

# Chapter 1 The Paragraph

A paragraph is a series of sentences all relating to the same topic or central idea. The aim of all paragraphs is to communicate to the reader that idea clearly and effectively. There is no hard and fast rule about the length of a paragraph; it will depend on the topic and what the writer wants to say. The paragraph should be long enough to develop the idea expressed in the topic sentence sufficiently. It should do what it sets out to do in the topic sentence. If the topic sentence states that you will be explaining how to make pizza, don't forget the steps about turning on the oven and at which temperature and how long the pizza should cook. Regardless of the length, the paragraph must contain only one idea. Any irrelevant sentences must be eliminated from the paragraph to ensure that it maintains its unity.

## Parts of the paragraph

There are three parts to a paragraph: a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a conclusion. Think of a paragraph as an Oreo cookie. The first and last sentences are like the top and bottom chocolate cookie of an Oreo; they are general statements about the topic, which tie the paragraph together. The middle sentences are like the white creamy filling, which contains information, facts, opinions and examples that support or develop the topic sentence.

### 1. Topic Sentence

There are differences between a topic sentence and a title. The title is above the paragraph and expands the topic. It should indicate what the essay is about, provoke interest and be brief. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence in the paragraph and limits the topic of the paragraph. A title is usually not a complete sentence. The topic sentence is always a complete thought or sentence. Most words in the title are capitalized. Only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized in the topic sentence.

The most important sentence of a paragraph is the topic sentence because it contains the main ideas of the paragraph. There are three elements in a topic sentence: the topic, a controlling idea and the point of view of the writer.

#### A. Topic

The topic is the subject, what is being written about in the paragraph. The main idea expressed in the topic sentence should not be too general or too specific. If it is too general, it will be difficult to develop it adequately in a single paragraph. If it is too specific, there will be nothing left to say to develop the idea in the paragraph.

Look at the following topic sentences.

#### **Everyone can benefit from exercise.**

This topic sentence is too general. There are many different kinds of exercise and different kinds of exercise have different benefits. Not all of them can be developed within one paragraph.

#### **Doing aerobics for thirty minutes a day will strengthen a person's cardio-vascular system by twenty five percent.**

This topic sentence is too specific. There is nothing else that can be said to support this statement in the remainder of the paragraph.

**There are three reasons why I exercise everyday.**

This sentence is an adequate topic sentence. It limits the discussion of the paragraph to only discussing the reasons that the writer exercises. Telling what those three reasons are and what benefits the writer gains from exercise can be expanded upon in the paragraph.

**B. Controlling idea**

The controlling idea limits the topic of the paragraph to one definite idea or one aspect of the topic that represents a particular idea, feeling or opinion. The controlling idea must not be too broad, it must be specific enough for the subject to be discussed within one paragraph.

Look at these three topic sentences. Each has same topic, but contain different controlling ideas.

Topic

- The Grand Canyon is a favorite vacation spot for travelers worldwide.  
(controlling idea: vacation spot)
- The Grand Canyon is noted for it awe inspiring panorama.  
(controlling idea: panorama)
- The Grand Canyon is an ideal area to view the geologic history of the earth.  
(controlling idea: geologic history)

Topic

- The television is a major source of home entertainment.  
(controlling idea: home entertainment)
- The television is an effective educational tool.  
(controlling idea: educational tool)
- The television has become smaller since its initial invention.  
(controlling idea: become smaller)

A divided topic sentence is useful in ensuring the sentence has a controlling idea. In a divided topic sentence, the writer specifies or explains the divisions of the topic. Look at the following sentences that illustrate a divided topic sentence.

- There are **three** major professional sports in America.*
- Five** essential ingredients are required in learning a foreign language.*
- To become a successful, writer one needs **four** basic skills.*

All three of the topic sentences above clearly limit what will be discussed in the paragraph (three sports, five ingredients and four skills).

**C. Point of view**

A good topic sentence also expresses the point of view of the writer. It may contain the opinion or attitude of the writer. In the topic sentence

**Digital cameras make photography easy and fun.**

The writer's point of view is easily determined- it's easy and fun.

Compare with

**Steven King has written many books.**

In this statement the writer's opinion of the works of Steven King is not evident, nor is there any indication of whether being such a prolific writer is good or bad.

