


There are several common mistakes students make when writing topic sentences. You should avoid these three mistakes:

The topic sentence  **is too general,**  
**is too narrow,**  
**lacks a controlling idea.**

Read the following topic sentences about *exercise* that illustrate these mistakes:

1. *Many people like to exercise.*

This statement is too broad to be developed adequately into one paragraph.

2. *I swim laps for 30 minutes every morning.*

This statement is too narrow to be developed into a paragraph.

3. *The subject of this paragraph is my exercise routine.*

This statement simply states the topic but does not identify a controlling idea or express the writer's attitude.

If you can avoid making these mistakes, the rest of the paragraph will be easier to write.

Here is an example of an effective topic sentence about *exercise*:

*Exercising every morning has several positive effects on my health.*

This statement contains a clear topic and controlling idea that could be developed into one paragraph.

### Evaluating Topic Sentences

Read the following statements and put a checkmark next to the three that you think are effective topic sentences. Then figure out why each of the other sentences is not effective. Is it too general? Too narrow? Does it lack a controlling idea? Draw a line through those sentences and rewrite them.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Vacations are expensive.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. My round-trip plane ticket to Orlando, Florida, cost over \$550.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. There are several ways to save money on a vacation to Disney World and still have a good time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I am going to write about the trip I took to Disney World last summer.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. American music reflects the native music of many of its immigrant groups.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I love music.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The history of American music is the subject of this paper.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. The first published collection of Afro-American music, *Slave Songs of the United States*, appeared in 1867.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Russian is a difficult language to learn.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Learning how to write in a foreign language can be a frustrating experience for many students.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. There are over 50,000 characters in the Chinese language.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. The topic of this essay is learning to write in a foreign language.

4. What do you think are the problems with the other paragraph?

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## Topic Sentences

The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of a paragraph. It is the most important one in your paragraph because it controls all the other sentences. In this way, a topic sentence functions like a traffic sign controlling vehicles on the road. It shows readers which way they are going, just as a traffic sign helps direct drivers.

A good topic sentence

- states the **topic** of the paragraph,
- identifies the **controlling idea**,
- expresses the writer's **attitude** about the topic.

Look at these two topic sentences.

*Nuclear power is our greatest hope for solving the energy crisis.*

1. What is the topic of this sentence?

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2. What is the controlling idea?

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*Nuclear power is the greatest threat to life on the planet.*

1. What is the topic of this sentence?

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2. What is the controlling idea?

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Notice that both sentences have the same topic, but the controlling ideas are different.

## Analyzing Topic Sentences

For each statement below, underline the topic and draw a circle around the controlling idea.

1. Martin Luther King Jr. was an influential leader.
2. The editorials in our school newspaper are not very objective.
3. The clothes we wear often reflect a lot about our personality.
4. The Japanese subway system is very efficient.
5. Television commercials are often insulting to women.
6. My older brother is a perfectionist.
7. The laws on child abuse should be strictly enforced.
8. Being a twin has both advantages and disadvantages.
9. The new shopping mall has brought many economic benefits to our community.
10. Golf is a difficult sport to master.