



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Clarity and Cohesion with Topic Sentences and Transitional Phrases

Adapted from the Penn State Graduate 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.
 - The sentence doesn't signal *what kind of* problem tornado formation poses or the direction the author will take in studying this problem.
- BETTER: This study proposes an analysis of tornado formation that accounts for the topographical conditions that predominate in so-called tornado alleys.

AVOID BURYING OR SUBORDINATING YOUR TOPIC SENTENCE

- BURIED/SUBORDINATED: Scholars have recently taken 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.**
 - The author's focus is presented in a dependent clause ("although ..."). Instead of giving center stage to the gap the author has identified (19th-century discourses about worlds beyond earth), center stage is given instead to the field's status quo: "Scholars" (in the subject position) "have recently taken interest ..." (in the verb position).
- 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.**

EDITING TOPIC SENTENCES FOR COHESION AND CLARITY:

1. Go through your draft and highlight your paragraphs' topic sentences. When you pull back and look at your highlighted sentences, what patterns do you notice in their placement? Do you tend
 - to "back into" your topic sentences in the middle or end of the paragraph?
 - tuck your main points into dependent clauses rather than the main sentence?
 - start with general "empty" statements—placeholders for more specific and pointed topic sentences?

2. Look at each topic sentence with the above Avoid/Better examples. Rewrite as needed to

- avoid empty statements
- make sure your perspective or contribution doesn't get subordinated in an introductory or ending clause
- lead with your perspective rather than bury it in the middle or end of a paragraph

Also see below for transitional expressions that can further help signal and signpost a research story.

- Better yet, look at published writing in your field to observe what transitional expressions are most commonly used to show sequence, to draw comparisons, to intensify or mitigate a claim, to conclude etc.

TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSIONS

Adding/Showing Sequence: again, also, besides, equally important, finally, first, further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, last, moreover, next, second, still too

Comparing and contrasting: also, although, and yet, but, at the same time, despite, even so, even though, for all that, however, in contrast, in spite of, in the same way, likewise, nevertheless, notwithstanding, on the contrary, on the other hand, similarly

Intensifying, giving examples: after all, an illustration of, for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, of course, specifically, that is, to illustrate, truly

Indicating place, time: above, adjacent to, after a while, afterward, as long as, as soon as, at last, at length, at that time, before, below, earlier, elsewhere, farther on, formerly, here, immediately, in the meantime, in the past, lately, later, meanwhile, near, now, nearby, on the other side, presently, opposite to, shortly, simultaneously, since, so far, soon, subsequently, then, thereafter, until, until now, when

Repeating, summarizing, concluding: all in all, altogether, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in particular, in short, in simpler terms, in summary, on the whole, to put it differently

Showing 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 OF TRANSITIONAL PHRASES AT WORK:

Food scientists have *thus* made important gains in developing dairy alternatives for lactose-intolerant individuals. These substitutes for dairy products may *also* be healthy alternatives for all people. Three problems remain, *however*, before almond and soy milks, ice creams, and yogurts can enjoy wide distribution and appeal. *First*, consumers continue to report dissatisfaction with texture and taste. *Next*, environmentalists raise legitimate concerns about the ecological impact of mass almond and soy production. *Finally and perhaps most significantly*, the dairy industry has marshalled a powerful lobby to prevent almond and soy products from being labelled as “milk,” “yogurt,” and *the like*.