

Advanced Writing—Handout 2

The Paragraph 1

Definition

A group of sentences that go together to talk about an idea forms a paragraph. Therefore, a *paragraph* is made of a number of related sentences that *develop* an idea. Written language is divided into paragraphs to distinguish one main idea from other main ideas.

Basic Organization

There is no strict rule for determining how many sentences you need for a paragraph. It all depends on the reader. You should include as many sentences as the reader needs to understand the point of the paragraph fully. However, many standard paragraphs include between 7 & 13 sentences.

A paragraph includes two types of sentences:

One topic sentence + some supporting sentences

The main idea of the paragraph is usually stated in a topic sentence. All other sentences in the paragraph must help the development of the topic sentence. As such, the topic sentence is the most general and the most important sentence in the paragraph. Technically, it summarizes the whole of the paragraph.

The Topic Sentence

A topic sentence makes a statement about the topic which limits it to a certain degree. A good topic sentence has two elements the:

Topic + Controlling idea(s)

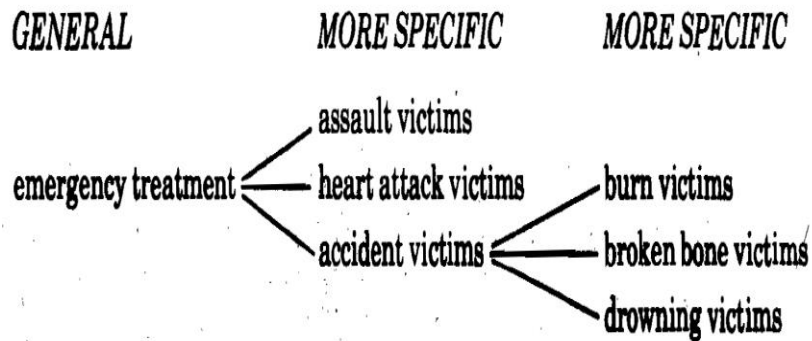
Subject vs. Topic

Whereas **subject** refers to a general area of interest, **topic** is a subject that has been narrowed down. You should narrow the subject into a topic which is manageable within the limits assigned by your teacher.

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Topic</u>
Sports	Soccer Basketball Tennis
Planets	Mars Earth Jupiter
Oils	Mineral oils Vegetable oils Animal oils

It is possible to **narrow down the topics** too. This can make your paragraphs even **more interesting** to the readers. A **narrow topic** forces you to be **more specific**. It helps you show by examples, facts, physical description, and personal experience rather than simply to tell.

<u>Topic</u>	<u>More Specific Topic</u>
Soccer	How soccer affects politics Great soccer teams of the world The World Cup
Mars	The possibility of life on Mars Mars compared to Earth Space travel to Mars
Vegetable oils	The process of getting oil from vegetables Different types of vegetable oils Medical value of vegetable oils



Topic characteristics

- A. Be the most important sentence in the paragraph.
- B. Be the most general sentence in the paragraph.
- C. Introduce the topic of the paragraph.
- D. Contain words or phrases that narrow topic.

Controlling idea

One good way **to limit your topic** is to place key words or phrases in the topic sentence. These words or phrases are called controlling words or phrases because they control the way you develop the paragraph. Thus, a controlling idea is a word or phrase that narrows the topic. It is also called a **limiting statement**. It tells the reader how you are going to discuss the topic.

Note

A controlling idea is a word or phrase that the reader can question about:

- How?
- Why?
- In What ways?
- What does it mean?

Examples

1. It is very difficult to be alone in a foreign country.
Why/ In what ways?
2. There are several funny superstitions in my country about death.
What are they? Why are funny?

3. The most serious problem in higher education in Iran is the growing number of students who fail courses several times.

Why is the problem so serious? How many students fail? What exactly makes this Situation a problem?

Types

The most common types of controlling ideas:

Place

Time

Certain aspects (quality, similarity ...)

Kinds

Phases

Steps

Effects

Causes

Reasons

Examples

1. Libraries have three basic kinds of materials.
2. Women are paid less for equal work than men in certain companies.
3. Air travel is more convenient than train travel for at least three reasons.

Take, for example, the general topic of: air pollution. Here are too many things to say about air pollution. It is extremely difficult to say everything about air pollution in a single paragraph. Therefore, your problem as a writer is to decide how to write about air pollution. In other words, you need to limit your discussion.

