



How to Be A Topic Sentence Ninja

Topic Sentences: What are they?

Topic sentences are the first sentence (usually) of each paragraph, and the link between your thesis and your essay. If you find yourself getting lost, not presenting your argument clearly, or not being convincing, you probably need to tweak your topic sentences. Ninjas never get lost, confused, or befuddled.

Topic Sentences: Why do I need them?

Practice and the Art of Killing: *Ninjas were not born silent, stealthy, and ruthless. The killing prowess of the ninja is cultivated over decades of training and practice. Practice is the way of the ninja, and diligent too must you be with your topic sentences.*

Topic sentences, when done right, do two different things. First, they drive paragraph content. This is really a fancy way of saying they dictate what the upcoming paragraph will be about. Think of it as summary of the argument or point you are making in your paragraph. Secondly, a strong topic sentence will also agree with, support, or further develop your thesis statement. In this way, topic sentences serve your thesis statement like a ninja serves a death warrant: Quickly, concisely, and with no room for ambiguity. From the OWL:

- The topic sentence should identify the main idea and point of the paragraph. To choose an appropriate topic sentence, read the paragraph and think about its main idea and point.
- The supporting details in the paragraph (the sentences other than the topic sentence) will develop or explain the topic sentence. Read all the supporting details in the paragraph and think about the ideas they discuss.
- The topic sentence should not be too general or too specific. When considering the options, look for a topic sentence that is general enough to show the paragraph's main idea instead of just one of its details. The answer should be specific enough that the reader understands the main idea of the paragraph.

Step 1: Earn your yellow belt! (10 min)

•**Get some practice!** Look at the handout on the back. The paragraphs are fully developed, with the exception of topic sentences – they don't have any. Read the paragraphs by yourself, and develop the best topic sentence you can for that paragraph.

•Write your topic sentence in the blank above each paragraph

When your group is finished, compare your sentences. Which ones were strongest? Why? What traits did the strong ones have that the weaker ones did not?

An Exercise on Topic Sentences: The following paragraphs are missing topic sentences. Individually, read them and write down an appropriate topic sentence. When you are finished, compare your sentences to ones written by other members. In your group's opinion, which ones are stronger? Why?

Passage A: Create a topic sentence for the following paragraph in the space below:

For example, recently I began taking my two-year-old dog to obedience school. After four weeks of lessons and practice, she has learned to follow only three commands--sit, stand, and lie down--and even those she often gets confused. Frustrating (and costly) as this is, I continue to work with her every day. After dog school, my grandmother and I sometimes go grocery shopping. Inching along those aisles, elbowed by hundreds of fellow customers, backtracking to pick up forgotten items, and standing in the endless line at the checkout, I could easily grow frustrated and cranky. But through years of trying times I have learned to keep my temper in check. Finally, after putting away the groceries, I might go out to a movie with my fiancée, to whom I have been engaged for three years. Layoffs, extra jobs, and problems at home have forced us to postpone our wedding date several times. Still, my patience has enabled me to cancel and reschedule our wedding plans again and again without fuss, fights, or tears.

Passage B: Create a topic sentence for the following paragraph in the space below:

For instance, when I was in kindergarten, I dreamed that my sister killed people with a television antenna and disposed of their bodies in the woods across the street from my house. For three weeks after that dream I stayed with my grandparents until they finally convinced me that my sister was harmless. Not long afterwards, my grandfather died, and that sparked new fears. I was so terrified that his ghost would visit me that I put two brooms across the doorway of my bedroom at night. Fortunately, my little trick worked. He never came back. More recently, I was terribly frightened after staying up late one night to watch *The Ring*. I lay awake until dawn clutching my cell phone, ready to ring 911 the moment that spooky little girl stepped out of my TV. Just thinking about it now gives me goosebumps.

Passage C: Create a topic sentence for the following paragraph in the space below:

When I was a young girl, I would make a tent out of my blankets and read Nancy Drew mysteries late into the night. I still read cereal boxes at the breakfast table, newspapers while I am stopped at red lights, and gossip magazines while waiting in line at the supermarket. In fact, I'm a very talented reader. For example, I've mastered the art of talking on the phone while simultaneously reading Dean Koontz or Stephen King. But what I read doesn't matter all that much. In a pinch, I'll read junk mail, an old warranty, a furniture tag ("DO NOT REMOVE UNDER PENALTY OF LAW"), or even, if I'm extremely desperate, a chapter or two in a textbook.