

Unit 1 : Introduction to a paragraph

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Objectives:

After studying this Unit, a student

- knows what a paragraph is and how a paragraph is organized.
- knows the importance of a topic sentence and support sentences.
- can write an effective topic sentence and support sentences.
- shows relationships between a topic sentence and support sentences in a paragraph.
- can do the exercises effectively.

1. Definition of a paragraph

A paragraph is a group of logically related sentences expressing one main idea. A paragraph is complete in itself and may also be a subdivision or part of something which is larger, such as a composition, an article, or a chapter in a book. That is to say, a group of related sentences composes a paragraph; a group of related paragraphs makes a composition; a group of compositions, in turn, can be the chapters that make a book.

2. Organization of a paragraph

In fact, most paragraphs consist of a topic sentence, which states the main idea or indicates what will be discussed in a paragraph, and the discussion that contains all supporting details used to explain or prove the main idea in the topic sentence. A paragraph may have a conclusion; which may be a sentence that shows the completeness of a paragraph. However, it is not necessary to have a conclusion in every paragraph, especially, if it is short. Study the paragraph below.

¹ *A good student should have at least two learning requirements.* ² *First, he should be diligent in his studies.* ³ *This includes regular class attendance, keeping homework and all assignments completed with great attention, and participation in any extracurricular activities organized by the institution where*

he is studying. ⁴ Diligence is regarded as one of the keys to success. ⁵ In addition to diligence, a good student should have good reading habits, which imply his greed for knowledge. ⁶ Instead of wasting his time doing other things, a good student spends his time in reading. ⁷ Good reading habits will help him broaden his knowledge beyond the subjects he has taken and keep himself abreast of the current situations. ⁸ It is true that no student reaches the peak of his profession without these two learning requirements.

In the above paragraph, the first sentence is the topic sentence. Sentences 2 - 7 are the discussion and sentence 8 is the conclusion sentence.

Traditionally, the first line of a paragraph is usually indented. This indentation of a paragraph indicates where the paragraph begins. In a composition that contains many paragraphs, there will be several indentations to make it easy for the reader to see where each new paragraph or idea in the composition begins. One paragraph, however, contains only one indentation because there is only one beginning point. Remember that you must capitalize the first word in each sentence and end each sentence with a punctuation mark, most often a period (.).

4. Topic sentence, its characteristics and how to write it

The most important basic element in a paragraph is the topic sentence. It is the sentence that gives the main or controlling idea of the paragraph, indicating what the paragraph is about and what it will describe or discuss. It is the most important sentence of a paragraph. It announces the main point or main idea of the paragraph, preparing the readers for the next sentences (support sentences) to come. The topic sentence may be stated or placed anywhere in a paragraph; that is, it may be placed at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a paragraph. However, the students of this course should place the topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph. In addition, you must keep in mind that a paragraph has only one topic sentence and contains only one controlling idea.

The characteristics of a good topic sentence

A good topic sentence, which defines the controlling idea clearly and precisely and which gives confident direction to a paragraph, must meet three requirements. It must be

1. complete,
2. limited,
3. specific.

Being complete: Like any other sentence, a topic sentence must be a complete sentence: that is, it must consist of a subject and a predicate. Moreover, it must express one and only one controlling idea which will be expanded into a complete paragraph. In fact, if it is not a complete sentence, it is not a sentence at all, but rather a sentence fragment or a part of sentence. Study the following:

1. Fragment: Learning English

Complete: Learning English is useful for everyone.

2. Fragment: Ways to learn English

Complete: There are many easy ways to learn English.

