Understand What a Topic Sentence and a Thesis Statement Are

Every good piece of writing has a main idea—what the writer wants to get across to the readers about the topic, or the writer's position on that topic. If you have narrowed and explored your topic, as discussed in Chapter 2, you may already have a sense of your main idea. Clearly and definitely conveying your main idea to your readers is fundamental to the success of any piece of writing. If your readers don't know from the start what your main idea is, they will not read the rest of what you have written with any clear thought in mind.

A topic sentence (for a paragraph) and a thesis statement (for an essay) express the writer's main idea and include both the topic and the main point the writer wants to make about that topic. To see the relationship between the thesis statement of an essay and the topic sentences of paragraphs that support this thesis statement, see the diagram on page 34.

In many paragraphs, the main idea is expressed in either the first or last sentence. In essays, the thesis statement is usually one sentence (often first or last) in an introductory paragraph that contains several other sentences related to the main idea. (In Chapter 6, you will learn more about writing introductions for essays.)

One way to write a topic sentence for a paragraph or a thesis statement for an essay is to use this basic formula as a start:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Narrowed topic} & \quad + \quad \text{Main point/position} \\
& \quad \downarrow \quad \downarrow \\
& \quad \text{Topic sentence/Thesis statement}
\end{align*}
\]

Oral presentations make me very nervous.

You Know This

You already have experience in making your point:
- You explain the point of a movie to someone who hasn’t seen it.
- When a friend asks you, “What’s your point?” you explain it.
- When you persuade someone to do something you want, you make your point about why they should.

IDEA JOURNAL What are your strongest communication skills? What other skills or talents do you have?

TIP For more information on what a complete sentence is, see Chapter 19, The Basic Sentence: An Overview.
PRACTICE 1  FIND THE TOPIC SENTENCE AND MAIN POINT

Read the paragraph that follows and underline the topic sentence. In the spaces below the paragraph, identify the narrowed topic and the main point.

A recent survey reported that employers consider communication skills more critical to success than technical skills. Employees can learn technical skills on the job and practice them every day. But they need to bring well-developed communication skills to the job. They need to be able to make themselves understood to colleagues, both in speech and in writing. They need to be able to work cooperatively as part of a team. Employers can’t take time to teach communication skills, but without them an employee will have a hard time.

NARROWED TOPIC: communication skills

MAIN POINT: Employers consider communication skills more critical to success than technical skills.

PRACTICE 2  IDENTIFYING TOPICS AND MAIN POINTS

In each of the following sentences, underline the topic and double-underline the main point about the topic.

EXAMPLE: Aging airplanes have increased the likelihood of plane crashes.

1. The level of nicotine in cigarettes is kept high by the tobacco industry.

2. The oldest child in the family is often the most independent and ambitious child.

3. Gadgets created for left-handed people are sometimes poorly designed.

4. The city’s new mayor enjoys practical jokes.

5. Dinnertime telephone sales calls should be illegal.

6. The magazine Consumer Reports can help you decide which brands or models are the best value.
7. Of all the fast-food burgers, Burger King’s Whopper is the best buy.

8. At 5:00 every afternoon, Route 128 becomes a parking lot.

9. Some song lyrics have serious messages about important social issues.

10. The beach on a hot midsummer day is a great place for people-watching.

Your first try at your topic sentence or thesis statement will probably need some tweaking to make it better. Before you write sentences to support your topic sentence, or paragraphs to support your thesis statement, you may want to change some words to make sure that the topic sentence or thesis statement is clear, specific, and forceful. As you get further along in your writing, you may go back several times to revise the topic sentence or thesis statement, based on what you learn as you develop your ideas. Look at how one student revised the example sentence above to make it more detailed:

Planning a vacation carefully can be time-consuming.

When developing a topic sentence or thesis statement, make sure it has the following five features.

