

READING TIP

STUDY SKILLS: Topic sentences

Whether you're writing an email, a report or an essay, each paragraph should contain a main idea. This main idea is often expressed in a sentence within the paragraph. This sentence is called a topic sentence and usually comes at the beginning of the paragraph (although it can appear elsewhere). The rest of the paragraph will then develop this main idea with supporting points.

This Reading Worksheet will help you understand the importance of topic sentences when writing. Here, you will have the opportunity to learn about identifying topic sentences as you read.

Practice

1 Complete the information with the words in the box.

topic new examples final main idea support

Writers organize texts into paragraphs. Each paragraph deals with one aspect of the topic. When the writer wants to make a fresh point, he or she begins a (1) _____ paragraph. Writers also organize each paragraph logically. The first sentence, the (2) _____ sentence, expresses the (3) _____ of the paragraph and tells the reader what the paragraph will be about. The sentences that follow (usually two or three sentences) (4) _____ the main idea. They usually give reasons or (5) _____. Sometimes, a (6) _____ sentence in a paragraph summarizes or repeats the main idea.

2 Look at this extract from 'A matter of life and death'. Notice how each highlighted topic sentence tells you what information will be in the rest of the paragraph.

A matter of life and death

Male and female life expectancy

There is a noticeable difference between male and female life expectancy. For men in the US, it is 73.6 years, while for women it is 79.4 years. Life expectancy is lower for African Americans: 67.2 years for men and 74.7 years for women.

Rich and poor

Life expectancy has increased more in the richest parts of the world. Life expectancy at birth in the US in 1900 was 47 years. In India in 1950 it was only 32 years. Today, there is still a difference. According to a 2006 report, disease and famine mean that today's life expectancy in poorer nations is almost half that in industrialized, richer nations.

3  **Work in pairs. Look at the texts below. Student A reads the text about Namibia; Student B reads the text about Costa Rica. Do the following:**

- Identify the topic sentences in your text.
- Look at how the other sentences in the paragraph support the topic sentence.
- Explain how your text is organized to your partner.

Namibia

Namibia is in southern Africa. It is next to South Africa in the south, Botswana in the east and Angola and Zambia to the north. To the west is the South Atlantic Ocean. About 2.1 million people live in Namibia, and about 340,000 people live in the capital, Windhoek. Most people live in the north of the country and are farmers.

Namibia has two famous deserts. The Namib Desert, one of the oldest deserts in the world, is on the Atlantic coast and covers 2,000 kilometres. The Kalahari Desert is in the east and south of the country. The Etosha National Park in the north is home to many African wild animals, for example, elephants and wild cats. The climate is hot and dry, and there isn't much rain. There are more than 300 sunny days a year.

Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a small country in Central America. It is next to Nicaragua and Panama. The Caribbean Sea is to the east and the Pacific Ocean is to the west. Costa Rica has a population of about 4.8 million. Around 30% of people live in the centre of the country around the capital, San José.

There are two important areas of mountains. Cerro Chirripó is the highest mountain and is 3,819 metres high. Rainforests cover 20% of the country and there are many interesting plants and animals to see.

Costa Rica is a tropical country. It has a rainy season from May to December and a dry season from December to May, with a lot of sunny days.

4  **Match the five topic sentences with the gaps in the text below.**

- a** People can change the way they deal with stress.
- b** There are techniques that can help angry people remain calm.
- c** Angry people often have unhealthy lifestyles.
- d** When we are angry, our body does what it does when something attacks it.
- e** Getting angry is not good for your heart.

Stress and heart disease

1 _____ If you lose control when you have to wait in a queue or because the driver of another car upsets you, you are more likely to have a heart attack than somebody who remains calm. Men who become angry easily are 60% more likely to have heart disease than other men.

2 _____ The nervous system prepares us to fight or run away. When the nervous system is on alert, the heart produces adrenaline and it becomes more sensitive.

3 _____ Because they cannot deal with stress, they smoke and drink alcohol. They are more likely to have a poor diet. Their anger may also result in bad relationships at home and at work.

4 _____ They need to accept that they cannot change the situation they are in but can change the way they react to it. They need to ask themselves if a late train or bad traffic really is such a big problem.

5 _____ Doing exercise relieves stress and puts people in a good mood. Taking a deep breath and counting to ten helps people to calm down, and writing your feelings on a piece of paper when you are very angry is a good idea.

Reflect

5 Think about the following questions:

- How well did you do Exercises 1–3?
- How well did you do Exercise 4?
- If you feel that you didn't do so well, what is the reason?
- Will the exercises in this **Worksheet** help you to notice topic sentences in the future?

6 For more practice, look at some of the texts in your English course book. Can you find the topic sentences in each paragraph? The more you do this, the better you will be at finding topic sentences.