

The Topic Sentence and Paragraph Organization



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The Topic
Sentence and
Paragraph
Organization
Video Tutorial

When you read directions, your texts, and the articles you research, when you read your own writing in order to revise and edit, you will increase your comprehension of the content and write more cohesively when you understand paragraph organization. **Paragraph organization** refers to the way sentences are ordered and structured to create a unified and cohesive body of text.

The principal features to consider in paragraph organization are **the topic sentence and controlling idea, supporting details, organizational patterns, and signal words**. Together, these features progress a topic and idea from one point to the next, logically and fluidly. This resource and the accompanying video tutorial explain these features and provide numerous examples of **paragraph organization in context**.

The Topic Sentence and Controlling Idea



Figure 1: "Snow skiing is a challenging sport." © 2011 Jupiterimages Corporation

The Topic Sentence is an important feature of a paragraph. It is the most general sentence in a paragraph, and it has two parts:

1. A topic: the subject or issue being discussed, and
2. A controlling idea: a point, opinion, or feeling about the topic.

Example: *Snow skiing is a challenging sport with important requirements.*

In this example, the subject of the sentence, snow skiing is **the topic**, and the predicate of the sentence expresses the **point or opinion** about the topic: that it is challenging and has important requirements (Figure 1). As the controlling idea, the rest of the paragraph will serve to develop this point with supporting details.

The topic sentence is typically the first sentence in a paragraph.

Example:

Snow skiing is a challenging sport with important requirements. Bending your knees and putting your weight on the downhill ski during turns will help you control your speed as you ski. If you do not adhere to these requirements, you may ski too fast and even fall.

The topic sentence can come later in a paragraph too.

Example:

Bending your knees and putting your weight on the downhill ski during turns will help you control your speed as you ski. *Snow skiing is a challenging sport with important requirements.* If you do not adhere to these requirements, you may ski too fast and even fall.

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The Topic Sentence on Your Own

Identify the topic sentence in the sample paragraph along with the specific topic and controlling idea. After identifying the topic and controlling idea on your own, proceed to the Analysis.

Sample Paragraph:

Toddlers have strong opinions about certain food. Broccoli (“trees”) and alphabet soup can bring shrieks of delight. Happy eaters are not always skillful or neat eaters, however. Toddlers still have much to learn about using a fork and spoon.

Analysis: In the sample paragraph, the topic sentence is “Toddlers have strong opinions about certain food.” According to this topic sentence, the paragraph is largely about toddlers but the controlling idea concerns their opinions about food or their eating preferences.

Supporting Details

In a paragraph, the topic and controlling idea are developed with supporting details. Listed here are some types of supporting details found in paragraphs along with an example of each in a sentence:

Facts: statistics or evidence from research that can be verified

The office sold seven million dollars of real estate during the boom years (Stoff, 2011).

Opinions: statements, quotes, or paraphrases from subject matter experts (which may be you!)

According to expert tea maker, Stoff (2010), there are three easy steps to making tea.

Definitions: explanations of what a term or concept means

A “crossover” is a family vehicle with the features of a sedan, mini-van, and an SUV.

Examples: illustrations that show how something is or how it is done

Mario was a shy, introverted young man. For example, he had few friends and mostly kept to himself. (Figure 2)

Anecdotes: narrative accounts of one time or recurring events

When I visited the Washington Monument, I enjoyed the 180 degree view the most.

Descriptions: a visual or sensory depiction of a person, place, event, activity, or idea

Frostbit leaves crunched beneath our winter boots on the path through the snow frosted trees.



Figure 2: Mario.
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Supporting Details on Your Own

Identify the supporting details in the sample paragraph then proceed to the Analysis. Hint: A paragraph may not every type of detail in it, but it might have more than one type as they develop the topic and main idea with more information and depth.

Sample Paragraph:

Hiking can be especially exhilarating during snowy, winter months. When my friend and I visited North Carolina last January, we hiked in the Blue Ridge Mountains near the highest peak, Mount Mitchell, which is 6,684 feet above sea level. We first crossed a footbridge over a rapidly moving, ice-cold river and then followed a wooded trail up to a waterfall. Frostbit leaves crunched beneath our winter boots on the path through the snow frosted trees. We also saw deer and rabbits as we trekked up the path. I assure you that nothing feels better than inhaling crisp, fresh mountain air, but the neatest part of hiking in winter, besides the beauty of the mountain, is exhaling and seeing your breath turn to frost when it hits the cold air!

