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

**Things to avoid:**

* + Vague, general statements
  + Overly broad statements that cannot possibly be developed in a single paragraph
  + Abstract wording
  + Quotations or summarizing (unless you’ve *clearly* set up/explained the purpose of this summary)

Adapted from Amber Foster, “Writing Clinic: Topic Sentences”

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.

(over)

**Example #2**: 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 #2, revised**: By consistently associating luxury items with women of a certain race, age, and body type, 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 #3**: Immigration is heavily discussed throughout Mohsin Hamid’s novel *Exit West*.

**Problem**: This topic sentence fails to reflect any larger agenda. Immigration may be a predominant theme of *Exit West,* but how does such an observation relate to the paper’s argument?

**Example #3, 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.