

Topic Sentences, Supporting Details, and Paragraph Format

“A topic sentence states the main idea of a paragraph. It is the most general sentence of the paragraph. All the other sentences serve to explain, describe, extend, or support this main-idea sentence. “

(Scarry, Sandra and John. *The Writer's Workplace*, 5th edition. Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1999)

“Most paragraphs you read will begin with the topic sentence. However, some topic sentences come in the middle of the paragraph; others come at the end. Some paragraphs have no stated topic sentence at all; in those cases, the main idea is implied. Students are usually advised to use topic sentences in all their work to be certain that the writing has a focus.” (*WW*)

The topic sentence consists of two things: the **topic** and a **controlling idea** about that topic. For this reason, the topic sentence often contains the writer's opinion or point of view.

Example: **Mexico is a wonderful place to visit.**

Here, the topic is **Mexico**, and the controlling idea is that it is a **wonderful place to visit**. Supporting details in the rest of the paragraph should tell us *why* Mexico is such a great place to visit.

Exercise

Consider this list of topics. Add a **controlling idea** to each topic to turn it into a topic sentence.

Example: Lisa has been my best friend for fifteen years.

1. The president _____
2. Cabrillo College _____
3. The Robert E. Swenson Library _____
4. Helene Jara _____
5. English 290 _____
6. My family _____
7. The entertainment industry _____
8. My parents-in-law _____
9. Religion _____
10. The American medical system _____

Supporting Details

Every paragraph should have **adequate** and **relevant** supporting details.

If a paragraph has **adequate** details, this means it has enough details to thoroughly support the main idea.

If a paragraph has **relevant** details, this means that all the supporting sentences relate back to the main idea; there are no unrelated, random sentences.

For each of the topic sentences below, add sufficient supporting details to complete the paragraph.

1. **Learning Skills offers many services to students at Cabrillo College.**

2. **The Library contains several different tools for accessing information.**

3. **Computers are essential to the process of composition.**

4. **It is important to make use of an instructor's office hours.**

Recognizing Main Ideas and Supporting Details

Read the following article entitled “What Is Self-Confidence?”¹ Underline the main idea in each paragraph. The first paragraph has been done for you as an example. It might be helpful to note that this article has been taken from a textbook. In most textbooks, paragraphs are separated by spaces.

What Is Self -Confidence?

Self-confidence primarily refers to having a positive and realistic perception of ourselves and our abilities. Self-confidence is characterized by: optimism, eagerness, pride, independence, trust, the ability to handle criticism, emotional maturity, and the ability to accurately assess our capabilities.

A lack of self-confidence, on the other hand, is characterized by: self-doubt, passivity, isolation, sensitivity to criticism, distrust, depression, and feelings of inferiority and being unloved.

How does a lack of self—confidence develop?

1. Negative life experiences at home, in school, or on the job can cause you to develop feelings of inferiority and hopelessness. For example, when you were growing up your parents might have been unable to provide a healthy and supportive environment. Perhaps they were critical, demanding and/or overprotective of you. As a result, you develop negative perceptions of yourself.
2. Loss of a family member or close friend may lead to feelings of depression. For example, your parents get a divorce, you move away from home for the first time and as a result are away from your friends and family, or you break up with your boyfriend/girlfriend.
3. Dwelling unnecessarily on negative events, such as failures and disappointment, instead of using the event as a learning experience. For example, perhaps you had a job interview, but you didn't get the job. Instead of getting depressed about it, think about what you learned from it and what you might do differently next time.
4. Judging or criticizing yourself and your abilities too harshly. For example, you criticize and blame yourself for your failures and disappointment.
5. Evaluating the outcome of situations as worse than they really are. For example, your supervisor asks you to make 15 copies of something, but you made 50. You're sure he's going to penalize you in some way.

¹ Taken from Price-Machado, Donna. *Skills for Success: Working and Studying in English*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 19-20. Source: Counseling Center, Division of Student Affairs. State University of New York at Buffalo.

6. Experiencing too much pressure from your parents and/or peers to meet the demands and expectations that they set out for you. Such pressure deprives you of the opportunity to develop your own identity and independence.

7. Setting unrealistic goals. For example, you just bought a computer and you want to learn a program by tomorrow. You need a realistic amount of time to learn a new skill.

8. Fear of failure. For example, if you get an “F” on an exam you may see yourself as a failure rather than as a perfectly worthwhile person who has failed an exam.

How to increase your self-confidence

1. Think positively about yourself.

2. Set goals that are realistic and that will allow you to meet your expectations. That is, set your goals at a reasonable level, so that what you accomplish is equal or almost equal to what you set out to accomplish.

3. Reward/praise yourself when you have done well.

4. Whenever something upsetting or disappointing occurs, be aware of your thoughts. Try to think logically about the situation instead of reacting merely on the basis of your emotions.

5. Dwell on your strengths, not your weaknesses.

6. Realize that there are certain things that you are more adept and competent in than others, and that it is impossible to expect perfection in every aspect of your life.

7. Do not attribute your achievement and accomplishments only to luck. Instead, give yourself credit for your own personal achievement.

8. Learn to be assertive. That is, learn to express your feelings, opinions, beliefs, and needs directly, openly, and honestly, while not violating the rights of others. For example, learn to say “no” to unreasonable requests.

9. Make a list of what you feel are the major problems in your life. Then list ways to improve or change them. Chances are that not all of your problems can be dealt with easily or quickly. However, there are some areas where you can take immediate action.

Checklist for improving self-confidence

- ✓ Count the good things, not the negative ones.
- ✓ Think positively about yourself.

- ✓ Learn from your experiences.
- ✓ Set realistic goals.
- ✓ Be courageous.
- ✓ Keep learning.
- ✓ Live usefully.
- ✓ Welcome change.

Organizing Information into Paragraph Form

Examine the following strategies for reading college textbooks. Then, re-write the information on the next page as a paragraph with a main idea and supporting details, **using your own words**. Write your paragraph underneath the original material.

Reading College Textbooks ²

- Preview the chapter before reading. [Observe] the signposts: opening questions, outline, subheadings, italics, boldfaced print, numbers and concluding summary.
- Integrate knowledge while reading: predict, picture, relate, monitor, and correct.
- Recall and self-test.
- Organize material for future study by summarizing, annotating, note taking, outlining, and / or mapping.
- Control external distractions by choosing an environment conducive to study. Get off the bed; instead, sit at a table or desk. Let your answering machine take your calls.
- Control internal distractions. Free your mind by writing a daily checklist for responsibilities and goals.

Notes/Examples

² Taken from Smith, Brenda D. *The Reader's Handbook*. New York: Longman, 2001. 160.