In a paragraph on air pollution, for example, they tell the reader you plan to do **one of** the following:

- A. Discuss the **causes** of air pollution
- B. **Compare** it with water pollution
- C. Discuss the **effects** of air pollution on human health
- D. Discuss the **effects** of air pollution on animal life

Examples

1. Air pollution is now a major problem in some European countries.
2. Air pollution has become an important problem within the last five years.
3. Air pollution and water pollution have a great deal in common.
4. Air pollution is more dangerous than water pollution.
5. Air pollution is dangerous for several reasons.

Note

A topic sentence may include more than one controlling idea. Using two or more controlling ideas gives you the ability to complete your paragraphs in a neat way. If you use only one controlling idea in the topic sentence, you may soon realize that you cannot say everything in **12 supporting sentences**. However, using more than one controlling ideas gives you this ability.

Question

Students frequently ask how they can write good topic sentences! A good topic sentence should keep the reader waiting. That is, after reading the topic sentence, the reader should be able to ask these questions: How? Why? In what ways? What does that mean?

A bad or weak topic sentence does not motivate the reader. Readers may react to a weak topic sentence by expressions like:

“who cares” or
“I know this” or
“so what?”

You should notice that a weak topic sentence can ruin the whole paragraph. There are a few recommendations that tell you how to write good topic sentences:

Recommendations

1. A topic sentence **cannot** be a simple fact. There are **no controlling ideas** that need **development** in a fact. A fact is complete once it is said. Factual statements are **dead ends**. There is no exit from them. Therefore, facts are one of the **worst types of topic sentences** you can ever write.

Examples

Airplanes carry passengers from one city to another.

We celebrate No-Ruz from 1 to 13 Farvardin each year.

2. A topic sentence cannot be a **simple personal opinion**. Do not begin your topic sentences with such phrases as *I like, I think, I believe*, etc. Like factual statements, expressions of personal opinion are dead ends too.

Examples

I can't help hating onions.

I like Tehran better than Shiraz.

It is my opinion that air pollution causes heart attack.

I think factories are the major cause of air pollution.

3. A topic sentence should not start with such phrases as: *it is clear that, it is a well-known fact that, as a matter of fact, everyone knows that*, or the like. These phrases tell the readers that they already know what you want to say about the topic.

Note

Readers will think that you are wasting their time. Iranian students of English frequently make this mistake because of their Persian writing habits.

Examples

It is a well-known fact that village life is better than city life.

Everyone knows that air pollution is dangerous.

You will certainly agree that education is better than money.

4. A topic sentence should not include ambiguous controlling ideas. Words that have fuzzy and unclear meanings make your topic sentences ambiguous. Many adjectives

such as *good, bad, easy, difficult*, and the like have fuzzy meanings.

Examples

Air pollution is a bad thing.

Cooking is easy to learn.

5. A successful topic sentence usually contains an *impersonal opinion* that will be proved or supported in the paragraph.

Examples

Birds make better pets than any other animal species.

Mountain climbing is good for the soul and for the body.

6. A successful topic sentence can also contain a *statement of intent* that the writer explains in detail in the paragraph. That is, you can say what you want to do in the paragraph as a topic sentence.

Examples

Shiraz can be compared to Tehran in three respects.

Using wind energy can reduce costs of power production.

7. Also notice that many people consider *passive* sentences, *negative* sentences, and *questions* as weak topic sentences. Therefore, you are advised not to use these structures in your topic sentences.

Exercises

1. Earth goes round the sun once a year. (f) (g) (p)
2. Physics is hard to learn. (f) (g) (p)
3. Linguistics is the scientific study of language. (f) (g) (p)
4. I think poverty is the mother of all crime. (f) (g) (p)
5. There are three main reasons why people prefer male children. (f) (g) (p)
6. Fish living in the Persian Gulf can be classified into three groups. (f) (g) (p)
7. Air pollution is becoming the major cause death in Tehran. (f) (g) (p)
8. Noise pollution has three major effects on plant life. (f) (g) (p)
9. I love chocolates. (f) (g) (p)
10. My father hates mice. (f) (g) (p)
11. A bar of candy can be bought for 100 Rials at any supermarket. (f) (g) (p)
12. If you do not study hard, you may fail your courses. (f) (g) (p)
13. Teen-agers are people who are between 13 to 19 years old. (f) (g) (p)
14. Mars is comparable to Earth in five respects. (f) (g) (p)
15. Space travel does not open new ways for tourism. (f) (g) (p)
16. Galileo lived in the sixteenth century. (f) (g) (p)
17. Mothers love their new-born babies. (f) (g) (p)
18. What is your idea about earthquakes? (f) (g) (p)