

**TEACHING TIP**

Working on the board, help students narrow several broad topics and write viable topic sentences.

**Writing the Topic Sentence**

The next important step is to state your topic clearly *in sentence form*. Writing the topic sentence helps you further narrow your topic by forcing you to make a statement about it. The simplest possible topic sentence about Pete might read *Pete is sloppy*, but you might wish to strengthen it by saying, for instance, *Pete's sloppiness is a terrible habit*.

Writing a good topic sentence is an important step toward an effective paragraph because the topic sentence controls the direction and scope of the body. A topic sentence should have a clear *controlling idea* and should be a *complete sentence*.

You can think of the topic sentence as having two parts, a **topic** and a **controlling idea**. The controlling idea states the writer's point of view or attitude about the topic.

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topic

controlling idea

**TOPIC SENTENCE:** Pete's sloppiness is a terrible habit.

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The controlling idea helps you focus on just one aspect or point. Here are three possible topic sentences about the topic *a memorable job*.

1. My job in the complaint department taught me how to calm down angry people.
2. Two years in the complaint department persuaded me to become an assistant manager.
3. Working in the complaint department persuaded me to become a veterinarian.

- These topic sentences all explore the same topic—working in a complaint department—but each controlling idea is different. The controlling idea in 1 is *taught me how to calm down angry people*.

- What is the controlling idea in 2?

*persuaded me to become an assistant manager*

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What is the controlling idea in 3?

*persuaded me to become a veterinarian*

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- Notice the way in which the controlling idea lets the reader know what the paragraph will be about. There are many possible topic sentences for any topic, depending on the writer's interests and point of view. If you were assigned the topic *a memorable job*, what would your topic sentence be?

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## PRACTICE 3

Read each topic sentence below. Circle the topic and underline the controlling idea.

1. A low-fat diet provides many health benefits.
2. Animal Planet is both entertaining and educational.
3. Our football coach works to build players' self-esteem.
4. This campus offers many peaceful places where students can relax.
5. My cousin's truck looks like something out of *Star Wars*.

As a rule, the more specific and limited your topic and controlling idea, the better the paragraph; in other words, your topic sentence should not be so broad that it cannot be developed in one paragraph. Which of these topic sentences do you think will produce the best paragraphs?

4. Five wet, bug-filled days at Camp Nirvana made me a fan of the great indoors.
5. This town has problems.
6. Road rage is on the rise for three reasons.

- Topic sentences 4 and 6 are both specific enough to write a good paragraph about. In each, the topic sentence is carefully worded to suggest clearly what ideas will follow. From topic sentence 4, what do you expect the paragraph to include?

The paragraph will probably discuss how weather and insects ruined the week.

- What do you expect paragraph 6 to include?

The paragraph will probably discuss three reasons why road rage is on the rise.

- Topic sentence 5, on the other hand, is so broad that a paragraph could include almost anything. Just what problems does the town have? Strained relations between police and the community? Litter in public parks? Termites? The writer needs to rewrite the controlling idea, focusing on just one problem for an effective paragraph.

The topic sentence also must be a **complete sentence**. It must contain a subject and a verb, and express a complete thought.\* Do not confuse a topic with a topic sentence. For instance, *a celebrity I would like to meet* cannot be a topic sentence because it is not a sentence; however, it could be a title† because topics and titles need not be complete sentences. One possible topic sentence might read, *A celebrity I would like to meet is writer Julia Alvarez.*

Do not write *This paragraph will be about . . .* or *In this paper I will write about . . .* Instead, craft your topic sentence carefully to focus the topic and let your reader know what the paragraph will contain. Make every word count.

\* For practice in correcting fragments, see Chapter 27, "Avoiding Sentence Errors," Part B.

† For practice in writing titles, see Chapter 15, "The Introduction, the Conclusion, and the Title," Part C.

### TEACHING TIP

An extremely common problem among basic writers is awkwardly announcing the subject of their paper with "This paper will be about . . ." Emphasize the role of the topic sentence as stating a point of view about the subject, not announcing it.