Analysis: The topic sentence and the concluding sentence are opinions about the topic. The middle of the paragraph is an anecdote—a story about visiting and hiking to a waterfall. There is also a fact about Mount Mitchell and descriptions of the area.

Paragraph Organization

Along with having topic sentences and supporting details, paragraphs are also *organized to achieve a certain purpose*. However, just as a paragraph can contain different types of supporting details, a paragraph may also include more than one organizational pattern. Listed here are some common patterns for organizing a paragraph:

- **Cause and Effect:** for showing how one thing leads to another
- **Chronological Order:** for narrating events that occurred over time
- **Classification:** for grouping things together according to their features
- **Compare and Contrast:** for showing how things are similar or different
- **Definition and example:** for defining a term or idea then expanding it with examples
- **Description:** for listing details
- **Episode:** for presenting details or information about a specific event or anecdote

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- **General/Specific order:** for presenting a general idea followed by specific examples
- **Generalization/Principal:** for making a general statement or applying a broad principal to explain the supporting details
- **Listing:** for presenting ideas from the least to most important
- **Order of Importance:** for building up to or leading away from the most important point.
- **Problem and Solution:** for presenting an issue and ways to address it
- **Process/Cause:** for explaining what or how something happens and then why
- **Spatial Order:** for ordering details directionally

Signal Words



Figure 3: Context clues. ©2011 Jupiterimages Corporation

Signal words indicate a type of organizational pattern and reinforce or further the meaning of the content (the information given in the body of the text) by way of that organization.

Commonly, we find signal words at the beginning of a paragraph or sentence or as part of a signal *phrase* that leads into a quote or paraphrase. In the paraphrase, *Stoff (2011) argued that green tea is healthier than jasmine tea*, the verb “argued” in the signal phrase, “Stoff (2011) argued,” informs us that the ideas that follow are Stoff’s and that she “argued” them. The signal word “argued” creates a firmer tone than if she had merely “said” green tea is healthier. It also establishes more context for Stoff’s meaning, signaling that she is generalizing or basing her opinion on some principal.

Signal words are also part of the vocabulary that makes up the content of the paragraph. The word “type” in a sentence, for example, *signals* that the ideas involve classification, which is an organizational pattern. Signal words are therefore **context clues** (Figure 3); they hint at what the paragraph is about and how it is organized.

Listed here are signal words associated with different types of paragraph organization.

- **Cause and Effect:** because, consequently, for this reason, hence made, on account of
- **Chronological Order:** after, at last, at (time), as long as, at the same time, as soon as, before, during, eventually, finally, in (month or year), later, meanwhile, next, on (day or date), since, second, subsequently, then, until, and whenever

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- **Classification:** categories, classes, classifications, elements, features, groups, kinds, methods, types, varieties, and ways
- **Compare and Contrast:** another, both, however, likewise, one difference, on the other hand, on the contrary, similarity, similarly, unlike, and while
- **Definition and Example:** concept, defined as, described as, e.g., for example, for instance, i.e., illustrates, is, is called, is stated, known as, means, refers to, specifically, such as, term, and that is to say
- **Description:** above, across, along, appears to be, as in, behind, below, beside, between, down, in back of, in front of, looks like, near, onto, on top of, outside, over, such as, to the right/left, and under
- **Episode:** a few days/weeks later, around the same time, as a result of, as it is often called, because of, began when, consequently, for this reason, just, lasted for, led to, shortly thereafter, since then, subsequently, this led to, and when
- **General/Specific order:** for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, in other words, like, namely, such as, and that is
- **Generalization/Principal:** Additionally, always, because of, clearly, conclusively, first, for instance, for example, furthermore, generally, however, if...then, in fact, it could be argued that, moreover, most convincing, never, not only...but also, often, second, therefore, third, truly, and typically
- **Listing:** additionally, also, and, as well as, besides, furthermore, in addition, in fact, moreover, or, plus, and too
- **Order of Importance:** central, chief, ending with, finishing with, key, lastly, least, main, major, finally, primary, principal, and significant
- **Problem and Solution:** answer, challenge, difficulty, dilemma, enigma, indicate, improve, issue, need, plan, problem, propose, resolve, respond, solve, and suggest
- **Process/Cause:** accordingly, as a result of, because, begins with, consequently, effects of, finally, first, for this reason, how to, how, if...then, in order to, is caused by, leads/led to, may be due to, next, so that, steps involved, therefore, thus, and when...then
- **Spatial Order:** above, below, behind, beside, down, east, feels, highest, looks, lowest, next to, north, smells, sounds, south, tastes, under, and west

The Topic Sentence and Paragraph Organization

The Topic Sentence and Paragraph Organization in Context

The sample paragraphs in this section illustrate topic sentences, supporting details, organizational patterns, and signal words in context. Read each paragraph to identify the type of paragraph organization on your own then proceed to the analysis to check your comprehension.

