

Topic Sentences and Thesis Statements

Topic sentences and thesis statements reveal the reason for writing and tell the reader what will be proven or explained:

- **Topic sentences** are used for paragraph and report writing when the writer is explaining facts.
- **Thesis statements** are used for essay writing when the writer expresses an opinion, takes a position, or makes an argument.

Topic sentences and thesis statements:

- Are used in expository writing.
- Can be written in any tone: serious, humorous, encouraging, inspiring, etc.
- Can change tone depending on the purpose of the paragraph and the audience.
- Can be very short and direct. Example: I love volleyball.
- Can be long and elaborate. Example: I may be the shortest, least coordinated player on our varsity volleyball team, but I am, without a doubt, the most passionate.

Paragraph assignments in all subject areas require strong, clear topic sentences and thesis statements.

- Math: My classmate and I found four examples of isosceles triangles in the pictures and charts in our classroom.
- Science: Today in science we learned how scientists use adult herring gulls to test instinctive behaviors.
- Literature: Maya Angelou's poem "Caged Bird" reminds us all of the power and importance of freedom.

Occasion and Position

Analyzing Your Topic Sentence

Every topic sentence has these two parts:

- a reason for writing (occasion/topic/subject)
- statement about what the writer plans to prove or explain (position/opinion/attitude)

In *Step Up to Writing* we refer to one kind of complex sentence as an Occasion/Position Statement.

Example: **Although Prohibition during the 1920s and 30s banned the production and selling of alcohol,**
(occasion)
many citizens found ways to overlook these laws.
(position)

All topic sentence styles, however, can be analyzed by applying the terms **occasion** and **position**.

- Examples:
1. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt showed great concern for the suffering of our nation's poor. (Action Topic Sentence)
(occasion) – **Eleanor Roosevelt**
(position) – *showed concern for poor*
 2. Eleanor Roosevelt found several ways to promote the rights of women in our country. (Number/Power Statement)
(occasion) – **Eleanor Roosevelt**
(position) – *promoted rights of women*
 3. During her years in the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt traveled to many parts of the country to support the New Deal programs. (Where or When + What's Happening)
(occasion) – **Eleanor Roosevelt**
(position) – *supported New Deal programs*

Action Verb Topic Sentences

- Use the three-part “burrito” fold to visualize an Action Verb Topic Sentence. This will help you focus on the verb as you create a topic sentence. The folded paper will also help you write a complete sentence.
- Select your “strong, action” verb first. Write it in the center column. Fill in the first and last columns. The action verb shows your position—what you plan to prove or explain.
- Remember to use action verbs in all topic sentences.

○	Examples		
		Action Verb	
	Our science group	identified	two important changes to the water as it boiled.
	Mr. Peters	stresses	good nutrition and regular exercise in his classes.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States, designed several buildings. 		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The attack by Japanese warplanes on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii sparked United States involvement in World War II. 		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wildfires in Indonesia forced many orangutans from the jungle onto palm oil plantations, where they were not welcome by people. 		
○	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At last night’s city council meeting, our mayor encouraged everyone to visit the new park. 		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurricane Katrina destroyed parts of the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast. 		

Where or When Plus What's Happening

When an idea for a topic sentence is hard to find, try this simple approach.

Focus on a “where” or a “when” and then add a “what’s happening.”

“What’s happening” can mean:

What could happen?

What will happen?

What should happen?

What did happen?

What might happen?

What could have happened?

Choose a serious topic or a lighter one.

○	Examples	
	Where or When	What's Happening
	In some parts of our country,	citizens conserve energy in creative and interesting ways.
	During our field trip to the county court house,	my team and I met several judges.
	Last year	my language arts teachers taught me to love poetry.
	• Each year our family vacations at Blue Bell Lodge in the Black Hills of South Dakota.	
	• After graduation my cousin will volunteer as a nurse in an interesting part of Africa.	
	• Each day at lunch, too many middle school students make poor choices about what to eat.	
○	• Before each vocabulary test in science, I use two strategies to learn and use the words on the list correctly.	
	• Inside most textbooks students will find directions for reading and using the materials correctly and effectively.	

Occasion/Position Statements

- An Occasion/Position Statement uses a sentence structure called a complex sentence with an adverbial clause.
- Think of Occasion/Position Statements as sentences with two parts. The *occasion* gives your reason for writing. The *position* shows what you plan to prove or explain.
- Occasion/Position Statements are easy because they start with special words called subordinate conjunctions—the starter words.

- | | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| ◆ After | ◆ Before | ◆ Since | ◆ Whenever |
| ◆ Although | ◆ Even if | ◆ So that | ◆ Wherever |
| ◆ As | ◆ Even though | ◆ Though | ◆ While |
| ◆ As long as | ◆ If | ◆ Unless | |
| ◆ As soon as | ◆ In order that | ◆ Until | |
| ◆ Because | ◆ Once | ◆ When | |

Examples	
	Occasion Position
○	Although many teens prefer to choose their own clothes for school, some favor the idea of wearing uniforms.
	If our country is serious about saving gas, we must explore the concept of electric cars.
	Because Jacques Cousteau loved the sea, he spent his life looking for ways to share his passion and knowledge.
	• Until students learn to get papers, assignments, notebooks, and lockers organized, life in middle school can be very difficult.
	• When students work with plastics in industrial arts class, it is important for them to wear safety goggles.
○	• Before you make the decision to eat a bag of potato chips, consider the health benefits of a fresh carrot stick.

And, But, Or, and So Statements

And, But, Or, and So are part of a group of words called coordinating conjunctions. Use the words Boy Fans to remember this list.

But Or Yet

For And Nor So

- These conjunctions are used in compound sentences. They divide the two independent clauses (complete ideas) that make up a compound sentence.
- Think of the first clause as your occasion—reason for writing. Think of the second clause as the position—what you plan to prove or explain.
- Use a comma *before* the conjunction: , and . . . , but . . . , or . . . , so

○	Examples	
	In science class we learned to identify the parts of a microscope	, and we learned how to use a microscope correctly.
	I enjoy most music	, but jazz is my favorite.
	I was nervous about completing my pottery project	, so one of the experienced art students offered some helpful advice.
	• Reptiles are all alike because they have backbones, breathe with lungs, and have scales, yet reptiles come in a variety of sizes and shapes.	
	• School boards should not cut art and music programs, nor should they sacrifice the industrial arts electives offered in most high schools.	
○	• To stay healthy, we need to eat the right foods, so we should make smart decisions about the snacks we choose.	

Power (Number) Statements

- Power statements, used as topic sentences, contain number words. The number word is the focus point of the sentence. It points out your position—what you plan to prove or explain.
- The number word lets a reader know that a list of information will follow.
- The number word helps you, as the writer, organize your thoughts. The number word also helps the reader.

- | | | |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| ◆ Two | ◆ Three | ◆ Plenty |
| ◆ Four | ◆ Several | ◆ Various |
| ◆ Many | ◆ Some | ◆ A number of |
| ◆ A couple of | ◆ A few | ◆ Numerous |

Avoid starting with “There are,” “These are,” or “Here are”. Instead, start your Power Statements with:

- Who – What – When – Where

Start with . . .	Examples
○ What	• Two movies released during the holidays received great reviews.
Who	• Young men and women serving in the military make a number of sacrifices for our nation’s security.
Where	• In social studies class, we read about some of the problems caused by global warming.
Who	• I have mastered several volleyball skills this quarter.
What	• Three cities in the West have serious pollution problems.
When	• This semester students taking Spanish and French use two interactive programs in the lab to help with vocabulary development.
Who	• Leon, my older brother, hopes to earn money this summer working at one of three popular spots in town: the baseball field, the theater downtown, or the amusement park.
○	

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A Few Good Prepositions

- Prepositions are words that show the relationship of one word to another word in a sentence. Prepositions do not stand alone. They are always used in a phrase: Without funding, Throughout the country, Before an election.
- The prepositional phrase in a topic sentence introduces your occasion—your reason for writing. The rest of the sentence shares your position—what you plan to prove or explain.

- | | | | | |
|----------------|------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| ◆ According to | ◆ Beyond | ◆ In case of | ◆ Outside | ◆ Within |
| ◆ Along with | ◆ Despite | ◆ In spite of | ◆ Over | ◆ Without |
| ◆ After | ◆ Due to | ◆ Instead of | ◆ Since | ◆ With the |
| ◆ Among | ◆ During | ◆ Inside | ◆ Through | exception of |
| ◆ Because of | ◆ For | ◆ Like | ◆ Throughout | |
| ◆ By | ◆ From | ◆ Near | ◆ Under | |
| ◆ Before | ◆ In | ◆ Of | ◆ Until | |
| ◆ Besides | ◆ In addition to | ◆ On | ◆ With | |

Examples

○	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>According to the school board survey, students, teachers, and parents support the new eighth grade study skills class.</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>During the construction of our new home, the contractor made several fantastic improvements to the original plan.</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Due to their high math test scores, the sixth graders were enthusiastic about math class.</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>With the proper training and the best equipment, high school football players can enjoy the sport and avoid injury.</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Like most teenagers, my cousin Itsuo disagrees with his parents on several issues.</u>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Instead of the traditional school calendar, districts should consider schedules that meet the needs of families and encourage community involvement.</u>
○	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>On our vacation we met several people with unusual hobbies.</u>

