

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## Topic Sentences

This handout will:

- Discuss topic sentences' purposes
- Explain components of topic sentences
- Provide solution to common grammatical issues with topic sentences
- Provide practice exercises

### Purpose of Topic Sentences:

1. *Topic sentences describe the main points of their paragraphs and relate those points back to the thesis.* By relating the main idea of the paragraph to the thesis and utilizing transitions, topic sentences create the 'flow' and structure of papers.

**a. Flow:** the flow of a paper refers to the logic and unity between the points made in an argument. Topic sentences help to create this flow through transitions and logical progression. (Temple)

**b. Outlining:** the best way to understand topic sentences' role in logical progression in an outline is by imagining them as links between the thesis and groups of evidence (your paragraphs). As such, each topic sentence should tie the thesis to the detailed information in the paragraphs.

2. *Topic sentences are also structural elements.* They succinctly summarize the main idea you intend to make in a paragraph and how you intend to support it. When used like this, they help the reader follow your logic as you explain your evidence. Even if you have skillfully chosen and arranged strong evidence, the lack of topic sentences often leaves your reader confused as to what purpose that evidence serves.

### Components of Topic Sentences:

1. Topic sentences often combine 3 things:

**a. Known information:** the thesis or arguments made in previous paragraphs.

In order to maintain an essay's logic when moving from one topic to another, it is important to explain how new information will relate to the information before it. Some paragraphs may build on ideas presented in previous paragraphs, some may present the opposite point of view of the previous paragraph, and still others may even jump to a new topic. Readers will not always understand the logic behind your organization, so the references to past arguments help them understand why or when you are moving from one topic to another.

**b. New information:** the details or evidence of the current paragraph.

Topic sentences' inclusion of new information is meant to help build an argument. The sentence within itself is not sufficient to prove your thesis, but it is necessary as a means of introducing the logic behind your main point.

**c. The main point:** the overarching idea of the current paragraph.

The main point is the most important part of a topic sentence; it describes the main idea within a paragraph. Think of it as a 'mini-thesis.' You might have several pieces of evidence that you want to include in a paragraph but not understand how to construct a sentence conveying the main point.

Here are some things to consider when figuring out your main point:

- Why have I chosen these particular pieces of evidence?

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- How are these pieces of evidence related? What do they have in common? How do they differ?
- How does this evidence relate to my thesis?

#### Example:

The following is an example of a student writing about greyhounds.

**Known information:** The student talked about greyhounds' use in dog racing in the previous paragraph.

**New information:** The student wants to use these two studies in this paragraph:

- A book that discusses the benefits of using greyhounds as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder support dogs
- An article that examines greyhounds' high ratings as physical therapy animals

**Main point:** Greyhounds are efficient therapy dogs.

**Topic Sentence:** (*known*) Although greyhounds have been traditionally used as racing dogs, (*main point*) they have recently been found to be highly efficient therapy dogs (*new*) for both emotional and physical ailments.

2. The order in which you choose to combine these three things is at your own discretion. However, a helpful tip is to work in terms of 'expansion,' that is, increasing the specificity of information as you proceed through the sentence. As you get more detailed or specific, the support for your main point expands, as does the amount the reader knows about the topic.

Remember that you do not have to specifically enumerate every piece of evidence you intend to discuss. For the purposes of topic sentences, it is acceptable to refer to your evidence generally or categorically because you are going to discuss each piece of evidence in your paragraph.

#### How to address common issues with topic sentences:

##### 1. "Run-on" or very long topic sentences:

- a. *Practice your concision skills.* See where you can combine ideas and where parts may be repetitive.
- b. *Ensure you are writing in the active voice.* The passive voice usually leads to excessive, unnecessary words. (for more information see the Active Voice and Passive Voice handout at <http://www.carp.sfsu.edu>)
- c. *Run-on sentences can also be a grammar issue, which usually occurs when punctuation is not properly used between clauses (or phrases within a sentence).* (for more information see the Run-ons and Fragments handout at <http://www.carp.sfsu.edu>)

#### Example:

*Run-on:* "Jack Churchill, also known as "Mad Jack," a British Lieutenant Colonel who carried a longbow and a broadsword with him to continental Europe and escaped concentration camps during his service there in the 1940s is known to have performed one of the last modern instances of a bow and arrow killing whilst in action."

