

## Paragraph Structure

### The Topic Sentence

A topic sentence usually comes at the beginning of a paragraph; that is, it is usually the first sentence in a formal academic paragraph. Not only is a topic sentence the first sentence of a paragraph, but, more importantly, it is the most general sentence in a paragraph. What does "most general" mean? It means that there are not many details in the sentence, but that the sentence introduces an overall idea that you want to discuss later in the paragraph.

For example, suppose that you want to write a paragraph about the natural landmarks of your hometown. The first part of your paragraph might look like this:

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep.

(Notice how the first sentence begins with "My hometown..." a few spaces to the right of the paragraph edge. This is an **indentation**. All paragraphs in English begin with an indentation.)

Note how the first sentence, *My hometown, is famous for several amazing geographical features*, is the **most general** statement. This sentence is different from the two sentences that follow it, since the second and third sentences mention specific details about the town's geography, and are not general statements.

### Supporting Sentences

Consider again the short paragraph above:

My hometown, is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep.

When a reader reads a topic sentence, such as *My hometown, is famous for several amazing natural features*, a **question** should usually appear in the reader's mind. In this case, the question should be like, "What are the natural features that make my hometown famous?" The reader should then expect that the rest of the paragraph will give an answer to this question.

Now look at the sentences after the topic sentence. We can see that the second sentence in the paragraph, *First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful*, indeed gives an answer to this question. That is, the second sentence gives some explanation for the fact that my hometown is famous. Similarly, we can see that the third sentence also gives some explanation for the fact that my town is famous by giving another example of an "amazing natural feature," in this case, Wheaton Hill.

The second and third sentences are called **supporting sentences**. They are called "supporting" because they "support," or explain, the idea expressed in the topic sentence. Of course, paragraphs in English often have more than two supporting ideas. The paragraph above is actually a very short paragraph. **At minimum, you should have at least Three sentences in your paragraph.** Here we can see our paragraph about my town with a few more supporting sentences in **bold** font:

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. **The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old.**

### **The Concluding Sentence**

In formal paragraphs you will sometimes see a sentence at the end of the paragraph which summarizes the information that has been presented. This is the concluding sentence. You can think of a concluding sentence as a sort of topic sentence in reverse.

You can understand concluding sentences with this example. Consider a hamburger that you can buy at a fast-food restaurant.

A hamburger has a top bun (a kind of bread), meat, cheese, lettuce, and other elements in the middle of the hamburger, and a bottom bun. Note how the top bun and the bottom bun are very similar. The top bun, in a way, is like a topic sentence, and the bottom bun is like the concluding sentence. Both buns "hold" the meat, onions, and so on. Similarly, the topic sentence and concluding sentence "hold" the supporting sentences in the paragraph. Let's see how a concluding sentence might look in our sample paragraph about my hometown:

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old. **These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place.**

Notice how the concluding sentence, *These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place*, summarizes the information in the paragraph. Notice also how the concluding sentence is similar to, but not exactly the same as, the topic sentence.

Adapted from:

<http://lrs.ed.uiuc.edu/students/fwalters/para.html>

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