

Help Centres – English Support



Paragraph – Topic Sentence / Main Idea

Topic sentences express the main idea of a paragraph. A topic sentence is not simply a general fact that everyone accepts as true. Rather, it makes a point and controls the scope of the paragraph. The topic sentence is often, but not always, the first sentence in a paragraph.

A good topic sentence does 3 things:

1. It introduces the topic of the paragraph
2. It makes a point about the topic (an opinion, point of view, or attitude)
3. It makes a statement that is neither too broad nor too narrow

Compare these weak and strong examples of topic sentences

1. (weak) This paragraph is about cats.
(strong) Cats are the best family pet for several reasons.
2. (weak) People around the world enjoy music.
(strong) Around the world, music helps people share identity, culture and experiences.

Here are some topic sentences. The underlined words indicate the **topic** and the author's *focus* to tell us the **main idea** of the paragraph.

1. Tennis racquets have changed a lot in the last century.
2. The middle child in families is often a good negotiator.
3. Tools for left-handed people are poorly designed.

Finding the Main Idea of a Paragraph

The main idea is the point of the paragraph. It is the most important thought about the topic (a person, place, or idea). The main idea answers the question: **What is being said about the topic?**

The topic sentence is *usually*, but not always, the first sentence. The writer uses the rest of the paragraph to support the main idea. Sometimes, the main idea is in the last sentence of a paragraph. The author gives supporting information first, then makes the point in the last sentence.

Example

Cats are the best family pet for several reasons. First of all, cats are very clean animals. They are very good at grooming themselves and you don't need to give them baths. Second, cats are very independent. For example, you can give your cats some food and water, and they will be okay on their own all day. Finally, cats don't need a lot of space. If you have a small house or apartment, a cat is a great choice because they are small animals that don't need a large area to run around and play. When choosing a family pet, a cat is a very good choice!

- **Topic** = cats
Main idea = cats are the best family pet

Example

Most teenagers do not know what they want to do for the rest of their lives. It is a big decision. There are a number of things you can do to narrow the options. For example, you can take an interest test, do some research on your own about a career, try volunteer work in the field in which you are interested, or "job-shadow", where you spend a day with a person who is working in a field that interests you. These are a few helpful ideas as you begin to choose a career.

- **Topic** = career choice
Main idea = a few ideas to help choose a career

Alternatively, an author might put the **main idea** in the middle of a paragraph. The author will introduce the topic, present the main idea, then spend the rest of the paragraph supporting it.

Example

The United States is in love with going out to eat. Because of this, a large variety of restaurants specialize in all kinds of foods. McDonald's is the king of a subgroup of restaurants called fast-food restaurants. Chances are, no matter where you live, there is a McDonald's near you. Now McDonald's is trying something new. It is called McDonald's Express and there is a test site in Peabody, Massachusetts. It is part of a Mobil gas station. This allows you to fill up with gas and fill up on food at the same time. What will they think of next?

- **Topic** = McDonald's
- Main idea = McDonald's is the king of fast food