the most important ideas to remember. It can do this in two ways:
 - By summarizing the main points of the paragraph
- OR
- By repeating the topic sentence in different words

End-of-Paragraph Signals Followed by a Comma

Finally,
In brief,
In conclusion,
Indeed,
In short,

Lastly,
Therefore,
Thus,
To sum up,

End-of-Paragraph Signals Not Followed by a Comma

The evidence suggests that . . .
There can be no doubt that . . .
These examples show that . . .
We can see that . . .

Greeting Cards

Have you noticed how many different kinds of greeting cards you can buy these days? In the old days, the local drugstore had one rack displaying maybe five or six basic kinds of cards. You could walk into the store and choose an appropriate card in five minutes or less. Nowadays, however, the display space for greeting cards is as big as a soccer field, and it may take an hour or two to hunt down exactly the right card with exactly the right message. There are at least 30 categories of birthday cards alone: birthday cards for different ages, from different ages, for different relatives, from different relatives, for different genders, from different genders, from a couple, from the office, for dog owners, for cat owners, and so on. There are cards for getting a job, for retiring from a job, for acquiring a pet, for losing a pet, for becoming engaged, for breaking up. There are also greeting cards to send for no reason—"Thinking of you" or "Just because" cards. The newest type of card is the "encouragement card." An encouragement card offers comforting thoughts and helpful advice to someone who is sad or distressed in these troubled times. In short, there is now a greeting card for every possible life event and for a few nonevents as well.

- ▶ Note: **Never** introduce a new idea in the concluding sentence.
- ▶ In conclusion, we now have more variety of greeting cards to choose from, but they are also becoming very expensive. (*This is a new idea~*) – **Incorrect**
- ▶ **Practice**
- ▶ Step 1 Underline the topic sentence in each paragraph.
- ▶ Step 2 Add a good concluding sentence to each paragraph. You may either paraphrase the topic sentence or summarize the main points.
- ▶ Step 3 Practice using end-of-paragraph signals

Paragraph 1

You can be a good conversationalist by being a good listener. When you are conversing with someone, pay close attention to the speaker's words while looking at his or her face. Show your interest by smiling and nodding. Furthermore, do not interrupt while someone is speaking; it is impolite to do so. If you have a good story, wait until the speaker is finished. Also, watch your body language; it can affect your communication whether you are the speaker or the listener. For instance, do not sit slumped in a chair or make nervous hand and foot movements. Be relaxed and bend your body slightly forward to show interest in the person and the conversation.

Paragraph 2

Modern communication technology is driving workers in the corporate world crazy. They feel buried under the large number of messages they receive daily. In addition to telephone calls, office workers receive dozens of e-mail and voice mail messages daily. In one company, in fact, managers receive an average of 100 messages a day. Because they do not have enough time to respond to these messages during office hours, it is common for them to do so in the evenings or on weekends at home.

Review

- ▶ These are the **important points** covered in this chapter:
- ▶ **1. A good topic sentence**
 - is a complete sentence with a subject, a verb, and a controlling idea.
 - is neither too general nor too specific. It clearly states the main idea of the paragraph but does not include specific details.
 - is usually the first sentence in the paragraph.
- ▶ **2. Good supporting sentences**
 - explain or prove the topic sentence.
 - are specific and factual.
 - can be examples, statistics, or quotations.
- ▶ **3. A good concluding sentence**
 - signals the end of the paragraph.
 - summarizes the important points briefly or restates the topic sentence in different words.

Homework

- ▶ **Topic:** The difficulty of translating from one language to another
- ▶ Write a well-organized paragraph about this topic.