Creating Clarity and Cohesion with Topic Sentences
(Adapted from the Penn State Writing Center)

A topic sentence not only organizes the ideas and discussion in a paragraph; it works as a signpost to let a reader know your perspective on or interpretation of the sentences to come.

AVOID EMPTY TOPIC SENTENCES that don’t signal your perspective, stance, or contribution:
- EMPTY: “Tornado formation is a major problem.”
- BETTER: “Although previous studies of weather patterns have focused on rain and wind, this study proposes an analysis of tornado formation.”

AVOID BURYING YOUR TOPIC SENTENCE

- BURIED/HIDDEN: Popular histories of geography (e.g., Sheehan 1996; Morton 2002) indicate that astronomers collected extensive geographic data about the nearby planets, usually recording their findings in detailed maps that were strikingly similar in appearance to many of the well-studied imperial maps produced during the same time period. Although much of this astronomical-geographical knowledge compiled during the late nineteenth century has since been revised or discarded on the basis of twentieth-century remote sensing images, these colonial-era images had significant scientific importance at the time they were created. Recognizing this, scholars have recently taken some interest in nineteenth-century geographical representation, although no geographer has yet seriously examined the remarkable discourses that emerged during the latter half of the century to represent the geographies of the worlds beyond Earth.

- BETTER: Despite the growing interest in nineteenth-century geographical representation, no geographer has yet seriously examined the remarkable discourses that emerged during the latter half of the century to represent the geographies of the worlds beyond Earth. Popular histories of geography (e.g., Sheehan 1996; Morton 2002) indicate that astronomers collected extensive geographic data about the nearby planets, usually recording their findings in detailed maps that were strikingly similar in appearance to many of the well-studied imperial maps produced during the same time period. Although much of this astronomical-geographical knowledge compiled during the late nineteenth century has since been revised or discarded on the basis of twentieth-century remote sensing images, these colonial-era images had significant scientific importance at the time they were created.

EDITING TOPIC SENTENCES FOR COHESION AND CLARITY:

1. Go through your draft with a highlighter and highlight your paragraphs’ topic sentences. What patterns do you notice in their placement? If you tend to “back into” your topic sentence in the middle or end of the paragraph, try rewrites to lead with your topic sentence/perspective at the paragraph’s beginning.

2. Look at each topic sentence with the Avoid/Better examples at the start of this handout. Which can you rewrite or extend to avoid empty statements (the “how” or “why,” for instance, missing) or to better signpost or signal how this topic/paragraph contributes to the research story you’re telling or how it fits within or departs from field discussions about this point.
   - If it’s helpful, see the reverse side of this handout for transitional expressions that help signal and signpost a research story.
   - Better yet, look at published writing in your field to note what transitional expressions are most commonly used to show sequence, to draw comparisons, to intensify or mitigate a claim, to conclude etc.
Transitional Expressions
(Courtesy of Penn State Graduate Writing Center)

Transitional Expressions

Transitional expressions within and between paragraphs and sentences can make connections that make it much easier for your reader to read along with the flow of your writing. You may use transitional expressions for several reasons, some of which are listed below, along with some appropriate expressions. Using these expressions wisely will help you develop your writing style. However, overusing them can be distracting.

To add or show sequence: again, also, and, and then, besides, equally important, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, moreover, next, second, still, too.

To compare: also, in the same way, likewise, similarly.

To contrast: although, and yet, but, but at the same time, despite, even so, even though, for all that, however, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, regardless, still, though, yet.

To give examples or intensify: after all, an illustration of, even, for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, it is true, of course, specifically, that is, to illustrate, truly.

To indicate place: above, adjacent to, below, elsewhere, farther on, here, near, nearby, on the other side, opposite to, there, to the east, to the left.

To indicate time: after a while, afterward, as long as, as soon as, at last, at length, at that time, before, earlier, formerly, immediately, in the meantime, in the past, lately, later, meanwhile, now, presently, shortly, simultaneously, since, so far, soon, subsequently, then, thereafter, until, until now, when.

To repeat, summarize, or conclude: all in all, altogether, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, that is, to put it differently, to summarize.

To show cause and effect: accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, for this purpose, hence, otherwise, since, then, therefore, thereupon, thus, to this end, with this object in mind.

Example: Medical science has thus succeeded in identifying the hundreds of viruses that can cause the common cold. It has also discovered the most effective means of prevention. One person transmits the cold viruses to another most often by hand. For instance, an infected person covers his mouth to cough. He then picks up the telephone. Half an hour later, his daughter picks up the same telephone. Immediately afterward, she rubs her eyes. Within a few days, she, too, has a cold. And thus it spreads. To avoid colds, therefore, people should wash their hands often and keep their hands away from their faces.