**BASICS OF A GOOD TOPIC SENTENCE OR THESIS STATEMENT**

- It fits the size of the assignment.
- It states a single main point or position about the narrowed topic.
- It is specific.
- It is something you can show, explain, or prove.
- It is a forceful statement written with confidence.

Although a topic sentence or thesis statement states a single main point or position, this main point or position may include more than one idea; however, the ideas should be closely related. For example:

Planning a vacation carefully can be time-consuming, but it is well worth doing.
Practice Developing a Good Topic Sentence or Thesis Statement

The explanations and practices in this section, organized according to the “basics” described previously, will help you write stronger topic sentences and thesis statements.

It Fits the Size of the Assignment

As you develop a statement (the topic sentence or the thesis statement) about your topic and main point, think carefully about the length of the assignment. Sometimes a statement could be used as a basis for either a paragraph or an essay.

Consider the following example, where the difference between the paragraph and the essay is in the depth of detail provided:

In the next decade, people of retirement age may create a surge in demand for higher education.

If the writer had been assigned a paragraph, she might write sentences that included the following support points:

Support 1 Baby boomers will be hitting retirement age, and they'll want to prove they're as active as ever.

Support 2 Retired people have time to develop new interests.

Support 3 With children out on their own, retirees may be able to afford to spend money on their own educational interests.

If the writer had been assigned an essay, she might write a thesis statement and more detailed support:

Thesis statement: In the next decade, people of retirement age may create a surge in demand for higher education.

Support 1 Baby boomers will be hitting retirement age, and they'll want to prove they're as active as ever.

Support 2 Retired people have time to develop new interests.

Support 3 With children out on their own, retirees may be able to afford to spend money on their own educational interests.
Support 2 Retired people have more time to develop new interests.
Support 3 With children out on their own, retirees may be able to afford to spend money on their own educational interests.

If the writer had been assigned an essay, she might develop the same support. In an essay, however, instead of writing single sentences to support her main idea, she would develop each support point into a paragraph. The support sentences she wrote in a paragraph might be topic sentences for support paragraphs. (For more on providing support, see Chapter 4.)

Other times, however, a topic sentence for a paragraph is much narrower than a thesis statement for an essay, simply because a paragraph is shorter and allows less development of ideas.

Consider how one general topic could be narrowed into an essay topic, and into an even more specific paragraph topic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASSIGNED GENERAL TOPIC</th>
<th>NARROWED ESSAY TOPIC</th>
<th>NARROWED PARAGRAPH TOPIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drug abuse</td>
<td>How alcoholism affects family life</td>
<td>How alcoholism affects a family’s budget</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

POSSIBLE THESIS STATEMENT (for the essay): Alcoholism can destroy family life.
(The essay might go on to give several ways in which alcoholism negatively affects the family.)

POSSIBLE TOPIC SENTENCE (for the paragraph): Alcoholism quickly destroys a family’s budget.
(The paragraph focuses on one way alcoholism affects family life — its budget — and might go on to give examples of how the budget gets destroyed.)

PRACTICE 3 WRITING SENTENCES TO FIT THE SCOPE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

For each of the three items in this practice, read how the topic has been narrowed for an essay or a paragraph. Using the following example as a guide, write a thesis statement for the narrowed essay topic and a topic sentence for the narrowed paragraph topic.

EXAMPLE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Narrowed for an essay</th>
<th>Narrowed for a paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>Competition in school sports</td>
<td>User fees for school sports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

POSSIBLE THESIS STATEMENT (for an essay): Competition in school sports has reached dangerous levels.

POSSIBLE TOPIC SENTENCE (for a paragraph): This year’s user fees for participation in school sports are too high.
Some main ideas are too broad for either a short essay or a paragraph. A main idea that is too broad is impossible to show, explain, or prove within the space of a paragraph or short essay.

**TOO BROAD**  
Art is important.  
[How could a writer possibly support such a broad concept in a paragraph or essay?]

**NARROWER**  
Art instruction for young children has surprising benefits.

A main idea that is too narrow leaves the writer with little to write about. There is little to show, explain, or prove.