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Examples

○	
	• <u>According to</u> the school board survey, students, teachers, and parents support the new eighth grade study skills class.
	• <u>During</u> the construction of our new home, the contractor made several fantastic improvements to the original plan.
	• <u>Due to</u> their high math test scores, the sixth graders were enthusiastic about math class.
	• <u>With the proper training and the best equipment</u> , high school football players can enjoy the sport and avoid injury.
	• <u>Like</u> most teenagers, my cousin Itsuo disagrees with his parents on several issues.
	• <u>Instead of</u> the traditional school calendar, districts should consider schedules that meet the needs of families and encourage community involvement.
○	• <u>On</u> our vacation we met several people with unusual hobbies.

Compare or Contrast Topic Sentences

For a compare or contrast writing assignment, ideas must be organized to show how concepts or items are alike or different.

Use any of the topic sentence strategies for these writing tasks. Just add one or two of the following compare/contrast words to your sentence.

- | | | |
|---------------|----------------|--------------|
| ◆ Alike | ◆ Identical | ◆ The same |
| ◆ Better | ◆ In common | ◆ Twins |
| ◆ Compare | ◆ Like | ◆ Unlike |
| ◆ Contrast | ◆ Opposite | ◆ Variations |
| ◆ Differ | ◆ Resemble | ◆ Varied |
| ◆ Differences | ◆ Similar | ◆ Vary |
| ◆ Different | ◆ Similarities | ◆ Worse |

	Examples
○	• Tennyson’s “The Eagle” and Wordsworth’s “To a Butterfly” have three similarities.
	• The first baseman’s glove and the catcher’s mitt differ in several ways.
	• Although both bikes were the same price, their warranties were different.
	• Comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Robin Williams are similar in some ways; however, their differences are quite obvious.
	• The twins resembled each other, yet they were not identical.
	• When it is cold, animals behave differently in order to survive.
	• My two favorite authors have similar styles of writing.
○	• Even though the people in the countries of Turkey and Jordan have some traditions in common, their daily lives are different in several important ways.

Rhetorical Question Plus a Statement

Rhetorical questions are questions that writers ask but do not expect their readers to answer.

Rhetorical questions are used to get the reader's attention. They are closely connected to a statement that follows. This statement presents the topic.

Think of the rhetorical question as your occasion—reason for writing. Think of the statement as your position—what you plan to prove or explain.

○	Examples	
	Question	Statement
	Is peace in the Middle East possible?	Many Americans believe it is.
	Have you considered a career in aviation?	Before you do, consider both the advantages and disadvantages of spending a lifetime in the air.
	Do you have a hard time remembering the meaning of vocabulary words?	Try associating them with something that you do remember.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are community centers meeting the needs of teenagers? In our city, they provide places to gather, help with homework, and scholarships for summer camp. 	
○	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should high school students be required to participate in extracurricular activities? Studies show that it is a very good idea. 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you read <i>Hatchet</i> by Gary Paulsen? If you haven't, you should. 	

However Topic Sentences

However is a part of a group of words called conjunctive adverbs. Conjunctive adverbs are used to divide the independent clauses (complete ideas) in a compound sentence.

- Compound sentences have two parts. When you write a topic sentence, think of the first clause as your occasion—your reason for writing. Think of the second clause as your position—what you plan to prove or explain.
- *However* and other conjunctive adverbs are easy to use.
 - ◆ Therefore
 - ◆ In fact
 - ◆ Next
 - ◆ Consequently
 - ◆ Instead
 - ◆ Still
 - ◆ Likewise
 - ◆ Meanwhile
 - ◆ Besides
 - ◆ Nevertheless
 - ◆ As a result
 - ◆ Otherwise
- When you use *however* or other conjunctive adverbs, you will need a semicolon and a comma - ; *however*, - ; *instead*, - ; *in fact*.

	Examples	
○	Most Americans want to eliminate crime	; however, it will take a great deal of money, time, and effort to reach this goal.
	The new students were excited about joining the volleyball team	; still, many were unprepared for the demanding practices every day after school.
	Many people recognize paintings by Vincent Van Gogh	; however, some may not understand the techniques that he used.
○	I babysit and know how hard it is to care for a toddler	; in fact, I am convinced every toddler needs two babysitters when Mom and Dad leave for a night out.

Semicolon and Side by Side Topic Sentences

- Use a semicolon in a topic sentence when you want to emphasize the relationship between the two independent clauses (complete ideas).
- Think of the first independent clause as your occasion—reason for writing. Think of the second independent clause as the position—what you plan to prove or explain.
- Sometimes two simple sentences—one for the occasion and one for the position—work well as a topic sentence. This is especially true if your goal is to stress the position.
- Use these two methods for creating a compound sentence when it fits your style and the purpose for your paragraph or essay.

