

Six Ways to Form a Topic Sentence

Six kinds of topic sentences are commonly used by experienced writers. They aren't the only kinds, but if you learn how to write them, you'll be able to express the main idea of almost any paragraph.

1. A Basic Topic Sentence

A basic topic sentence is the quickest and simplest way to begin your paragraph. Just copy the main idea from your outline, making sure that the sentence has a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought. Make sure, too, that the sentence begins with a capital letter and ends in a period. When you write a basic topic sentence, do not change any key words or add any new words that might change the meaning of your main idea. Here are three examples:

MAIN IDEA	Tango is my favorite restaurant.
TOPIC SENTENCE	Tango is my favorite restaurant.
MAIN IDEA	Music is important in my life.
TOPIC SENTENCE	Music is important in my life.
MAIN IDEA	I could not live without my car.
TOPIC SENTENCE	I could not live without my car.

Basic topic sentences are clear and direct, and they get you writing quickly. You might want to use a basic topic sentence in the following situations:

- if you are being timed and must write quickly
- if you get stuck when you try to begin writing
- if a topic is difficult for you

When you begin your paragraph with a basic topic sentence, you can always go back and revise it later if you have time.

ACTIVITY 1

For this activity and others, you can work from the outlines that you have developed in your class. Refer back to these outlines. Then, for each main idea in the outlines, write a basic topic sentence.

2. A Topic Sentence That Adds a Description

A topic sentence that adds a description is similar to a basic topic sentence but requires just a little more work. Copy the main idea from your outline and add a brief descriptive phrase to clarify the subject of the paragraph.

Here are three examples with the descriptive phrase underlined:

MAIN IDEA

Tango is my favorite restaurant.

TOPIC SENTENCE

Tango, an Argentinean restaurant in my neighborhood, is my favorite place to eat.

MAIN IDEA

Music is important in my life.

TOPIC SENTENCE

Hip-hop and classical music are important in my life.

MAIN IDEA

I could not live without my car.

TOPIC SENTENCE

I could not live without my car, a beat-up 1992 Honda Civic.

A topic sentence that adds a description is more precise and colorful than a basic topic sentence. With practice, you will be able to add a brief descriptive phrase to your topic sentences with little effort or loss of time. However, in order to keep your main idea clear, remember these suggestions:

- Use only *brief* descriptive phrases.
- Do not change any key words or add any new words that might change the meaning of your main idea.
- If a descriptive phrase does not fit smoothly into your main idea, do not force it. Some main ideas do not work well with an added description.

ACTIVITY 2

Using your completed outlines from Activity 1, write each main idea as a topic sentence that adds a description. (You may not be able to add a descriptive phrase to every main idea.) Then, exchange your topic sentences with a classmate. Check each other's work and share any ideas that you may have for revising the sentences.

3. A Topic Sentence That Creates a Contrast

A contrast is another effective way to start your paragraph. To form this type of topic sentence, you will need to write a complex sentence beginning with *although*, *even though*, or *while*. Here are three examples:

MAIN IDEA

Tango is my favorite restaurant.

TOPIC SENTENCE

Although I have eaten at many good restaurants, Tango stands out as my favorite.

MAIN IDEA

Music is important in my life.

TOPIC SENTENCE

Even though I don't get to listen to music as often as I would like, it is very important in my life.

MAIN IDEA

I could not live without my car.

TOPIC SENTENCE

While I could survive without many of my possessions, I could not live without my car.

A topic sentence that creates a contrast shows that you have a deep understanding of your main idea. However, since this type of topic sentence tends to be longer than a basic topic sentence, you must be careful that your main idea stays clear. Keep these suggestions in mind:

- Make sure that the *first word* of your sentence is *although, even though, or while*.
- Be sure that your main idea is in the *second half* of the sentence.
- When writing the main idea, do not change any key words or add any new words that might change its meaning.

ACTIVITY 3

Using your outlines from the previous activities, write each main idea as a topic sentence that creates a contrast. Then, exchange your topic sentences with a classmate. Check each other's work and share any ideas that you may have for revising the sentences.

4. A Topic Sentence That Identifies Your Support Points

Identifying your support points is another popular and effective way to begin your paragraph. This type of topic sentence includes the main idea and briefly identifies the support points that you will develop in your paragraph. These support points may be introduced by the word *because*, as shown in the following examples. Keep your list as brief as possible so that it flows smoothly.

MAIN IDEA	TOPIC SENTENCE
Tango is my favorite restaurant.	Tango is my favorite restaurant because of the delicious food, romantic atmosphere, and reasonable prices.
SUPPORT POINT 1 The food is delicious.	
SUPPORT POINT 2 The atmosphere is romantic.	
SUPPORT POINT 3 The prices are reasonable.	