**TOO NARROW**  
One of my legs is longer than the other.  
[Okay, so now what?]

**BROADER**  
Although one of my legs is two inches longer than the other, technology allows me to function perfectly.
**PRACTICE 4: WRITING TOPIC SENTENCES THAT ARE NEITHER TOO BROAD NOR TOO NARROW**

In the following five practice items, three of the topic sentences are either too broad or too narrow, and two of them are OK. In the space to the left of the item write either “B” for too broad, “N” for too narrow, or “OK” for just right. Rewrite the three weak sentences to make them broader or narrower as needed.

**EXAMPLE:**  
**B** World War II affected many people.  
*World War II gave women their first real chance to work.*

1. **N** I have a sister.  
*Answers will vary*

2. **OK** This year, schools in my town face budget cuts, teacher shortages, and demands for major renovations.

3. **B** College is challenging.  

4. **B** I would like to be successful in life.

5. **OK** Having a positive attitude improves people’s ability to function, improves their interactions with others, and reduces stress.

**It Contains a Single Main Point**

Your topic sentence or thesis statement should focus on only one main point. Two main points can split the focus of the writing and confuse readers.

**Main Idea with Two Main Points**

High schools should sell healthy food instead of junk food, and they should start later in the morning.
The two main points are underlined. Although both are good main points, together they split both the writer's and the readers' focus. The writer would need to give reasons to support each point, and they are very different ideas.

**Main Idea with a Single Main Point**

High schools should sell healthy food instead of junk food. 

OR

High schools should start later in the morning.

The main point may contain more than one idea, but these ideas should be closely related and serve an overall main point you want to make. For example, some writers use a three-point topic sentence (for a paragraph) or thesis statement (for an essay) that includes the main point and previews three support points that will be explored in the body paragraphs.

**Three-Point Thesis**

High schools should sell healthy food instead of junk food because (1) it is better for students, (2) it is often less expensive, and (3) it can boost levels of energy and attention.

**PRACTICE 5 WRITING SENTENCES WITH A SINGLE MAIN POINT**

In each of the following sentences, underline the main point(s). Identify the sentences that have more than a single main point by marking an X in the space provided to the left of that item. Put a check (✓) next to sentences that have a single main point.

**EXAMPLE:**  

```
Shopping at second-hand stores is a fun way to save money, and you can meet all kinds of interesting people as you shop.
```

✓ 1. My younger sister, the baby of the family, was the most adventurous of us.

X 2. Political campaigns are often nasty, and the voting ballots are difficult to understand.

X 3. My brother, Bobby, is incredibly creative and attractive to women of all ages.

X 4. Pets can actually bring families together, and they require lots of care.
5. Unless people conserve voluntarily, we will deplete our supply of water.

It Is Specific
A good statement of a main point (topic sentence or thesis statement) gives readers specific information and concepts that allow them to understand the writer's main idea right from the start. A statement that lacks such information is considered vague.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VAGUE</th>
<th>SPECIFIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students are often overwhelmed.</td>
<td>Working college students have to learn how to successfully juggle many responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What words in the first sentence are vague? How does the second sentence explain more clearly the writer's main idea?

One way to make sure that your topic sentence or thesis statement is specific is to make it a preview of what you are planning to say in the rest of the paragraph or essay.

PREVIEW: Working college students have to learn how to juggle many responsibilities: doing a good job at work, getting to class regularly and on time, being alert in class, and doing the homework assignments.

PREVIEW: I have a set routine every Saturday morning that includes sleeping late, going to the gym, and shopping for food.

PRACTICE 6 WRITING SENTENCES THAT ARE SPECIFIC
In the space below each item, revise the sentence to make it more specific. There is no one correct answer. As you read the sentences, think about what would make them more understandable to you if you were about to read a paragraph or essay on the topic.

EXAMPLE: Marriage can be a wonderful thing.

Marriage to the right person can add love, companionship, and support to life.