3. Fragment: If you know English

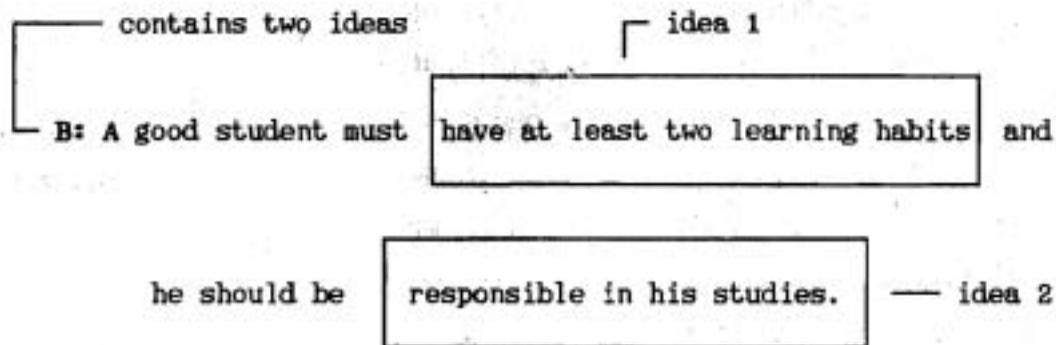
Complete: If you know English, you will have many advantages.

Being Limited: In addition to being complete, a topic sentence must also be limited: that is, it must contain one and only one controlling idea, it must be clearly limited in such a way that it is neither too broad nor too narrow. In this way, you will not have either too much or too little to write about. You can support or expand it in the space and time you are given. Compare the following sentences.

┌ one controlling idea

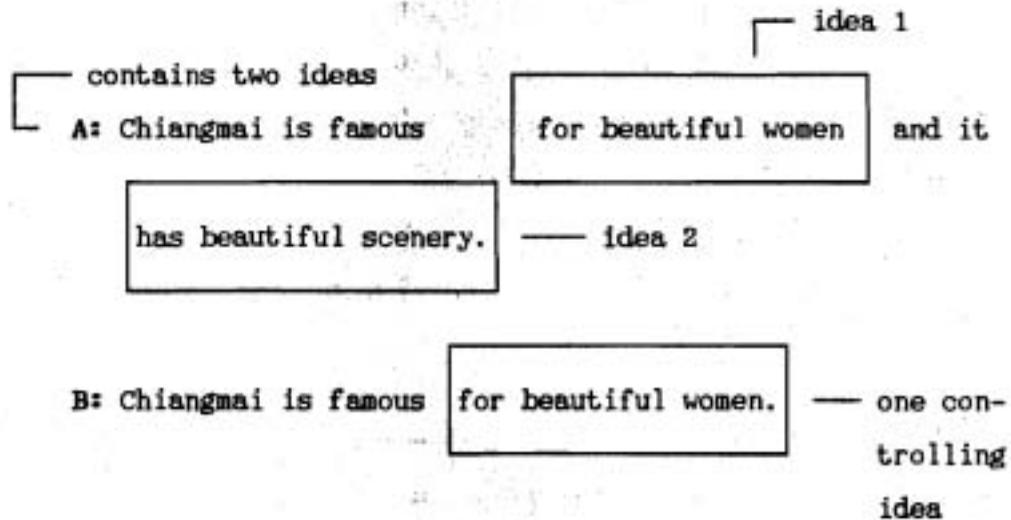
A: A good student must have

at least two learning habits.



Note that sentence A contains only one idea ("have at least two learning habits"), whereas sentence B has two ideas ("have at least two learning habits" and "should be responsible in his studies"). Therefore, sentence A is the better topic sentence because sentence B has more than one idea and is not a good topic sentence.

Again, compare the following pair of topic sentences



Sentence B is the better topic sentence because sentence A has more than one idea ("beautiful women" and "it has beautiful scenery") which should not be discussed in one paragraph. It would be better if this sentence were rewritten as "Chiangmai is famous for beautiful women and scenery".

