

Topic sentences

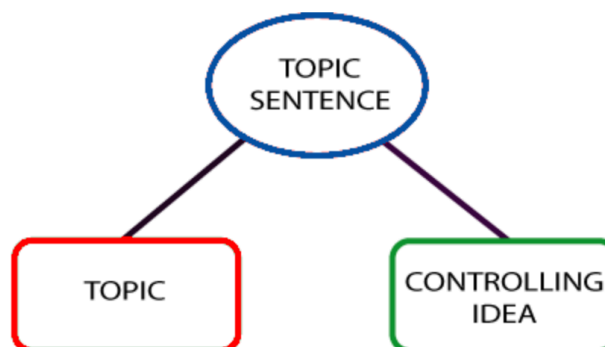
<http://sana.aalto.fi/awe/cohesion/topsen/index.html>

Finnish Virtual University / © 2008 Ken Pennington

TOPIC SENTENCES

One easy way for engineers to improve their writing is to begin their paragraphs with topic sentences that summarize the purpose and content of a paragraph. Topic sentences present the **main idea** or a **claim** that controls the rest of the paragraph. A good topic sentence has four characteristics:

1. The topic sentence is usually (but not always!) the **first sentence** in the paragraph.
2. It makes a **general statement** that is wider in its scope than the rest of the sentences in that paragraph. In other words, the topic sentence should be general enough so that it can be supported by specific details in later sentences.
3. Topic sentences should always contain both a **topic** and a **controlling idea**. The **topic** typically occurs before the verb and is "*what the paragraph is about*", while the **controlling idea** is "*what you want to say about the topic*".
4. The **controlling idea** should be repeated (preferably, in "**subject position**") in each of the sentences that follow the topic sentence.



NEW TOPIC

Writers often use topic sentences as a means to introduce the main idea as a new topic that has not been discussed earlier. In the example below, notice how the topic sentence (the first sentence) serves as a “bridge” in the transition from an earlier discussion of *primary and secondary education* to the new topic concerning “universities” and “polytechnics”.

The **topic** (shown in red below) typically occurs before the verb and is “*what the paragraph is about*”, while the **controlling idea** (underlined in green) is “*what you want to say about the topic*”. In this case, the topic sentence contains two controlling ideas.

The Finnish higher education system consists of universities and polytechnics. The universities stress the connection between research and teaching. The basic purpose of the universities is to carry out scientific research and to provide teaching in related subjects. Students at universities may take a lower (Bachelor's) or higher (Master's) academic degree, as well as academic further education, consisting of licentiate and doctoral degrees. Universities also arrange further education and open university teaching. In contrast, polytechnics emphasize a connection with working life, and the degrees offered are higher education degrees with a professional emphasis. Located throughout Finland, universities and polytechnics aim to ensure that all prospective students have equal opportunities for study, regardless of where they live.

Finnish Virtual University / © 2008 Ken Pennington

ENUMERATION

In science, topic sentences are often used to introduce a **LIST OF ITEMS**. Such paragraphs, based on a **PATTERN OF ENUMERATION**, have topic sentences that typically include **QUANTIFIERS**, such as *numerous, several, many, much, and a number of*.

Often the **controlling idea** (underlined in green) in such lists consist of **superordinates**, such as *reason, cause, difference*.

There are a number of good reasons for immigrating to Finland. First, everyone speaks English (*though they're not very talkative*). Second, Finland has a superior, free health system (*if you don't mind the long lines*) and all education is free (*and you get what you pay for*). In addition, most public transport is free (*except if you get caught*). A third reason is that Finns are friendly, outgoing people (*when they're intoxicated*). Finns also value equality between the sexes (*so, no opening of doors for the fairer sex*). Finally, where else except in Finland can you swim outside during the winter (*through a hole in the ice*).

Finnish Virtual University / © 2008 Ken Pennington

In the above **paragraph of enumeration**, notice how each item is presented using **enumerators** (e.g., *first, second, another..., finally*). The same information could have also been expressed as a numbered list:

There are a number of good reasons for immigrating to Finland:

1. All Finns speak English (*though they're not very talkative*).
2. Finland has a superior, free health system (*if you don't mind the long lines*) and all education is free (*and you get what you pay for*). In addition, most public transport is free (*except if you get caught*).
3. Finns are friendly, outgoing people (*when they're intoxicated*).
4. Finns also value equality between the sexes (*so, no opening of doors for the fairer sex*).
5. where else except in Finland can you swim outside during the winter (*through a hole in the ice*).

Finnish Virtual University / © 2008 Ken Pennington

CLAIMS

Topic sentences can also introduce the main idea of the paragraph as a claim. Claims are opinions that that are not introduced by the pronoun "I". In the example below, the topic sentence makes the **claim** about *how easy* it is to learn Finnish. Notice how this claim is **explained, developed** and **supported** by evidence in the sentences that follow the topic sentence .

The **topic** (shown in red below) typically occurs before the verb and is "*what the paragraph is about*", while the **controlling idea** (underlined in green) is "*what you want to say about the topic*".

Finnish is an easy language to learn. It is written the way that it is pronounced. Finnish has no articles (i.e., *a, an, the*), nor does it distinguish between masculine and feminine forms, as do other European languages, such as Spanish, French and German. Thus, Finnish makes no distinction between she and he; one word **hän** serves for both sexes. Another feature that makes Finnish easy to learn is that words are formed from common "roots", thus learning the the word **kirja** (*book*) quickly opens the way to learning other related words, including **kirjasto** (*library*), **kirje** (*letter*), and **kirjoittaa** (*to write*). Furthermore, Finnish has no separate preposition words (e.g., *to, from, on, in*). Instead, they are all simply added to the end of words.

Finnish Virtual University / © 2008 Ken Pennington

In outline form, this text would have looked like this:

Finnish is an easy language to learn.

1. easy to write because it is phonetic
2. easy because it has no articles, no masculine and feminine forms, and only one word **hän** serves for both sexes.
3. easy because words are formed from common "roots"
4. easy because it needs no separate prepositions

A carefully thought out topic sentence will serve two important functions. First, it will provide you, the author, with the means to stay focused on your objective. It is far easier to write if you know what you are going to write about! Second, a clearly stated topic sentence will provide readers with the tools they need to quickly understand what you have to say.

Finnish Virtual University / © 2008 Ken Pennington