

## Topic sentences & writing effective paragraphs

This information on this Writing Guide will help you understand what's expected in paragraphs and topic sentences in college-level writing:

- the structure and qualities of effective paragraphs and
- what topic sentences are and how they work.

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### Structure and qualities of effective paragraphs

Effective essay **body paragraphs** follow a careful structure:

- **Each paragraph (¶) should have a clear topic sentence**, which communicates the paragraph's focus idea. *See more on topic sentences, below!*
- **The topic sentence should be developed** with (or "supported" by) evidence and explanations.
- Sometimes the paragraph will end with a "clincher" or concluding sentence.

**An effective paragraph has the three qualities.** A handy way to remember them is to remember **DUC**—which isn't how "duck" is spelled, but it works to help you remember!



**Qualities of effective paragraphs (DUC): they are**

D	<b>DEVELOPED:</b> they include enough evidence and explanation to fully support the idea in the t.s.
U	<b>UNIFIED:</b> everything in the paragraph supports the t.s.; nothing is "off topic."
C	<b>COHERENT:</b> the ideas in the paragraph are in logical order and ideas are linked with clear transitions.

*(Effective **essays** meet these three qualities, too—just replace "topic sentence" with **thesis**.)*

### Effective topic sentences create clarity in essays

How to write effective topic sentences (t.s.) is one of the most important skills to develop as a college writer. The table below is a crucial overview of topic sentences and how to use them.

<p><b>What is a topic sentence (t.s.)?</b></p>	<p>A <b>topic sentence</b> articulates the focus idea of a <b>paragraph</b> in the same way a thesis articulates the focus idea of a whole essay.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear, well-placed topic sentences guide the reader by clearly indicating what idea is being presented and how it relates to the ideas it follows.</li> <li>• Missing or misplaced topic sentences can make an otherwise well-organized essay seem mysterious or confusing.</li> </ul> <p>The topic sentence is developed in the paragraph with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evidence—usually several pieces of evidence, often from sources—and</li> <li>• explanation of the evidence.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Where is a topic sentence placed?</b></p>	<p>Usually, an effective topic sentence in academic writing is the first sentence in the paragraph.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is no actual “rule” about where the topic sentence must be placed, BUT the first-sentence position will provide maximum clarity in your essay.</li> </ul>
<p><b>How does an effective topic sentence work?</b></p>	<p>Topic sentences have <b>three key functions or “jobs”</b>: they</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. present the focus for the paragraph</li> <li>2. provide a direct link to the thesis, and</li> <li>3. (in most cases) provide transition from the preceding paragraph.</li> </ol> <p><i>Specific wording to make topic sentences effective depends on what type of essay they are part of—be these three functions apply in all cases.</i></p>
<p><b>How can you apply this to your essay drafts?</b></p>	<p><b>Review your draft to analyze how well the topic sentences are working.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If a t.s. is missing, write one!</li> <li>• If it’s in the middle or at the end of the paragraph, move it up to the beginning.</li> <li>• If it’s too general, revise to make it more specific.</li> <li>• If a t.s. doesn’t include a transition and the essays needs one, revise to include it.</li> </ul> <p><i>See our Writing Guide “Thesis + topic sentences outline exercise” for a great way to do this analysis!</i></p>