A topic sentence that identifies the support points gives the reader a “snapshot” of your paragraph, and it demonstrates that you have a firm grasp on the organization. However, since this type of topic sentence tends to be longer than a basic topic sentence, you must be careful that your main idea stays clear. Keep these suggestions in mind:

- Be sure that your main idea is in the *first half* of the sentence.
- When writing the main idea, do not change any key words or add any new words that might change its meaning.
- When copying the support points from your outline, you may shorten them so that they flow smoothly; however, do not omit any of them or change their meaning.
- If you use the word *because* before the support points, it should come *in the middle* of your topic sentence.

ACTIVITY 4

Using your completed outlines from the previous activities, write each main idea as a topic sentence that identifies the support points. Then, exchange your topic sentences with a classmate. Check each other's work and share any ideas that you may have for revising the sentences.

5. A Topic Sentence That Creates a Contrast and Identifies the Support Points

This type of topic sentence shows your deep understanding of the main idea and your firm grasp on the organization of the paragraph. To form this type of topic sentence, do the following:

- Make sure that the *first word* of your sentence is *although*, *even though*, or *while*, and complete the contrast statement.
- Follow the contrast statement with the main idea. In other words, the main idea will be *in the middle* of the sentence.
- When writing the main idea, do not change any key words or add any new words that might change its meaning.
- Copy the support points from your outline. You may shorten them so that they flow smoothly; however, do not omit any of them or change their meaning. Also, you can precede the support points with *because* if that makes sense for your topic sentence.

<p>MAIN IDEA</p> <p>Tango is my favorite restaurant.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 1</p> <p>The food is delicious.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 2</p> <p>The atmosphere is romantic.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 3</p> <p>The prices are reasonable.</p>	<p>TOPIC SENTENCE</p> <p>Although I have eaten at many good restaurants, <u>Tango is my favorite</u> because of the delicious food, romantic atmosphere, and reasonable prices.</p>
--	--

<p>MAIN IDEA</p> <p>Music is important in my life.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 1</p> <p>It helps me relax.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 2</p> <p>It helps me work.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 3</p> <p>It helps me party.</p>	<p>TOPIC SENTENCE</p> <p>Even though I don't get to listen to music as often as I would like, <u>it is important in my life</u> because it helps me relax, work, and party.</p>
--	--

ACTIVITY 5

Using your outlines from the previous activities, write each main idea as a topic sentence that creates a contrast *and* identifies the support points. Then, exchange your topic sentences with a classmate. Check each other's work and share any ideas that you may have for revising the sentences.

6. A Topic Sentence That Uses Creative Language

To form this type of topic sentence, use any of the other methods, but think about ways to grab the reader's attention. You might look for vocabulary and ideas that are playful, inspirational, or interesting in some other way. Try the following strategies:

- Ask yourself: Would I want to read this paragraph based only on the main idea? If not, think about what excites you most about the topic. What words might express your enthusiasm more clearly?
- Try to use strong, active verbs (action words) and vivid descriptions. For more on verbs and descriptive words, see Chapter 10.
- Use a portable or online thesaurus to search for fresh, new words to express your ideas. (A thesaurus is a dictionary that, for each word, gives words with similar meanings.)

Here are some examples of topic sentences that use creative language:

<p>MAIN IDEA</p> <p>Music is important in my life.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 1</p> <p>It helps me work.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 2</p> <p>It helps me party.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 3</p> <p>It helps me relax.</p>	<p>TOPIC SENTENCE</p> <p>To me, music is an essential life companion, from the moment hip-hop gets me out of bed to the time I fall asleep to my favorite jazz station.</p>
--	--

<p>MAIN IDEA</p> <p>I could not live without my car.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 1</p> <p>I need it for work.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 2</p> <p>I need it to help my family.</p> <p>SUPPORT POINT 3</p> <p>I need it to escape.</p>	<p>TOPIC SENTENCE</p> <p>Like Cinderella's pumpkin that turned into a golden carriage, my beat-up 1992 Honda Civic is a magical vehicle that I couldn't live without.</p>
--	--

A topic sentence that uses creative language can grab the reader's attention with its originality. However, when you search for more creative ways of expressing your ideas, you run a higher risk of losing the clarity of your main idea. With sufficient practice, you should be able to use creative language *and* keep your main idea clear. Keep the following suggestions in mind:

- As you add new vocabulary and ideas, be sure to keep two or three of the key words from your main idea (as they appear on your outline).
- If you use a thesaurus, be careful in choosing words. Not all the words listed will have exactly the same meaning, and a poor choice may change or obscure your main idea. When possible, select a word that you are somewhat familiar with, or ask your instructor for advice. You might also want to check your word choices in a dictionary.
- Try building on one of the five types of topic sentences discussed earlier (basic, one that adds a contrast, one that identifies the support points, and so on).

ACTIVITY 6

Look at the topic sentences that you have written for the previous activities. Select one or two of them and rewrite them, using more creative language. Then, exchange your topic sentences with a classmate. Check each other's work and share any ideas that you may have for revising the sentences.
