

# What Is a Paragraph?

A **paragraph** is a collection of sentences that describe, discuss, or explain one central idea. The three main parts of a paragraph are:

- the topic sentence
- the supporting detail sentences
- the concluding sentence

## Topic Sentences

A **topic sentence** tells the reader the main idea or thought that the writer is trying to express. It is a **one-sentence summary of the entire paragraph**. Each sentence that follows helps to develop the idea presented in the topic sentence.

The organization of a paragraph is based on the topic sentence.

### Elements of a Topic Sentence

The **two main elements** of a topic sentence are:

- the **main subject**
- a **controlling idea**

EXAMPLE:



Topic sentence 1: **Computers** can be **used in many different situations**.

↑  
main subject    controlling idea: *situations where people use computers*

From this sentence, we know that the paragraph is going to discuss something about computers (main subject). Specifically, it will explain how people use computers in different situations (controlling idea).

Topic sentence 2: **Computers** have **changed** enormously **in the past 20 years**.

↑                      ↑  
main subject    controlling idea: *the change in computers in the past 20 years*

From this topic sentence, we know that the paragraph is going to explain how computers have changed over time.

Topic sentence 3: Different **computers** can **appeal** to **different people**.

↑                      ↑  
main subject    controlling idea: *computers that different people like*

From this topic sentence, we know that the paragraph is going to explain how different kinds of people like different computers.

## ACTIVITY 1 Selecting a Good Topic Sentence

In each pair of sentences, put a check mark (✓) next to the better topic sentence. Be prepared to explain your choices.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ a. Bilingual dictionaries can help non-native learners in two very important ways.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. In a bilingual dictionary, the information is presented in two different languages.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ a. A person who is interviewing for a job has to arrive on time to the interview.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. A person who is interviewing for a job has to do three important things during the interview.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ a. There are many theories about who killed John F. Kennedy.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ a. Smartphones have a number of useful features.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. Smartphones use touch screen technology.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ a. Fossils are the remains of plants or animals that died a long time ago.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. There are numerous techniques that scientists use to discover the age of a fossil.



### Five Features of a Good Topic Sentence

Good writers know that an effective topic sentence has certain characteristics:

#### 1. It should guide the whole paragraph.

A well-written topic sentence controls or guides the whole paragraph. It lets the reader know what the rest of the paragraph will be about.

#### 2. It should not be a well-known fact.

A good topic sentence is not a general fact that everyone accepts as true. For example, *Cars use gasoline* is not a good topic sentence because there is not much more to say about the topic.

#### 3. It needs to be specific.

A good topic sentence is specific. *Credit cards are useful* is not a good topic sentence because it is too general. The reader does not know exactly what to expect in the paragraph. *Credit cards are useful on long trips* is a good topic sentence because it is specific. The paragraph will most likely explain how credit cards can be used in one particular situation—a long trip.

#### 4. It cannot be too specific.

A good topic sentence is not too specific. *A credit card can have a high credit limit* is very specific. There is nothing more to be said about the topic because the supporting details have already been stated.

#### 5. It must contain a controlling idea.

A good topic sentence has a controlling idea—a group of words or a phrase that helps guide the flow of ideas in the paragraph: *A credit card is one of the most important things that a traveler needs while on vacation.* The underlined words in this sentence are the controlling idea.



### ACTIVITY 3 Recognizing Effective Topic Sentences

Read each of the following groups of sentences. Write the general topic in the space provided. Put a check mark (✓) next to the best topic sentence.

1. General topic: smartphones

- ☒ a. Smartphones have more features than regular phones.
- ☐ b. Smartphones are expensive.
- ☐ c. You can download apps on a smartphone.

2. General topic: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ a. Pepperoni and mushrooms are my two favorite toppings on a pizza from Nino's Pizzeria.
- ☐ b. Nino's Pizzeria has a wide selection of delicious food.
- ☐ c. Nino's Pizzeria makes good chicken sandwiches.