1. My job is horrible. Answers will vary

2. Working with others is very rewarding.
3. I am a good worker.

4. This place could use a lot of improvement.

5. Getting my driver’s license was challenging.

It Is an Idea That You Can Show, Explain, or Prove

If a main idea is so obvious that it doesn’t need support, or if it states a fact that most people would agree with, then it probably won’t make a good topic sentence or thesis statement.

**OBVIOUS**

- Models are very thin.
- The Honda Accord is a popular car model.
- Many people like to take vacations in the summer.

**FACT**

- The automobile industry lobby is very strong.
- Violent crime was up 10 percent this summer.
- More than 60 percent of Americans aged twenty and older are overweight.

It would be hard for any writer to base a paragraph or an essay on these statements: There is really nothing to say about them as they are currently worded. They could be good main ideas, however, if they were revised.

**REVISED**

- To be thin, models maintain very strange eating habits.
  OR
- Too often, young women believe that they should be as thin as the models they see everywhere in the media.

  Fuel economy for SUVs will be slow to improve because the automobile industry lobby is too powerful.
  OR
  The government is afraid of clamping down on the automobile industry.

**PRACTICE 7** WRITING SENTENCES THAT YOU CAN SHOW, EXPLAIN, OR PROVE

Revise the following sentences so that they contain an idea that you could show, explain, or prove.
EXAMPLE: Leasing a car is popular.

*Leasing a car has many advantages over buying one.*

1. I wear my hair long.

*Answers will vary.*

2. My monthly rent is $750.

3. Health insurance rates rise every year.

4. Many people in this country work for minimum wage.

5. Technology is becoming increasingly important.

**It Is Forceful, Confident, and Definite**

A good topic sentence or thesis statement is forceful, confident, and definite. Instead of announcing your topic, go ahead and make your point about it—as specifically as you can. Getting right to your point is more direct and forceful than working your way up to it. Also, keep in mind that expressions like “I think” and “I believe” can signal a lack of confidence in your point, so try to avoid them.

**WEAK**

In this paragraph I will talk about why people go to college.

**FORCEFUL**

People have many complex reasons for going to college.

**WEAK**

In my opinion, everyone should exercise.

**FORCEFUL**

Everyone should exercise to reduce stress, maintain a healthy weight, and feel better overall.

**WEAK**

I think student fees are much too high.

**FORCEFUL**

Student fees need to be explained and justified.

**PRACTICE 8 WRITING FORCEFUL, CONFIDENT, DEFINITE SENTENCES**

Rewrite each of the following sentences to make them more forceful, confident, and definite. Also, try to make up details to make sentences more specific.

**EXAMPLE:** Jason’s Supermarket is the best.

*Jason’s Supermarket is clean, well-organized, and filled with top-quality products.*
1. I will prove that drug testing in the workplace is an invasion of privacy.  
   *Possible answer: Drug testing in the workplace is an invasion of privacy and should be banned immediately.*

2. This school should consider banning cell phones from classrooms.  
   *Possible answer: Because ringing cell phones are disruptive to class, this school should ban their classroom use.*

3. I strongly think that I deserve a raise.  
   *Possible answer: I deserve a raise based on my strong performance over the past year.*

4. Nancy should be the head of the Students’ Association.  
   *Possible answer: Because she is hard-working, dedicated, and concerned about campus issues, Nancy should be the head of the Students’ Association.*

5. I think my neighborhood is really nice.  
   *Possible answer: My neighborhood is safe, close to several stores, and beautifully landscaped.*

### Write Your Own Topic Sentence or Thesis Statement

If you have worked through this chapter, you should have a good sense of how to write a topic sentence or thesis statement that includes the five features of a good one (see p. 33).

To develop a good topic sentence or thesis statement, consider the process that one student, Jeanette Castro, used. First, she narrowed her general topic.