Being specific: Additionally, a topic sentence must be specific. This means that it should be direct, precise and relevant to the topic. Sentences that consist of is or are followed by a vague complement (predicate) such as good, interesting, serious problem, etc., are too imprecise to be useful in a topic sentence. A sentence such as "The rising cost of living is a serious problem", for example, does not help indicate for whom or in what ways the problem is serious. A good topic sentence must be specific about some aspect of a topic. That is, it must express a student's attitude, opinion or impression about the topic. Keep in mind that it is impossible to specify many aspects of a topic in one paragraph, so a student should express the most interesting or important aspect in a topic sentence. Compare these topic sentences.

A: The rising cost of living is a serious problem. (vague)

key opinion, attitude

B: The rising cost of living is a more serious problem

for the poor than for the rich.

words help specify.

Note that sentence B is better than sentence A because it specifies one aspect of the rising cost of living. That is, it specifies the problem of the rising cost of living for "the poor" as compared with "the rich". Sentence A suggests the entire aspect of the problem; it does not specify how or whom the problem affects. It is too broad and has no specific point to be discussed.

How to write a good topic sentence

It can be said that the most important element in a paragraph is its topic sentence, which contains one main idea that will be developed or expanded in the paragraph. To write an effective topic sentence, you should follow the following steps.

1. You should immediately introduce the topic or subject that will be discussed so that the readers know what you will write about and you yourself also will know what you will write about.

2. You should limit the topic clearly in such a way that the topic sentence is neither too broad nor too narrow. In this way, you will not have either too much or too little to write. It will help if you limit the topic (subject) to only one major feature or point.

3. You should give the opinion, attitude, reaction, or impression that you have about the topic. In this way, you will pave the way and introduce a key word which will help you relate all your supporting ideas (support sentences) to one dominant central idea.

Here are some effective topic sentences which are successful because they introduce a limited topic clearly with one controlling idea and give the writer's key opinion words about that topic. (Study also the examples of "Being limited" and "Being specific" on pages 6)

1. My favorite way to spend a weekend is to go to the beach.

Topic : way to spend a weekend

Key opinion word: favorite

2. Everyone in the Monday morning EN 305 class seems restless.

Topic : Everyone in the EN 305 class

Key opinion word: seems restless

3. Most new students are shocked at the RU registration procedure.

Topic: Most new students

Key opinion words: shocked at the RU registration procedure.

- Notes:
1. The writer of sentence 1 will give details to show why he likes to spend his weekends at the beach.
 2. The writer of sentence 2 will show in each major support sentence that follows the topic sentence just why everyone appears to be restless
 3. The writer of sentence 3 above will give details that prove that most new students are shocked.

5. Support sentences and their function

The other basic element in a paragraph is the support sentences. The support sentences are the sentences that explain, expand or prove the topic sentence in a logical manner to form a complete paragraph.

There are two kinds of support sentence, namely, major support sentences and minor support sentences.

A major support sentence is a sentence that has a direct relationship with the topic sentence, giving supporting details to it in such a way that the paragraph will have Unity and Coherence. (Unity and Coherence will be discussed in the next Units.)

In the same way, a minor support sentence is a sentence that supports or gives more information or details about a major support sentence.

However, you must keep in mind that in each paragraph there must be only one topic sentence and at least one major support sentence, and that it may not be necessary to have minor support sentences.

6. Relationships between a topic sentence and support sentences

The relationships between a topic sentence and support sentences can be seen in the way that a topic sentence gives the main or controlling idea and the support sentences, both major and minor, if necessary, prove or explain or expand that main idea to form a complete paragraph.

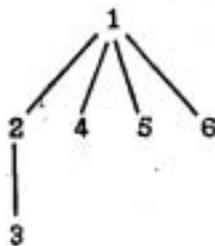
The paragraph below shows the relations between the topic sentence, the major support sentences and the minor support sentences.

¹ My father's face is rough. ² His complexion is leathery and wrinkled. ³ There are many large pores in the skin that covers his nose and cheeks. ⁴ His nose is flattened. ⁵ Unless he smiles, his mouth looks hard and threatening. ⁶ His chin is massive and angular. (1)

(1) Adapted from Sullivan, Kathleen E., Paragraph Practice, 3rd ed., Macmillan Publishing, Co, Inc, New York, 1976, p.6.

