

The Organization of Main Ideas

Placement of the Main Idea in Paragraphs

Most paragraphs contain a controlling statement called a “topic sentence.” In each topic sentence you will find a word or phrase—often at the end of the sentence—that identifies the subject or focus of the paragraph.

“Pattern 1” Paragraphs

Most paragraphs begin with a topic sentence. These are “Pattern 1” paragraphs, sometimes called “deductive paragraphs,” that begin with a claim followed by specific examples or support.

“Pattern 2” Paragraphs

More rarely, the main idea will come in a topic sentence placed at the end of the paragraph. These paragraphs, suggesting the scientific method of exploration, are sometimes called “inductive” or “exploratory paragraphs.” That is, they invite the reader to examine several related pieces of information or concepts that generate a rather obvious interpretation or conclusion. That interpretation or conclusion is written at the end of the paragraph, reflecting the natural consequence of the exploration. Again, the main idea of that exploration is usually found in a word or phrase contained in the topic sentence.

Implied (Unstated) Main Ideas

Still other paragraphs will lack a written topic sentence or will contain a topic sentence stated either so broadly or generally that the main idea is only suggested, implied, or assumed. These paragraphs often demand careful attention and concentration. To identify the main idea, as you read the paragraph, ask yourself, “What do these details have in common?” “Where does the author seem to be taking me?” “What seems to be the point of this discussion?” Try to state that common element, that direction, or that point as a complete sentence.

The Hierarchy of Controlling Statements

The coherency within an essay is controlled by a series of controlling elements. Topics sentences are only one of the controlling elements.

Sentence-length Controlling Statements

Specific types of sentences guide the reader through an essay, often outlining each major section in longer or more complex essays. The two most familiar controlling statements are the “thesis” and “topic sentences.”

Two Types of Thesis Sentences

The controlling statement that governs the development of a full essay is called a *thesis statement*. A “catalog thesis” contains a list of points to be addressed in the body of the paper. A “position thesis” makes a claim that must be supported by evidence or examples developed in the body of the paper.

Example of a “catalog thesis”:

Three issues confronting Congress are 1) retiring the national debt, 2) curbing spending, and 3) preserving “Social Security.”

Example of a “position thesis”:

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has not lived up to its original expectations.

General vs. Specific Thesis Sentences

Thesis statements can be composed to include very specific detail so that the main idea(s) are clearly identifiable, or they can be written very generally so that the main idea is only suggested or implied.

(General statement) *New college students have a lot to consider.*

(Specific statement) *Three factors new college students have to consider are transportation, finances, and personal discipline.*

Construction of Thesis Sentences

Thesis sentences can be composed as grammatically simple sentences (one independent clause) or as complex sentences (containing both dependent and independent clauses). Complex sentences reflect the relative values of concepts to be discussed in the essay or differentiate the major from the minor points that the essay will explore.

Example of a grammatically simple sentence used as a thesis:

The general and specific statements above are both examples of grammatically simple sentences since both contain only one independent clause:

(General statement) *New college students have a lot to consider.*

(Specific statement) *Three factors new college students have to consider are transportation, finances, and personal discipline.*

Example of a grammatically complex sentence used as a thesis:

While new college students are faced with important issues such as transportation and finances, the one factor most critical to their success is personal discipline.

Topic Sentences

Topic sentences control the development of individual paragraphs found in the body of the essay. Usually, they are found at the beginning of paragraphs, although they can be placed at the end of the paragraph or even only implied, rather than actually stated. Here is a set of topic sentences generated by the previous example of a grammatically complex thesis:

- 1) *One of the issues faced by students new to college is finding transportation to move around the campus and for going back and forth from the university to their homes.*
- 2) *Another factor confronting students is creating and living within a budget.*
- 3) *Perhaps the most important factor in the success of the new college student is developing personal discipline.*

Note that at the topic sentence level, the details listed in the catalog thesis are restated more specifically for controlling the development of the paragraphs in the body of the paper.

Other Types of Controlling Statements

Thesis and topic sentences are only two of several types of controlling statements. Two others include “sub-thesis” sentences and “echoes.”

Sub-Thesis Statements

The prefix “sub” means “less” or “below.” It can also mean “within,” the more appropriate meaning for our purpose here. If a “thesis statement” controls the development of the full or entire essay, then a “sub-thesis” controls the development of a section “within” the essay, usually a section containing two or more related paragraphs. “Sub-thesis” statements are usually placed at the beginning of the section that they control, and, if they aren’t isolated in the text as separate sentences, they may appear at first to be topic sentences. Only

Careful reading of the text of the paragraph that follows will reveal a more specific discussion set up by the “sub-thesis.”

Functioning like a guidepost or sign along the way, a “sub-thesis” is most helpful to the attentive reader. Longer, more complex essays may use several “sub-thesis” sentences throughout the body of the compositions.

Example of a “Sub-Thesis” sentence:

To establish personal discipline within a college setting, students must learn to master conflicts between the demands of study, work, and free time.

This sentence sets up a discussion of three factors, each of which might be developed within a separate paragraph. Note, also, that this “sub-thesis” establishes the outline of that discussion that will address first the demand of “study,” followed by those of “work” and “free time.”

Echoes

Used primarily for emphasis, an “echo” is a sentence that mirrors the main idea developed within a paragraph. While it usually comes at the end of a paragraph or a section within a paper, where it restates a point that has just been developed, it can also come at the beginning of a paragraph. The topic sentence of the paragraph, in that case, usually follows the “echo.”

An example of an “Echo”:

Balancing course work, one or more jobs, and the distractions of campus life are critical to student success.

Single-word/Phrase Transitions

Some controlling elements are simple transitional words like *ordinals* (“first,” “second,” “third”). Others include such words as “next,” “then,” “however.” Phrases are also used as controlling elements: “on the other hand,” “most importantly,” and “last, but not least.” Titles, the first controlling element of an essay, are usually short phrases. Headings and sub-headings that appear within the body of paragraphs are also examples of phrase-length controlling elements. A process essay, for example, might include headings like this: *Collecting the Data, Classifying the Data, Organizing the Data.*