*Why is this example a run on?* It is very long and presents a series of ideas without punctuation leading to some discrepancies in understanding. The focus on the

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main point, that Jack Churchill employed medieval war practices in modern times, is lost.

*Repaired example:* “Jack Churchill, a World War II British Lieutenant Colonel, was notorious for his eccentric personality and performed one of the last modern instances of a bow and arrow killing whilst in action.”

### 2. Too broad or general topic sentences:

*Be more specific.* When a topic sentence is too broad or general, it is often because it is only conveying the main point. Be sure to include new information and known information in addition to the main point.

#### **Example:**

*Broad Sentence:* “Jack Churchill was notoriously known as “Mad Jack” during his army career.”

*Why is this example too broad?* It does not address any new or known information; it conveys only a main point but does not give any specifics.

*Repaired example:* “Jack Churchill was notoriously known as “Mad Jack” during his army career because of his eccentric antics, specifically his use of medieval weaponry during the modern era.”

### 3. Sudden shifts in tone or subject between the end of a paragraph and a topic sentence:

- a. *Use transitions at the beginning of your topic sentence.* Transitions will help the paper flow better by creating relationships between what you have already said and what you will say.

**Examples of transitions:** First, However, Moreover, To begin, etc.

**Example sentence:** To begin, Churchill’s eccentric antics were not simply his way of getting attention; they raised his troops’ moral in times of anxiety or crisis.

- b. *Ensure your structure is logical.* Be sure that your paragraphs follow the logic you laid out in your thesis or outline. For example, do not make your first paragraph the second point of your thesis. A good way to tell if your structural logic is consistent is to read the topic sentences of your paragraphs. The topic sentences will act as summaries of the paragraphs allowing you to quickly ensure that the order of the paragraphs match the order of your points in your thesis.

#### **Exercises:**

1. *Directions:* Examine the following thesis and select 3 pieces of evidence from the list that support the idea presented in the thesis. Based on these pieces of evidence, create a main point. Using the thesis as old information, the selected evidence as new information, and the main point you created, write a topic sentence for this paragraph.

*Thesis:* In the last fifty years, the popularity of Welsh Corgis as household pets has diverted attention away from their inherent value as working dogs; originally, Welsh Corgis were used on farms for herding and hunting.

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*Evidence:*

Welsh Corgis' fur is double-coated and weather resistant.  
Welsh Corgis are very vocal and bark frequently.  
Welsh Corgis have natural herding instincts.  
Welsh Corgis are extremely energetic and have high endurance levels.

*Main Point:*

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*Topic Sentence:*

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2. *Directions:* Now examine this thesis, which argues for the opposite point of view. Select 3 pieces of evidence that support this thesis and write a main point based on them. Using the thesis as old information, the selected evidence as new information, and the main point you created, write a topic sentence for this paragraph.

*Thesis:* Despite being bred as hunting dogs until the latter half of the last century, Welsh Corgis are now one of the most popular household pets because their personalities are well-suited for new families.

*Evidence:*

Welsh Corgis are known for their friendly personalities.  
Welsh Corgis are very vocal and bark frequently.  
Welsh Corgis are protective of children.  
Welsh Corgis are extremely energetic and have high endurance levels.

*Main Point:*

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*Topic Sentence:*

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### Answer Key:

(Answers will vary depending on the selection of evidence.)

### Main Points:

Effective main points connect evidence with ideas. They are full sentences that identify commonalities or differences within the evidence. To test whether your main point meets these requirements, apply the following questions to your main point:

- a. Is this point a complete sentence?
- b. What commonality, difference, or relationship does this sentence identify in the selected evidence?

#### 1. *Examples of sufficient answers for Main Point 1:*

**Evidence selected:** Corgis' fur is double coated and weather resistant. Corgis are very vocal and bark frequently. Corgis have natural herding instincts.

**Main Point:** Corgis are physically made for farm-work.

*Why is this point sufficient?* Each piece of evidence describes a physical attribute of Welsh Corgis. And we know from the thesis that we should be looking for things that might make Corgis useful for either farm-work or hunting.

Just by picking either farm-work or hunting and seeing how the physical attributes line up with that topic, you can think of ways to connect the physical attributes described with useful things for either farm-work or hunting.

Take farm-work, for example. Loud dogs would be good for scaring large animals away from flocks. Dogs with natural herding instincts would be good for keeping flocks under control. And thick, weather-resistant coats mean that Corgis would be able to work in all kinds of conditions.