In the paragraph above, the first sentence is the topic sentence containing the main idea ("...face is rough") of the paragraph. The other sentences are support sentences: i.e., sentences 2,4,5 and 6 are major support sentences giving more explanations about the topic sentence "My father's face is rough", while sentence 3 is a minor support sentence giving more details about sentence 2.

The relationships between topic sentence and support sentences can also be shown in a diagram such as the one below



1: Topic sentence

2, 4, 5, 6: Major support sentences

3: Minor support sentence

To sum up:

1. The topic sentence
 1. tells what the paragraph will be about.
 2. states the main idea of the paragraph.
 3. focuses on some aspect of the topic of the paragraph.
2. A paragraph has only one topic sentence containing only one main idea.
3. The topic sentence is supported by major and minor support sentences to form an effective paragraph.

7. Exercises about topic and support sentences

Exercise 1.

Directions: Fill the blank with the appropriate word or words given to make an effective topic sentence.

who come, problems, good, for Asians, to visit,
convenient, easy ways, mental, advantages of,
because, exciting, harmful, two requirements

1. Smoking must be offensive because it is _____ to both smokers and non-smokers.
2. Exercise is _____ for a person's _____ and physical health.
3. The provincial students _____ to study in Bangkok must face many _____.
4. What makes English difficult _____ to learn is pronunciation and vocabulary.
5. The Mall Department Store is _____ for shopping _____ it has a wide variety of merchandise.
6. My home-town is a wonderful place _____.
7. There are two _____ to lose weight.
8. There are three important _____ living in a small town.
9. The first day at RU was _____ for me.
10. Being a good student has _____.

Exercise 2.

Directions: The following topic sentences need to be improved by adding key or attitude words which help limit and specify the topic. Many lack key opinion words; others fail to clarify exactly what the topic will be. Rewrite these sentences in the spaces provided to make them clearer and more effective topic sentences.

The first one is done as an example.

Example: English is difficult. (not limited)

possible correction: English is difficult for Thai students. (The underlined phrase helps limit the topic.)

1. English is very useful.

2. A topic sentence is a very important sentence.

3. Everyone who knows English can get a job.

4. There are many places in Bangkok.

5. Being a good student requires qualifications.

6. A book is a good friend.

7. Ramkhamhaeng University is an open admissions university.

8. Tourists can go to Chiangmai.

9. Ramkhamhaeng University students must help themselves learn.

10. Students in the EN 305 class have problems.

Exercise 3.

Directions: Some of the following topic sentences have complete, limited and specific central ideas. Others are not complete or are too broad or vague to be useful as an effective topic sentence. Indicate which ones you think are satisfactory. Write S before satisfactory topic sentences and U before unsatisfactory ones. Then change the unsatisfactory ones in the spaces given to satisfactory ones. The first one is done as an example.

1. U Government regulation of business causes difficulties.
Government regulation of business causes difficulties for businessmen.
2. _____ Cigarette smoking is both disgusting to those who do not smoke and dangerous to those who do.

3. _____ Dr. Uthai is a really good teacher.

4. _____ Fundamental English ought to be a required course for university students.

5. _____ A good teacher has many qualities.

6. _____ Human beings need four things for living.

7. _____ Poverty is the most serious problem in Thailand today.

8. _____ My friend has different ideas from me about what subject is most useful for finding a job.

9. _____ Going to Chiangmai by plane is comfortable.

10. _____ Traffic congestion in Bangkok requires an urgent solution.

11. _____ The first day of college is exciting.

12. _____ Fashions in clothes always change.

Exercise 4.

Directions: The following topic sentences need at least two major support sentences. Write major support sentences for each of these sentences in the spaces provided. The key word or words for writing major support sentences are given in parentheses.