## PRACTICE 4

## TEACHING TIP

Practice 4 works well as a small-group or full-class activity.

Put a check beside each topic sentence that is focused enough to allow you to write a good paragraph. If a topic sentence is too broad, narrow the topic according to your own interests and write a new topic sentence with a clear controlling idea.

**EXAMPLES**  Keeping a journal can improve a student's writing.

Rewrite: \_\_\_\_\_

This paper will be about my family.

Rewrite: My brother Mark has a unique sense of humor.

1.  Eugene's hot temper causes problems at work.

Rewrite: \_\_\_\_\_

2.  This paragraph will discuss my two closest friends.

Rewrite: My two closest friends are alike in three ways.

3.  Learning a foreign language has several benefits.

Rewrite: \_\_\_\_\_

4.  Child abuse is something to think about.

Rewrite: Child abuse can be reduced through parenting classes.

5.  Company officials should not read employees' e-mail.

Rewrite: \_\_\_\_\_

## PRACTICE 5

Here is a list of broad topics. Choose three that interest you from this list or from your own list in Chapter 1, page 6. Narrow each topic, choose your controlling idea, and write a topic sentence focused enough to write a good paragraph about. Make sure that each topic sentence has a clear controlling idea and is a complete sentence.

Overcoming fears

Popular music

Insider's tour of your community

Balancing work and play



The first advantage of digital photography is easier picture-taking. Gone are the days of toting film to the store to be processed and waiting to see how the pictures turn out. The digital photographer can see instantly whether a shot is good and then snap more pictures if necessary. Another advantage of digital photography is quick and easy processing. At home on a computer, the digital photographer can size or retouch his or her images, print the good ones, or e-mail them to family and friends. Third, with no film or developing costs, digital photography saves money. The photographer can take hundreds of shots and print only the best. A final advantage is the tiny size and weight of digital cameras. Therefore, when an irresistible photo opportunity arises, the digital photographer is more likely to have a camera handy, tucked in a pocket or handbag. Most people treasure their photographs, so any tools that can help capture memories with more ease and less frustration are sure to catch on.

## C. Generating Ideas For the Body

### ESL TIP

Many ESL and other students tend to overuse generalizations. Try the acronym FIRE (fact, incident, reason or result, explanation) to remind them to be specific.

### TEACHING TIP

List on the board different kinds of supporting detail (facts, examples, anecdotes, expert opinions, testimonials, descriptive details, reasons, effects, etc.). Encourage students to consider all of these possibilities as they are brainstorming ideas for the body of their paragraph.

One good way to generate ideas for the body of a paragraph is **brainstorming**—freely jotting on paper or the computer anything that relates to your topic sentence: facts, details, examples, little stories. This step might take just a few minutes, but it is one of the most important elements of the writing process. Brainstorming can provide you with specific ideas to support your topic sentence. Later you can choose from these ideas as you compose your paragraph.

Here, for example, is a possible brainstorm list for the topic sentence *Pete's sloppiness is a terrible habit*:

1. His apartment is full of dirty clothes, books, candy wrappers
2. His favorite candy—M&Ms
3. He is often a latecomer or a no-show
4. He jots time-and-place information for dates and appointments on scraps of paper that are soon forgotten
5. Stacks of old newspapers sit on chair seats
6. Socks are on the lampshades
7. Papers for classes are wrinkled and carelessly scrawled
8. I met Pete for the first time in math class
9. His sister is just the opposite, very neat
10. Always late for classes, out of breath
11. He is one messy person
12. Papers are stained with coffee or M&Ms

Instead of brainstorming, some writers freewrite or ask themselves questions to generate ideas for their paragraphs. Some like to perform this step on paper, whereas others use a computer. Do what works best for you. The key is to write down lots of ideas during prewriting. If you need more practice in any of these methods, reread Chapter 2, "Prewriting to Generate Ideas."