

LOOKING AT YOURSELF AS A WRITER

Topic sentences

Professors and business supervisors often complain about the writing that is submitted to them, and one of their loudest complaints concerns topic sentences. Why, they wonder, do so many students and employees have trouble stating the point of a paragraph in its first sentence?

If you have difficulty writing topic sentences, ask yourself why. Here are some common causes and cures.

- CAUSE** You haven't decided how to organize your draft, so you don't know what key idea to express in the topic sentence for each paragraph.
- CURE** Jot down an informal outline and build a topic sentence for each key point in the outline. It's best to do this before drafting, but you can do it later as well.
- CAUSE** You are focusing on details and forget the reader's need to see how the details fit into the overall structure of the essay. The forward flow of writing tempts nearly all of us to blur the structure while we are drafting.
- CURE** As you revise a draft, pay special attention to organization, inserting (or sharpening) topic sentences as needed.
- CAUSE** You are trying to link the opening sentence of a new paragraph to the last sentence of the previous paragraph.
- CURE** When you move into a new paragraph, don't worry about subtle links between sentences. Pay attention instead to links between larger chunks of text—the move from one topic to another.
- CAUSE** You are aware that some professional writers, especially journalists and informal essayists, do not always use clear topic sentences.
- CURE** Develop a flexible approach to writing. In some contexts, topic sentences may not be so important. In the academic world, however, topic sentences are often necessary for clarifying the lines of an argument or reporting the research in a field. In the business world, topic sentences (along with headings) are essential, since readers often scan for information.