Examples	
○	Buying a new car is exciting; it's also stressful.
	Music helps people relax; listening, dancing, or singing to music can diminish stress.
	Living in a large city has many advantages; it also has its disadvantages.
	• Going to college is a must. A college degree is the fastest road to high-paying jobs.
	• Building a desk is very difficult. Planning in great detail can simplify the process.
	• Swimming in the ocean can be exhilarating and exciting. It can also be dangerous.
○	• The Internet provides a wealth of information. Just be careful about how you use it.

Infinitives in Topic Sentences

- An infinitive is a verb form introduced by the word “to.”

Examples: To succeed To accomplish To finish
 To win To teach To support
 To write To pass To be accepted

- Use an infinitive to start your topic sentence. This will make your sentence clear and direct.
- Use this strategy for writing assignments that explain directions, share a process, or give instructions.

○	Examples	
	To + a Verb	Position
	To succeed in business,	a person must establish clear but realistic goals.
	To impress her guests at our New Year’s dinner,	my aunt created the most incredible culinary surprises.
	To prepare for college,	high school students should take several math, science, and English classes.
	To build the best homes,	contractors insist on using only the best materials.
	• To succeed in college, students need strong study skills.	
○	• To improve math test scores, the leadership team initiated an intensive review of basic skills.	
	• To avoid problems with your computer, follow the tips that the manufacturer suggests.	
	• To win state championships, athletes must work hard and practice often.	

Two Nouns and Two Commas

Topic Sentences

- An appositive, a phrase that describes and renames a noun, can sometimes improve your topic sentence.
- The appositive adds information to your topic sentence.
Example:

My uncle volunteers in many third-world hospitals.
 My uncle, a famous heart surgeon, volunteers in many third-world hospitals.
- An appositive phrase does not have a verb—action word. An appositive phrase contains only the noun and other words that describe (modify) it.
Examples:

The automobile, a relatively new invention,
 The soccer team, a group of talented teens,
 Our school mascot, an unusual-looking buffalo,

	Examples
○	• Sarah, my best friend and a college freshman, took a study skills class to help her manage all of her coursework.
	• Our city's newest building contractor, a veteran engineer, insists on the highest quality materials.
	• Ben Franklin, a colonist from Pennsylvania, helped Thomas Jefferson write the Declaration of Independence.
	• Oils, a type of paint, are somewhat difficult to use.
	• The medulla, an important part of the brain, controls your breathing.
	• Soccer, a popular sport in other countries, has become a favorite activity for many children in the United States.
	• <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> , a Charles Dickens classic, teaches a powerful lesson.
○	

Using a Quotation in Topic Sentences

Adding a quotation to a topic sentence can be very effective.

- Using one of the topic sentence strategies will make the task easier.
- The quotation plus your comments tells the reader your position—what you plan to prove or explain.

○	Examples
	Occasion/Position Topic Sentence
	• When Mark Twain said, “Wrinkles should indicate where the smiles have been,” it really reminded me of my grandmother.
	• If you are tempted to give your best friend advice, at least be aware of the proverb that says, “Never give advice in a crowd.”
	Action Verb Topic Sentence/Side by Side Topic Sentence
	• Dr. Seuss’s character, the Lorax, tells us that “unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” I agree.
	• Some say “there is no I in TEAM.” I believe that to be true.
	A Rhetorical Question Plus a Statement
○	• Have your parents ever told you that “only boring people get bored”? For once, I think they just might be right.
	Where or When Plus What’s Happening?
	• In Anne Sewell’s classic, <i>Black Beauty</i> reminds readers that “. . . all boys are not cruel [to animals].”

Lists in Topic Sentences

A common method for writing a topic sentence is to list the key/star ideas that you will use in your paragraph or essay.

- There are several ways to list your key/star ideas:
 - A list of words
 - A list of phrases
 - A list of dependent (cannot stand alone) clauses
 - A list of independent (can stand alone) clauses
- This type of topic sentence works best in an essay or report. It is often too much for a single “stand-alone” paragraph.
- Keep your list parallel—do not mix words, phrases, or clauses.

Examples
○
A list of words
• Computers offer convenience, speed, and tools for accuracy.
• Golf requires power, balance, finesse, and accuracy.
A list of phrases
• Problems with the old school include poor ventilation, small classrooms, inadequate lighting, and limited parking.
• My grandparents prefer to vacation in Mexico, in the Northwest, and in the Bahamas.
A list of clauses
• When I found my lost puppy, when I won the trip to Florida, and when I met a group of teachers from Russia, I realized that life is great and full of surprises.
○
• Run for office; join a club; march in the band. Activities like these will make school more rewarding.