Sample Paragraph 1:



Figure 4: Lawrence Real Estate.
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Fifteen years ago, Lawrence started his real estate business, and it has since become a huge success. In 1995, Lawrence Real Estate (Figure 4) opened its door in Oviedo, Florida and sold seven million dollars of real estate during the first few “boom years” (Stoff, 2010). By 2000, Lawrence decided to open two branch offices: one in Tampa in 2003 and one in Miami in 2004. By 2007, the home office and both the branch offices had survived the economic slowdown, so Lawrence and his associates are expanding their business to the Carolinas and plan to open a branch office in Charlotte in 2011. It can be safely said that in the last fifteen years, Lawrence Real Estate has become a model for success despite the economic struggle and real estate devaluation.

Analysis 1: According to the topic sentence, which contains two [coordinating clauses](#) and therefore two subject and two topics, this paragraph is about Lawrence and his real estate business, and the controlling idea about Lawrence and his business is that they have been successful.

Let’s now look at how the supporting details are organized to present the information about this topic and idea. To do this, we look at the way the sentences begin and at any other signal words that lead readers along a certain line of thinking. Here we see “Fifteen years,” “in 1995,” “By 2000,” “By 2007,” and “in the last 15 years.” Do you see a pattern? The dates make a pattern. They go back 15 years, but then in a chronological order, they move forward to when the success of the business happened.

This paragraph uses **chronological order**. Notice too that the last sentence returns to the beginning idea of 15 years ago. In this sentence, a final comment about the time period overall is given with respect to the new information in the body of the paragraph.

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Sample Paragraph 2:



Figure 5: Making a cup of tea.
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Making a great cup of tea (Figure 5) is easy if you follow these three steps. First, heat a cup of water to a boiling point. Then put the tea bag in the hot water, and let it seep into the hot water for at least three minutes. Finally, add creamer and sugar to taste. There is nothing tastier than a strong cup of tea early in the morning.

Analysis 2: According to the topic sentence, which is the first sentence of the paragraph, making cup of tea is the topic, and the controlling idea is that it's easy to if you follow three steps. Then, by looking at the sentence openings, we find the signal words: "first," "then," and "finally," which indicate a sequence of steps, not times or dates as in a narrative story, but steps that happen in a specific order as in the process of doing something or informing others how to do something.

This paragraph uses *process order* (or *process/cause*). In the last sentence of this paragraph, too, the process is completed with a return to the original topic—a cup of tea—and a new comment about it—that a strong cup is tasty in the morning, making those three steps not only easy but also worthwhile.

Sample Paragraph 3:



Figure 6: The Washington Monument. © 2011 Jupiterimages Corporation

The Washington Monument (Figure 6) is divided into three main areas. The lowest section of the building houses the entrance, a gift shop, and a restaurant. The middle section consists of elevators and stairways to the top. The top section of the monument includes an observation deck with a spectacular view of the Washington DC area. When I visited the Washington Monument, I toured every section but enjoyed the spectacular 180 degree view the most.

Analysis 3: Based on the topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph, the topic is the Washington Monument and the controlling idea is that it is divided into three main areas. The paragraph presents information about the lowest section first, then the middle section, the top section, and the last sentence makes a remark about the most enjoyable of all the sections. This is an example of *spatial* organization. The information is given in the order you might see it if you were there.

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Sample Paragraph 4:



Figure 7: Crossover.

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There are three types of family vehicles made in the United States. The first type is the minivan. All American car manufacturers make a version of the minivan. Some say that the comfort and amenities of the minivan compare to none. The second type of family vehicle is the SUV. Some SUVs offer four-wheel-drive to navigate tough terrains, and they also offer seating for a large crowd. A third type of family vehicles is called the “crossover” (Figure 7). These vehicles supposedly have the best features of the sedan, mini-van, and

SUV. They are easy to maneuver, look much like a regular sedan, and sit up to six people. All of these vehicles are family friendly; they offer safety, roomy comfort, and many extra features to accommodate the special needs of families.