Therefore, one can derive that the main point of this paragraph would be about farm-work and how Corgis are physically capable of it. It is important to remember that the statement needs to be very concise, so put the two ideas (farm-work and physicality) together and you have "Corgis are physically made for farm-work."

The same kind of logic can be applied to another main point, perhaps "Corgis are physically made for hunting" or "Corgis physical attributes are useful for hunting" or even "Corgis physical attributes make them efficient farm-dogs."

#### 2. *Examples of sufficient answers for Main Point 2:*

**Evidence selected:** Welsh Corgis are known for their friendly personalities. Corgis are protective of children. Corgis are extremely energetic and have high endurance levels.

**Main Point:** Corgis are good dogs for families with children.

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*Why is this main point successful?* Each piece of selected evidence involves personality trait of corgis. And we know from the thesis that we should be trying to relate corgis to new families.

Focusing on personality traits as a reason for corgis to be family dogs, we need to examine how each piece of evidence could relate to a new family.

Examine each piece of evidence and see how it would benefit a family with children. Corgis' friendly personalities mean that they would likely get along very well with children and not hurt them. Corgis' protective instincts would be beneficial to a parent because they would feel that the dog would protect their child (or children) from harm if necessary. And finally, children would find excellent playmates in corgis because of corgis' high energy and endurance levels.

Concisely phrase your analysis. The two main topics are families with children and corgis, so we can merge them into "corgis are good dogs for families with children."

#### Topic Sentences:

To be effective, your topic sentence must include known information, new information, and a main point. To test whether your topic sentence meets these requirements or not, apply the following questions to your sentence:

- a. Does this topic sentence convey known information from the thesis or the previous paragraph? Circle where it does.
- b. Does this topic sentence convey new information based on selected evidence? Draw a rectangle around it.
- c. Does this topic sentence include the main point of the paragraph? Underline the main phrase.

#### 1. *Examples of topic sentences for Topic Sentence 1:*

**Evidence selected:** Corgis' fur is double coated and weather resistant. Corgis are very vocal and bark frequently. Corgis have natural herding instincts.

**Main point:** Corgis are physically made for farm-work.

**Thesis:** In the last fifty years, the popularity of Welsh Corgis as household pets has diverted attention away from their inherent value as working dogs; originally, Welsh Corgis were used on farms for herding and hunting.

#### Possible Topic Sentences:

1. "Because of their physical attributes, particularly their double-coated coats, tendency to be loud, and natural herding instincts, Welsh Corgis are meant to be farm-dogs."
2. "Welsh Corgis are physically suited for farm-work because of their weather-resistant fur, loud and frequent bark, and natural herding instinct."

*Why are these topic sentences successful?* Known information is conveyed in the reference to farm-work in the thesis. New information is conveyed in the summary of evidence.

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And the main point is conveyed through the use of the words “physical attributes” and “physical.” The second example follows the “expansion” pattern, whereas the first example simply reverses the order. Both methods are sufficient because they include all of the relevant material.

#### 2. Example of topic sentences for Topic Sentence 2:

**Evidence selected:** Welsh Corgis are known for their friendly personalities. Corgis are protective of children. Corgis are extremely energetic and have high endurance levels.

**Main point:** Corgis are good dogs for families with children.

**Thesis:** Despite being bred as hunting dogs until the latter half of the last century, Welsh Corgis are now one of the most popular household pets because their personalities are well-suited for new families.

#### Possible Topic Sentences:

1. “Corgis are popular pets for families with children because corgis have friendly and energetic, but also protective personalities when need be.”
2. “Families with children have contributed to corgis’ popularity as household pets because corgis’ friendly, energetic, and protective personalities match well with the needs of child-rearing.”

*Why are these topic sentences successful?* Known information is conveyed in the reference to personality in the thesis. New information is conveyed in the summary of evidence. And the main point is conveyed through the use references to families with children.

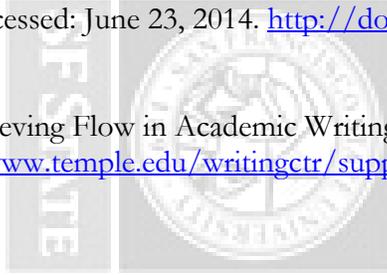
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