3. General topic: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ a. Some dolphins are gray.
- ☐ b. Dolphins are quiet, friendly, unique, beautiful, and smart.
- ☐ c. Dolphins are one of nature's most incredible animals.

4. General topic: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ a. Few people know the interesting history of snowboarding.
- ☐ b. Snowboards are made of fiberglass and have sharp metal edges.
- ☐ c. Snowboarding is a winter sport.

5. General topic: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ a. My favorite seashell is orange and white.
- ☐ b. My hobby is collecting seashells, but my brother's hobby is playing sports.
- ☐ c. Seashells make great souvenirs for several reasons.



### Practice with Controlling Ideas

The controlling idea in your topic sentence guides your paragraph and lets the reader know what the paragraph is going to be about. The topic of the paragraph is limited by the controlling idea—it narrows the topic.

Here are some examples of topic sentences. The main subjects are circled, and the controlling ideas are underlined.

1. Eco-vacations are becoming very popular these days.

The reader expects to learn why eco-vacations are becoming popular.

2. Electric staplers are easier to use than other types of staplers.

The reader expects to learn what makes electric staplers easier to use.

3. Singapore is a very popular vacation destination in Asia.

The reader expects to learn some reasons why Singapore is a popular vacation destination.

4. There are three things that people need to be aware of before swimming in the ocean.

The reader expects to learn about the three things that people need to know before they swim in the ocean.

### ACTIVITY 4 Reviewing Topic Sentences and Controlling Ideas

Read each group of sentences. Put a check mark (✓) next to the best topic sentence. Underline the controlling idea in the sentence you choose.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ a. North Americans drink about half a billion cups of coffee every day.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. Coffee is the drink of choice for many North Americans.  
\_\_\_\_\_ c. Most North Americans drink coffee in order to wake up in the morning.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ a. Yesterday was the tenth of April.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. Yesterday I spilled spaghetti sauce on my shirt during my lunch break.  
\_\_\_\_\_ c. Yesterday I had a terrible day at work.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ a. My best friend and I had a wonderful time at the amusement park last week.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. We rode three different roller coasters.  
\_\_\_\_\_ c. My best friend and I enjoyed the roller coasters more than the Ferris wheel.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ a. Over half a million U.S. high school athletes participated in outdoor track and field events last year.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. The sport of track and field is very old.  
\_\_\_\_\_ c. The sport of track and field has increased in popularity in recent years.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ a. My iguana's trip to the veterinarian was a catastrophe.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b. My iguana scratched the veterinarian when she tried to pick it up.  
\_\_\_\_\_ c. People do not like iguanas.





## ACTIVITY 6 Writing Topic Sentences

Read the paragraphs on the following pages. Write a topic sentence for each paragraph in the space provided. Be sure your sentence includes a controlling idea.

### Paragraph 2

Without that morning meal, the body does not wake up completely. It is lacking the necessary fuel for energy. By lunchtime, people who **skip** breakfast tend to be overly hungry, so they will eat too much. Perhaps the most serious effect of not eating breakfast is that the body's **metabolism** will not work properly. It has been said for generations: "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

**to skip:** go without;  
pass over

**metabolism:** chemical  
process in the body  
to maintain proper  
functions

### Paragraph 3

First, you may want to begin your search online. There are numerous job-search websites, both local and international. When you have found an interesting job opening, do your research. Find out as much as you can about the company and the position itself. Next, review your résumé and make any necessary changes. The résumé should fit each job that you apply for. You should also make sure that the résumé **highlights** all of your previous employment and education. Finally, fill out the application and include all other necessary documentation. Remember that **persistence** is the key to getting the job you want. By following these steps, you can be confident that you will find a job sooner rather than later.

**to highlight:** to focus,  
raise to the front

**persistence:** the quality  
of not giving up, the  
quality of continuing  
to try