1. Topic sentence: Bangkok is a boring city to live in for the following reasons.

Possible major support sentence 1 _____

_____ (traffic)

Possible major support sentence 2 _____

_____ (pollution)

Possible major support sentence 3 _____

_____ (cost of living)

2. Topic sentence: Traffic congestion in Bangkok is caused by at least two factors.

Possible major support sentence 1 _____

_____ (many vehicles)

Possible major support sentence 2 _____

_____ (people using the street)

3. Topic sentence: English is useful in Thailand for the following reasons.

Possible major support sentence 1 _____

_____ (daily life)

Possible major support sentence 2 _____

_____ (business)

Possible major support sentence 3 _____

_____ (education)

4. Topic sentence: A good citizen is required at least to be responsible to the public and respectful of the regulations.

Possible major support sentence 1 _____

_____ (keep or preserve the public domain)

Possible major support sentence 2 _____

_____ (keep or follow the law)

5. Topic sentence: Bangkok is a paradise for some people, but a hell for others.

Possible major support sentence 1 _____

_____ (the rich)

Possible major support sentence 2 _____

_____ (the poor)

Exercise 5.

Directions: Read the following paragraph. Then point out which sentence is the topic sentence and which ones are major and minor support sentences. Write only the sentence numbers, and then draw a diagram to show the relationships between the topic sentence and support sentences.

Paragraph 1.

¹ Many students apply for admission to Blake College because of its popularity. ² First of all, the campus is beautiful. ³ It has many trees, a lot of grass, and handsome, well-kept buildings. ⁴ In addition, the college has excellent facilities, such as a new gymnasium, a computer room, and a large library. ⁵ On the weekends, there are always numerous extra-curricular activities to choose from, such as films, lectures,

dances, and concerts. ⁶ The tuition, moreover, is only \$500.00 per semester. ⁷ But the major reason for the popularity of Blake College is its outstanding faculty. ⁸ Classes are interesting and informative, and the professors are always willing to help after class. (1)

Topic sentence _____
Major support sentences _____
Minor support sentences _____

Draw a diagram showing the relationships between topic sentence and support sentences here.

(1) Adopted from, Huizenga, Jann, et al., Basic Composition for ESL, An Expository Work Book, Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois, 1982, p.86.

Paragraph 2.

¹ In Saudi Arabia, parents have separate responsibilities for raising their children. ² For example, the father, as the leader of the family, has the duty to provide complete financial support for his family. ³ He, therefore, works hard to earn money for buying the clothing and food for his family. ⁴ He also has the authority to make all decisions concerning his children: what school they should attend, what friends they should have, and whom they should marry. ⁵ The mother's responsibility for her children is to stay home, taking care of their everyday needs, such as, cleaning the house and preparing meals, and sharing love and friendship with them. ⁶ She also teaches her children moral virtues, such as, friendship, generosity, and courtesy. (1)

Topic sentence _____.

Major support sentences _____.

Minor support sentences _____.

(1) Adopted from, M. Reid, Joy, The Process of Paragraph Writing
Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, USA, 1985, p.50.

Draw a diagram showing the relationships between the topic sentence and the support sentences here.

Paragraph 3.

¹ In the human body, there are four important functional organs to maintain life. ² The first organ is the brain in the skull. ³ Its function is to control thought and feeling. ⁴ It is also the centre of the higher nervous activities of the other organs. ⁵ The second organ is the heart in the chest. ⁶ This organ has the function of pumping and circulating blood all over the body through blood vessels. ⁷ If the heart stops working, all the cells in a human body will die. ⁸ The next organ is the liver beneath the heart. ⁹ Its function is to destroy or accumulate poisonous substances to prevent the diffusion of these substance. ¹⁰ The final organ is the kidneys, a pair of organs in the lower back area of the human body. These organs have charge of filtering waste liquids and separating the useless

metabolic products which will be excreted as urine later. (1)

Topic sentence _____.

Major support sentences _____.

Minor support sentences _____.

Draw a diagram showing the relationships between the topic sentence and the support sentences here.

(1) Adapted from a student's paper.