- **General topic:** an activity that you are very involved in
- **Narrowed topic (for a paragraph):** training to run a marathon
- **Narrowed topic (for an essay):** running a marathon

Then she did some prewriting (see Chapter 2) to get some ideas about her narrowed topic.

- **For a paragraph:** training to run a marathon
  - Start six months before
  - Get good shoes
  - Work up to distance
  - Use a schedule (can find one on the Web)
For an essay: running a marathon
Training (schedule, shoes, routine, the final practice run)
The day before a marathon (what to eat and drink, whether to practice, how much sleep to get)
The morning of the marathon (how much time to leave before the race, what to eat and drink, how to dress, how to get psyched)
During the run (how often to drink, what to watch out for—physical symptoms, how to pace yourself, how to stay motivated and focused on your goal)

Next she decided on the point she wanted to make about her topic—in other words, her position on it:

For a paragraph: training for a marathon is essential
For an essay: running a marathon requires lots of planning and thought

Then she was ready to write the statement of her main point.

Topic sentence (for a paragraph): Training is important if you want to run a marathon.
Thesis statement (for an essay): Running a marathon is a process, not just something that happens on one day.

Finally, Jeanette revised this statement to make it more forceful:

Topic sentence: Training for success in a marathon involves several important steps.
Thesis statement: Successfully running a marathon demands careful planning from start to finish.

You may want to tinker with the wording of your topic sentence or thesis statement later on as you write and revise your paragraph or essay, but following a sequence like Jeanette’s should start you off with a good basic statement of your main point.

Writing Assignment
Write a topic sentence or thesis statement using the narrowed topic and ideas you developed in Chapter 2, your response to the idea journal prompt on page 31, or one of the following topics (which you will have to narrow).

Volunteering
A controversial issue
Dressing for success
This school
Siblings

Good neighbors
Interviewing for jobs
Downtown
Holiday traditions

Exciting experiences
Juggling many responsibilities
Friendship

TEACHING TIP Even if you aren’t reading a student’s entire first draft, it always helps to check the topic sentence or thesis statement, because you can clear up numerous potential problems before you have to give a grade.
Before writing, read this Critical Thinking box:

**CRITICAL THINKING: WRITING A TOPIC SENTENCE OR THESIS STATEMENT**

**FOCUS**
- Read your narrowed topic.
- Decide what is important to you, personally, about the topic.

**ASK YOURSELF**
- What do I want to show, explain, or prove about the topic?
- How can I state what I want to show, explain, or prove forcefully and confidently?
- Will the main point I’m considering fit the assignment?
- Can I get behind the main point I’m considering and support it for my readers?

**WRITE**
- Write a forceful, confident topic sentence (for a paragraph) or thesis statement (for an essay) that includes your topic and your main point about that topic.
- Rewrite it to improve it.

After writing your topic sentence or thesis statement, complete the checklist that follows.

**CHECKLIST: EVALUATING YOUR MAIN POINT**

- It is a complete sentence.
- It fits the assignment.
- It includes my topic and the main point I want to make about it.
- It states a single main point.
- It is specific.
- It is something I can show, explain, or prove.
- It is forceful and confident.

Coming up with a good working topic sentence or thesis statement is the foundation of the writing you will do. Now that you know what you want to say, you’re ready to learn more about how to show, explain, or prove it to others. That is covered in the next chapter: Supporting Your Point.

**Chapter Review: Writing a Topic Sentence or Thesis Statement**

1. The **main idea** of a piece of writing is *what the writer wants to get across to the readers about the topic.*
2. A topic sentence and a thesis statement include both the topic and the main point the writer wants to make about that topic.

3. The basics of a good topic sentence or thesis statement are

- It fits the size of the assignment.
- It states a single main point or position about the narrowed topic.
- It is specific.
- It is something you can show, explain, or prove.
- It is a forceful statement written with confidence.

What Will You Use?

Recall an assignment you have in another class or at work. How can you use what you have learned in this chapter to do the assignment? How can making a clear point help you in everyday life? In college? In your job?