Review this handout if you need help with paragraphing or otherwise structuring your ideas. Many overall problems with structure and “flow” can be addressed by spending extra time on topic sentences!

Body Paragraph Revision, Part I: Topic Sentences

An effective topic sentence should:

- Articulate a claim or mini-argument that clearly relates back to your thesis
- Reflect only what you will discuss in that paragraph
- Announce an achievable goal
- Connect in some way to what has been said in the previous paragraph

Thing to avoid:

- Vague, general statements
- Overly broad statements that cannot possibly be proven in one paragraph
- Abstract wording

Examples

Example #1: The poem contains many thought-provoking references to love and death.

Problem: This is an overly broad topic sentence that will allow the author to list various references (in more or less random order) without necessarily making any argument about them. This topic sentence needs to be revised for more focus.

Example #1, revised: The poem consistently links images of love to images of death, creating an unsettling mood for the reader.

What changed? The second topic sentence sets up a clear task for the paragraph to accomplish. Now, the paragraph must show us examples of love linked to examples of death, while arguing that this creates an eerie mood.

Example: #2: Television’s first Hispanic family appeared in 1983, on the sitcom Condo.

Problem: This is a topic sentence that sets up “info dump.” The sentence states a fact, rather than making a claim about that fact or connecting the fact to the paper’s larger agenda. This topic sentence needs a stronger argumentative purpose.

(over)
Example #2, revised: Televised representations of the Hispanic family have gradually expanded from visions of the heterosexual middle-class to include post-nuclear, extended family networks.

What changed? The revised topic sentence offers an original insight about how Hispanic families have been represented on television, meaning the author will have something to say about the evidence in the paragraph.

Example #3: The sexist symbols appearing in magazines have a huge impact on women’s psychology.

Problem: This topic sentence has promise, but it is far too broad. In all likelihood, the author cannot discuss “women’s psychology” — or the interplay between magazines and psychology — in one paragraph. As a result, this body paragraph will discuss a wide range of psychological effects superficially, rather than digging deep into one or two. This topic sentence needs more specificity.

Example #3, revised: By consistently representing a certain race, age, and body type as “glamorous,” publications like Cosmopolitan instill feelings of failure and social invisibility in many women.

What changed? This topic sentence highlights a specific shortcoming of a specific publication, while naming a unique psychological impact.

Example #4: Immigration is heavily discussed throughout Mohsin Hamid’s novel Exit West.

Problem: Like example #2, this topic sentence states a fact rather than making an argument about that fact. Immigration may be a predominant theme of Exit West, but how does this relate to the paper’s larger agenda?

Example #4, revised: The novel Exit West challenges tribalism and xenophobia, arguing that immigration is a common human experience.

What changed? This topic sentence specifies what the novel Exit West has to say about immigration.