**Exercise 1.1**

Look at the following topic sentences and decide whether they are good or lacking. Put an X in the space if it is a good topic sentence, a G or S if it is too general or specific or a C if it lacks a controlling idea.

- \_\_\_\_\_ The greatest boxer of all time was Mohammed Ali.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Jogging is good exercise.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Computers have changed the world.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Bananas are the best fruit because they contain all the essential vitamins needed for a healthy body.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Using cell phones while driving can be a hazard.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Religion is a crutch.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The most challenging board game ever invented is chess.
- \_\_\_\_\_ AIDS kills people every day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Music soothes the soul.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Lawyers are too plentiful in the Unites States.

**Exercise 1.2**

Rewrite the following general statements and make them more specific and suitable as topic sentences.

Italian food is healthy and easy to prepare.

\_\_\_\_\_

The United States government is over burdened with citizen's complaints.

\_\_\_\_\_

Natural disasters create havoc for everyone.

\_\_\_\_\_

The extinction of species of life on earth will have a profound effect on future generations.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Fairy tales are beneficial to children.

\_\_\_\_\_

**Exercise 1.3**

Identify the topic and controlling idea of the following topic sentences.

1. Children's educational programs on TV are superior to cartoons for young minds.

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Racial discrimination in the work place is a waste of human resources.

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_

3. The exploration of space needlessly expends resources that could be put to better use elsewhere.

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Hobbies provide people with many benefits.

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Learning a foreign language is also about learning the culture of that country.  
Topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Becoming a doctor requires skills other than just medical knowledge.  
Topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_
7. The time I spent in the Peace Corps was a horrendous experience.  
Topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Driving in Korea presents foreign drivers with many challenges.  
Topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_
9. A computer is a must for today's college students.  
Topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Teaching children the basics of fire prevention at home is fast and easy.  
Topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
Controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_

**Exercise 1.4**

Write topic sentences for the topics below.

- |                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Same sex marriage    | Dancing as exercise     |
| Littering            | Dieting                 |
| Home safety          | White sandy beaches     |
| Reading for pleasure | Favorite pets           |
| Basic first aid      | Games played as a child |

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Supporting sentences**

The topic sentence is usually fairly general. The supporting sentences that follow it should be more specific and develop the idea expressed in the topic sentence. Supporting sentences that are vague merely restate the topic sentence. There are several methods that can be employed to make the supporting sentences more specific. One is to use details, facts, statistics, examples, opinions, research results, personal experience or anecdotes. For example:

Seoul is a big city. (no statistics, just a broad statement)  
Seoul, South Korea has a population of over 10 million people.

Another method of adding specificity is by using exact names of things rather than writing about them in general terms. For example

He is a doctor. (a very general statement)

He is a pediatrician who has worked at City Hospital for the last 15 years. (a very specific statement)

A final method is to use concrete words that allow the reader to imagine the topic being written about in greater detail, and not just in general or abstract terms. For example:

Mr. Thompson enjoys life.

Mr. Thompson is almost always in a good mood, most often has a smile on his face, is quick to laugh and always sees the positive, even in terrible situations.

**Look at the following paragraph and note the supporting sentences.**

The invention of the automobile has provided many benefits to travelers. With a car, man is able to travel vast distances in short periods of time. What once took a two or three weeks on horseback can now be done in a matter of hours. The comfort enjoyed by travelers, compared to a horse drawn wagon, is amazing. No longer do travelers have to endure the bone-jarring ordeal of riding on a stiff leather saddle or splinter-infested wagon seat. Their voyage is now made on softly cushioned seats that can be adjusted to fit the sojourners level of comfort. Travelers are no longer subjected to the harsh elements of the weather. In the past, travelers had to suffer the biting cold of winter and the blistering heat of summer, not to mention the suffering encountered by gale force winds, blinding snow and drenching rain. Today people can enjoy a soothing and relaxing trip thanks to the totally enclosed interiors that offer air conditioning and heating units in most vehicles. Needless to say, with all the advantages an automobile has to offer, no one would dream of using the expression 'Get a horse' today.

**Exercise 1.5**

Select two topics that you wrote topic sentences for in exercise 1.4. Write five or six supporting sentences for each topic.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_