

WRITING GUIDE | Thesis + topic sentence outline exercise

Effective academic essays tend to use a strong structure, with a clear and clearly placed thesis (T) and with a clear topic sentence (t.s.) guiding each paragraph. Evaluating how well your essay uses this structure is a very helpful revision technique. This “topic sentence outline exercise” lets you and your peer readers see the overall organization and clarity of your essay.

This technique works best if your draft is fairly advanced—as close to finished as you can get it so far.

The process

1. **Copy the thesis (T) and each topic sentence (t.s.)** onto a blank page. (Don’t include anything from the conclusion; concluding paragraphs work differently than body paragraphs.)
 - If a topic sentence is unclear, in the wrong place, or missing altogether, revise until you’re satisfied!
2. **Label the thesis, and number each topic sentence.**
 - See the example on the back; your outline will look like this.
3. **Examine the outline critically** to see how well it is working in the areas below.

Thesis: Ask...

- Is it an *assertion* that can be developed, and not just a statement of fact or a restatement of the assignment?
- Is it an accurate response to what the assignment asks for?

Topic sentences: For each, ask...

- Does it present the *focus* the paragraph develops?
- Does it clearly *link to the thesis*?
- Does it provide *transition* from the previous t.s.?

If it seems like a topic sentence isn’t working, here are some common problems:

- **It isn’t really a topic sentence.** It might actually be the first sentence of the paragraph’s development. **What to do:** First, check to see if the real topic sentence somewhere else in the paragraph. It’s common for it to be *the last* sentence. If it’s not there, determine what the paragraph’s focus; then compose the topic sentence.
- **The link to the thesis isn’t clear.** It might be a good focus sentence but is “disconnected.” **What to do:** First be sure there *is* a link. If so, revise the t.s. to reflect it. If not, some further revision will be needed.

What if it’s not clear what the problem is—but it’s clear there’s a problem! **What to do:** Try to get someone else’s input. If nothing else, you know you need to return to that section of your draft and work on its clarity and connection to the thesis. And of course, drop by the Writing Center for feedback!

Example topic sentence (T + t.s.) outline

The example outline below is from a student essay that presents an analysis of *The Crucible* and *Trifles*, two plays “about men in authority transferring power to women who manipulate it.”

Thesis: Though the men in each play respond differently to the women’s use of power, the women have clearly gained some control in male dominated societies.

t.s. 1 Both of these plays illustrate the idea of male dominance clearly in the way the men act and speak towards the women.

t.s. 2 Further evidence of this power is shown in the various motifs used throughout both plays.

t.s. 3 There is evidence in both plays that the men in authority feed information to the female characters and this act transfers some of their power to the women.

t.s. 5 Once the power is given to the women, the plays each take a different spin as the men in authority respond differently to them.

t.s. 6 While the men in each play may respond differently to the women’s actions, it is important to note that the women have taken what power they can and used it to manipulate things to change the outcome of their situations.