

## Writing Tip Sheet: Structuring a College Essay /Topic Sentence Outlines

### Part I – The Importance of Topic Sentences

While an essay is generally a list of reasons supporting a thesis, it needs to come across as more. Paragraphs should flow into one another. The reader should understand that there is an overall relationship between the different points. To this end, a writer needs to think about providing clear topic sentences and using clear transitions to help guide readers along, to make the journey as easy as possible.

There are many different ways to structure an essay. Each particular assignment may require a unique approach. Below are three general approaches to consider.

**Sample Thesis:** Despite criticism, Boston's City Hall is an architectural masterpiece.

#### **A) Simple Listing.**

Introduction with thesis

Body: Support thesis (list reasons)

Part 1: The first reason Boston City Hall is a masterpiece is....

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Part 2: The second reason City Hall is such a wonderful building is...

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Part 3 of paper: The third reason why City Hall is an excellent building is...

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Conclusion

Advantage: Lets reader know when you are moving from one point to the next.

Disadvantage: Not much more than a glorified list. No serious relationship established between points. While there are transitions that ease the reader along, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

## **B) Dramatic Progression**

Introduction with thesis

Body: Support thesis

Part 1: One important reason that City Hall is a great building is....

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Part 2: An even more important reason is....

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Part 3: The most important reason City Hall is a great building is...

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Conclusion

Advantage: Not only does it let readers know when to move from one point to the next, it also shows how the points are related.

Ascending order: (illustrated above) From least important to most important.

The most important point is at the end of paper, making a final impact on the reader.

Descending order: From most important to least. Make your biggest point first.

Comment: It is tempting to settle for the Simple Listing (Part I above). However, you should always try to establish a clearer pattern of development to your points. In most cases, if you examine your beliefs, you will probably find that you feel more strongly about certain points. It is only logical that you indicate this to your reader.

## **C) Logical Linkage**

Introduction with thesis

Body: Support thesis

Part 1: Although interesting to look at, Boston City Hall is quite simply an unattractive concrete monstrosity.

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Part 2: The effects of this concrete are felt beyond just the building, helping lay waste to City Hall Plaza.

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Part 3: This effect is made worse as both building and plaza interact poorly with surrounding buildings.

*Provide evidence to support point.*

Conclusion

As you can clearly see, Point B builds upon what was said in Point A. Point C builds upon both A and C.

Advantage: Clearly demonstrates relationship between points and can produce a tighter, more sophisticated essay.

Disadvantage: Requires strong transitions. If any parts don't connect clearly, the entire essay can easily unravel.

## **Part II: The Topic Sentence Outline**

A **topic sentence outline** is an outline of your essay, but instead of just using fragments or short phrases to summarize your points (as most people tend to do when they outline), you use full sentences. Ideally you have an outline point for **every major paragraph in your paper** and provide the topic sentence for that particular paragraph. Once you are ready to write your draft, you can use these sentences. Part of your paper is already written. Connections are already laid out. Transitions are already decided upon. This helps both you and your reader understand the organization of your essay.

Essentially, what you are doing is providing an outline similar to the sentence schemata above, except probably a bit more developed. In fact, the more developed you can make it, the better off you may be. Consider the very developed example below:

### **Example Topic Sentence Outline**

#### Introduction

- I) The fight for control of the Central Artery green space bodes poorly for the project. *(Thesis paragraph that introduces idea and claim.)*
- II) For years now, different groups have battled for control of the space. *(Background paragraph, if you feel one is necessary.)*

#### Body: Support Thesis

##### First point:

- I) The old adage "Too many cooks spoil the soup" seems to apply here. *(Make claim followed by some evidence.)*
- II) In San Antonio, city official facing off against other groups, decided to... *(A second paragraph to provide even further evidence.)*

##### Second point:

- I) If this debate is not settled amicably, Boston may lose an opportunity to create a landmark park. *(Make claim and provide evidence.)*

- II) Something like this has happened in ... (*Second paragraph for this point; provides further evidence.*)
- III) On the other hand, in Paris, groups worked together... (*A third paragraph for this point; provides a different perspective. Instead of piling it all into one paragraph, you have divided it up and drawn attention to each individual example.*)

Third point:

- I) Even more significant is the risk we run of replacing the “dead” Central Artery space with a “dead” green space. (*Make claim and provide evidence. Note how transitions “On the other hand” and “Even more significant” indicate your reasons are increasing in importance.*)

Fourth Point: (A counterargument)

- I) All groups involved in this power struggle claim to have the city’s best interests in mind. But how can they say this when... (*Refute opposing viewpoint, then provide evidence.*)

Conclusion:

- I) Recent developments have given us hope that this story can have a happy ending.

Here we have a ten-paragraph essay very clearly laid out. If you were to translate this into an actual draft, much of the work is already done. It facilitates the entire writing process.

Writing a topic sentence outline can force you to think in terms of the purpose of each paragraph. Instead of just diving into unfocused content, you lay out the reason for each paragraph’s existence. This makes it easier for you to write the paper and for the reader to understand it.

For additional information see writing tip sheet <i>Argument Structure</i> .
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