Analysis 4: This paragraph shows us another way to organize the details of a topic. The topic sentence of this paragraph is structured differently than the other ones we’ve looked at. Typically the topic of a sentence is also the grammatical subject. Here however, the subject is “there,” a pronoun, so the topic is in the predicate of the sentence. The topic, what the paragraph is about, is “family vehicles.” The controlling idea is that there are three types made in the US.

The paragraph is organized according to those three types: The first type, the second type, and the third type, and to conclude, there is a comment about “all of these vehicles” or all of these types of vehicles.

When we organize information by types or something’s features, we are classifying it. We thus call this type of organization, *classification*.

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Sample Paragraph 5:



Figure 8: Twin brothers.
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Although the twin brothers (Figure 8) shared many physical characteristics, they handled themselves differently in social situations. Mario was a shy introverted young man. He had few friends and mostly kept to himself. On the other hand, Gino was outgoing and the life of the party. Unlike Mario, Gino had many friends and felt totally at ease among big crowds. The best way to tell these identical twins apart is to invite both to a party and observe how differently they interact with the other guests.

Analysis 5: When the topic sentence is [complex](#) (having more than one clause) as in this paragraph, there may be two subjects and therefore two topics; however, here, the subject of the first clause is “the twin brothers” and the subject for the second clause is “they,” so they refer to the same topic: the twin brothers. The controlling idea is that they share many physical characteristics but handle themselves differently socially. The paragraph then progresses with descriptions of these similarities and differences and signal words that create contrast such as “although,” “on the other hand,” and “unlike.” Vocabulary such as “apart” and “differently” also indicate that the organizational pattern of this paragraph is **Compare and Contrast**.

Sample Paragraph 6:



Figure 9: Walking Tours.
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There are many reasons why I enjoy walking tours (Figure 9) when visiting new cities. For starters, walking through a city allows the visitor to see the details of an area without having to hurry. This often results in meeting locals and experiencing their lives and traditions first hand. Furthermore, walking tours are flexible and inexpensive because there are no strict schedules or transportation expenses. Travelers taking walking tours are rewarded with firsthand experiences of the places they visit and the opportunity to personally interact with the people who live there.

Analysis 6: The first sentence begins with “there are,” so we must read beyond the subject and verb to find the topic. Additionally, this is a [complex sentence](#) with an [independent and dependent clause](#) connected by “why,” so there may be two topics. Looking at the objects of both clauses, we find “many reasons” and “walking tours”; these two topics are linked together by the controlling idea: why walking tours are enjoyable when visiting new cities. The signal words build on this idea of “why” or causes with terms such as “results” and “because.” The last sentence then sums up the ultimate effect of walking tours: travelers *are rewarded*. This is an example of **cause and effect** organization.

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Sample Paragraph 7:



Figure 10: Frostbit leaves.

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Hiking can be especially exhilarating during snowy, winter months. When my friend and I visited North Carolina last January, we hiked in the Blue Ridge Mountains near the highest peak, Mount Mitchell, which is 6,684 feet above sea level. We first crossed a footbridge over a rapidly moving, ice-cold river and then followed a wooded trail up to a waterfall. Frostbit leaves (Figure 10) crunched beneath our winter boots on the path through the snow frosted trees. We also saw deer and rabbits as we trekked up the path. I assure you that nothing feels better than inhaling crisp, fresh mountain air, but the neatest part of hiking in winter, besides the beauty of the mountain, is exhaling and seeing your breath turn to frost when it hits the cold air!

Analysis 7: In the first sentence we find that the topic of the paragraph is “hiking,” and the comment or main idea is that it “can be especially exhilarating during snowy winter months.” Based on this, we can expect supporting details to illustrate this exhilaration, but we don’t know how it is organized until we look at the signal words that help progress the topic from one idea to the next.

Taking inventory of the signal words, we find several time markers: “when,” “last January,” “first,” “then,” and “in winter.” “When” and “last January” set the narrative in the past while “first” and “then” develop a **chronological order** of events along with a final, summarizing idea about hiking “in winter” based on the experience last January.

Within this chronology, we also find signal words associated with **spatial organization**: “over,” “up,” “beneath,” “through,” “crunched” (sounded), “saw,” “feels,” and “seeing.” Narratives do typically include descriptive elements about the setting. Additionally, the concluding thought **contrasts** inhaling to exhaling.

We can thus conclude that this paragraph has multiple patterns of organization intricately connected. For a closer look at these connections beyond signal words, visit the in the [Revising and Editing for Paragraph Cohesion Workshop](#) archived in the [ELL Resource Library’s Writing Workshop](#) page.

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