*Writing a Topic Sentence*

Each paragraph should be organized around a single idea, call the **main idea**. The statement of the main idea is called the **topic sentence**. The topic sentence tells the reader two important pieces of information:

1. The subject of the paragraph
2. What the author wants the reader to know about that subject

As a writer, you can use these statements to help you develop a topic sentence. Begin by answering the following two questions:

What is the subject of the paragraph?

What do I want the reader to know about that subject?

Then, use the answers to these questions to form a topic sentence.

**For example:**

**Subject:** Fuel-efficient cars

**Want reader to know:** help the environment

**Sentence:** Buying a fuel-efficient care is one way you can help the environment.

**Activity:** On a separate sheet of paper, answer these questions above about each of your paragraphs:

1. What is the subject of the paragraph?
2. What do I want the reader to know about that subject?

Then organize your topic sentence by filling in the blanks:

* Subject\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Want reader to know \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Sentence \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\*Additional Note: A good topic sentence should present a **single idea** that is broad enough to **invite discussion**. The sentence should have only one subject and one verb.

*Supporting Details*

An effective topic sentence starts your conversation with the reader, but it is up to you to continue the conversation by providing a clear, logical explanation of the main idea. Supporting details are specific statements that are related to the topic of the paragraph, but they do more than just restate the main idea.

1. **Supporting details are more than restatements of the topic sentence**. They provide reasons and examples that show why the main idea is true.

**Example 1:** Researchers have proven that smoking is bad for your health. Many researchers have determined smoking is unhealthy. In addition, researchers have publicized smoking’s harmful components.

What’s the problem with this paragraph?

**Example 2:** Researchers have proven that smoking is bad for your health. The American Medical Association has issued several warnings about the increased risk of lung cancer associated with smoking. In addition, the New England Journal of Medicine has issued its own separate findings verifying this same association.

How have they fixed it?

1. **Supporting details are related to the topic**. If the details digress from the topic, these unrelated ideas can weaken the coherence of the paragraph and confuse the reader.

**Example 1:** It is easy to learn a new language. Sometimes it’s hard to find someone who speaks another language. It’s also fun to learn martial arts. Sometimes I just can’t learn how to memorize things.

What’s the problem with this paragraph?

**Example 2:** It is easy to learn a new language. Right now, you can learn a language by taking an elective course in high school. Then, if you go to college you may have the opportunity to live in a foreign country as an exchange student. All along, you can join chat rooms on the Internet or conversation meetings in your area that will help you practice speaking your new language.

How have they fixed it?

1. **Supporting details are specific, not general, statements**. The topic sentence is a general statement, but you should explain in detail. Be specific as you can.

**Example 1:** Opinion polls question small samples of the population in order to indicate larger trends. An important part of polling is making sure that different kinds of people are represented. Even though this country is made up of many different kinds of people, opinion polls are pretty accurate.

What’s the problem with this paragraph?

**Example 2:** Opinion polls question small samples of the population in order to indicate larger trends.Pollsters must be careful to select people of different age, gender, occupation, location, and ethnic background. In this way, a sample of as few as 200 people can give a good indication of public opinion throughout the country. Despite the small sample, the margin of error is usually between four and six percent.

How have they fixed it?

**Activity:** Work with a partner on improving the supporting details in each paragraph of your essay.

1. Exchange papers with your partner
2. Read each paragraph paying close attention to the supporting details
3. If the paragraph exhibits errors like the ones listed above, identify which type of errors they have made (which of 3 areas above)
4. Write a short explanation of how they can improve their paragraph.
5. Return the essay to your partner and begin improving your supporting details.