

Basics

Good writers organise texts logically. They don't just put ideas onto the page as they come into their head. They plan ahead and make sure one idea follows another. They want the text to be easy to read.

Writers organise their 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 new paragraph.

Writers also organise each paragraph logically. The first sentence, the topic sentence, expresses the main idea of the paragraph and tells the reader what the paragraph will be about. The sentences that follow, (usually two or three sentences) support the main idea. They usually give reasons or examples. Sometimes, a final sentence in a paragraph summarises or repeats the main idea.

When you skim read a text, you often read the topic sentences at the start of each paragraph to get the general idea of the text.

The academic context

In an academic setting, you will need to read a large amount of material. When you read, it is important to understand the main idea quickly. Understanding the relationship between the topic sentence and the other sentences in each paragraph help you to do that. When you need to read academic texts quickly (perhaps in an exam) you can sometimes skip some points in a paragraph and focus on the topic sentences.

Key features

A topic sentence contains the main idea of a paragraph. Here are some key features of topic sentences:

- In a text with several paragraphs, the topic sentence at the start of each paragraph will contain a new idea
- A good topic sentence will use specific language that gives a clear message.
- Topic sentences should be well-written and not too long.
- Good topic sentences are interesting and will make the reader want to find out more. Topic sentences should not be boring. An interesting topic sentence is well planned and well thought out.

Topic sentences need to have a strong message and state the writer's views clearly.

Challenges / difficulties

When topic sentences are short and clear, you have a good idea of what the rest of the paragraph will say. It is more difficult if topic sentences are long and have words you don't know.

Most topic sentences are at the start of the paragraph – occasionally they might be in the middle, so always make sure you **have** found the topic sentence.

How can I develop this skill?

Make sure you look for the topic sentence in everything you read. If you can, find newspaper and journal texts and find the topic sentences; then compare your ideas with a fellow student to see if you both agree. The more you do this, the more you will develop the skill.

Learning outcomes

When students have learned this skill, they will:

- know that typical academic texts are organised into paragraphs.
- know that a paragraph is usually organised into topic sentences followed by sentences that support it.
- recognise topic sentences and supporting arguments in paragraphs of academic texts.

Theory to practice

Below is a text that discusses whether it is better to live in a big city or quietly in the country. Read and notice the following:

- how the highlighted topic sentences introduce each paragraph.
- how other sentences in the paragraph support the topic sentence.
- how the final underlined topic sentence in paragraph 2 repeats the main point.
- how a short phrase can introduce the topic sentence.

A growing number of people live in cities. They make the move because there is work and it is better paid. Some people truly enjoy city life, but others would prefer to live in the country if they could choose.

There is certainly more to do in big cities. There are museums and galleries and places to enjoy your leisure time. There are more bars and restaurants and shopping is generally more fun. People in cities are better entertained.

However, city life is stressful. Travelling on public transport is difficult and driving impossible. Because of the traffic, air is polluted. There is more crime and city centres do not feel safe.

There are obvious reasons for living in the country. There are trees and fields and no concrete office blocks. Life is generally slower and there is time to relax. The air is fresher, and lifestyles are healthier.

On the other hand, country life can be too quiet, and people get bored. They see the same faces every day and do not meet anyone new. There are no leisure facilities and people spend a lot of time at home.

In the end, it probably depends on age. When people are young, they want to earn money, have fun and to meet interesting people. As they grow older and have children, they look for peace and a quieter way of life.

Remember that when you skim read a text, you often read the topic sentences at the start of each paragraph to get the general idea of the text. As your skills improve, you will be able to read each sentence and predict what the rest of the paragraph says.

Here are the topic sentences from six paragraphs in a text about stress. Read them and think about what more information will be given in each paragraph. Then write the correct number to match each paragraph to the information below.

Para 1: Stress is worry and anxiety in your life.

Para 2: Financial problems cause a lot of stress.

Para 3: Another cause of stress is pressure at work.

Para 4: People worry about their personal relationships.

Para 5: People get stressed about their poor health.

Para 6: There are ways of dealing with stress.

Para _____ will explain more about stress and say there are different causes of stress.

Para _____ will say that people don't have enough money or have debts.

Para _____ will give examples of problems at work.

Para _____ will mention problems between husbands and wives and parents and children.

Para _____ will give examples of health problems and illnesses that people worry about.

Para _____ will explain how people can try to relax and stop worrying.

Ways to get more practice

Read as widely as possible, and always analyse the paragraphs and identify the topic sentence.

You can also skim texts by only reading the first sentence in each paragraph and deciding what the text will be about.

Then read the full text to confirm your ideas.