Topic Sentences, Paragraph Content, and Concluding Sentences: A Mutually Supportive Relationship

Effective writing occurs in many formats, but the majority of U.S. academic writing adopts a linear organization pattern—main points are followed by supporting points and details. The author’s thesis is usually stated in the introduction, and then body paragraphs support the thesis by providing relevant details, opinions, examples, and evidence.

Body paragraphs frequently include a predictable set of elements and organization. Topic sentences generally occur at or near the beginning of body paragraphs. A topic sentence introduces the topic of the paragraph and a point the author wants to make about that topic. The paragraph then develops that point. Body paragraphs frequently end with concluding sentences, which revisit the main idea of the paragraph in light of the supporting details. Moreover, both topic and concluding sentences can function as transitional sentences between parts of the paper. A paragraph without a topic or concluding sentence may confuse readers because it lacks a clear focus.

A. Topic Sentences Are Logically Related to Thesis Statements

Body paragraphs support the author’s argument by providing detailed information about the ideas in the thesis statement. For example, the thesis statement for an essay about reasons to use the University Writing Center might be, “Making use of the University Writing Center at IUPUI can help students with their writing in a variety of ways, including time efficiency, writing strategy development, and gaining reader feedback.” Thus, the first body paragraph might begin with the following topic sentence: “The University Writing Center can help busy college students use their time efficiently.”

B. Topic Sentences Are Logically Related to All Paragraph Support

Suppose the writer created the following paragraph to explain his first supporting point about time efficiency:

The University Writing Center can help busy college students use their time efficiently.

For instance, consultants can aid writers in understanding assignments before they start the writing process, thereby avoiding the waste of precious time on false starts. It can be distressing for writers to discover they have written much of an essay based on a misinterpretation of the assignment. UWC consultants can also help writers determine if a draft has a logical pattern and relevant material. All too often, writers spend time developing points that, although related to the topic, are not relevant to the main purpose of the essay. Consultants can help spot digression and steer the writer back toward a logical line of reasoning. A third way the UWC helps students save time is by providing flexible hours and means for scheduling appointments. UWC consulting is available six days a week and can be scheduled up to two weeks in advance. In addition, staff is available in two locations as well as through on-line consulting. Also, students can go on-line at any time of day or night to arrange their own sessions. All this availability allows students to use the UWC in ways that best suit their needs.
Each of the three bolded sub-points in the above paragraph (providing pre-writing help, checking logic midway through a project, offering flexible scheduling) is a logical extension of the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. By providing a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph, the writer helps the reader create a mental framework for understanding the paragraph contents. Each new point is interpreted in relation to the idea expressed in the topic sentence.

C. Topic Sentences Are Logically Related to Concluding Sentences

While topic sentences introduce the main idea of a body paragraph, concluding sentences revisit that idea in light of the paragraph content. An effective concluding sentence reminds the reader of the paragraph topic and controlling idea but also acknowledges the new information that follows the topic sentence. For the above paragraph, the author might create the following concluding sentence: “By taking advantage of these UWC resources, college students can complete their assignments in a timely and efficient manner.”

This sentence reminds the reader of the topic (the UWC) and the main idea for the paragraph (helping students use their time well). However, the author could also create a concluding sentence that generally acknowledges the many ideas included in the paragraph, such as the following: “By using UWC resources, student writers can receive timely support to get off to a good start on a new project, check midway that they are on track, and ensure they are using their time well.” In addition to reminding the reader of the topic and controlling idea, the above concluding sentence briefly revisits the supporting details of the paragraph.

D. Topic and Concluding Sentences Can Work as Transitions Between Sections of a Paper

Both topic and concluding sentences can function as transitions or “bridges” between parts of a paper. Topic sentences can include language that refers to preceding ideas while concluding sentences can foreshadow upcoming information. Use of transitional language in topic and concluding sentences can help readers understand the paper’s organization and the relationships between its various parts. By using transition sentences, an author can establish links between points and sections in the paper, thereby creating a stronger more cohesive piece of writing. As an example of a transitional topic sentence, the second body paragraph in the essay on the University Writing Center might begin with the following: “In addition to helping students make the best use of their time, the University Writing Center can teach students how to create stronger papers through mastering a variety of writing strategies.”

This topic sentence refers to the topic of the first body paragraph (using time efficiently) as well as the topic of the second body paragraph (developing writing strategies). Similarly, the second body paragraph could include a transitional conclusion: “Teaching writers to apply strategies at appropriate points in the writing process is the second of three key ways in which the UWC helps students.” This concluding sentence reminds the reader of the current paragraph’s main point while at the same time preparing the reader for the information in the upcoming paragraph.