

Baruch COLLEGE | WRITING CENTER

CONTROLLING AN ARGUMENT WITH TOPIC SENTENCES WORKSHOP

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Reference Sheet: “The Disgrace of Man”

MATERIALS NEEDED

Students: a text to be revised

Facilitator: highlighters sufficient to supply each student with three different colors; dry erase markers in four different colors

LEARNING GOALS

At the close of the workshop, students will be able to:

- Articulate the relationships between an effective topic sentence, the paragraphs that precede and follow, and the essay’s primary argument.
- Edit and draft topic sentences that achieve each of these purposes.

OVERVIEW

In this workshop, three primary activities take place:

- Students read model topic sentences in order to understand how they direct readerly expectations for a single paragraph.
- Students examine topic sentences in the context of an essay to identify how topic sentences both elaborate on a thesis statement and link to neighboring paragraphs.
- Using a sample of their own writing, students evaluate their topic sentences and revise accordingly.

LESSON PLAN

Introduction

As students file in, replicate on the whiteboard the two-sentence thesis statement from Handout 2, “The Disgrace of Man.” Inform students that this text will be used later in the workshop:

Orwell artfully employs figurative language and personification to reveal people’s inhumanity to one another, thereby prompting the reader’s sympathy and self-examination. Despite his insistence on universal moral responsibility, however, Orwell’s depiction of race and nationality nevertheless reflect his own Eurocentric values.

Begin by eliciting students’ existing knowledge of topic sentences: *What is a topic sentence? What does it accomplish in an academic essay? Where is it typically found in a paragraph?* Frame the workshop as an occasion to understand topic sentences not only as directing a single paragraph, but also in terms of how they bind paragraphs together to build an argument.

Part One: Examining Model Topic Sentences

1. **Distribute Handout 1, “Model Topic Sentences.”**

- For each sentence, ask a different student to read aloud before prompting the group to *imagine the paragraph that might follow*.
- Ask students to identify the specific syntax and language they’re using to extrapolate the paragraph-level content and structure to come.
- Thereby elicit the following close reading of each model topic sentence, recording findings on the whiteboard:
 - **Topic Sentence 1: Identifies the precise subject (and claim)** of the paragraph to come by setting the writer up to **elaborate on one key component of the thesis** (“the use of blue”). Note “the use of blue” seems reasonable to **the scale of a paragraph**.
 - **Topic Sentence 2: Propels the argument with a question that recaps or synthesizes earlier paragraphs** (“Critics may *thus* consider these images profane”); then **complicates or extends** them (“*but* what happens...”).
 - **Topic Sentence 3: Pivots the writer’s argument** (from the elite holding all the power to an exploration of “vertical pressure” as a multidirectional force). Note the pivot (“however”) is sandwiched between reference to earlier paragraphs and to what is yet to come.
 - **Topic Sentence 4: Prepares the reader for change** (from the matter of Madonna’s relationship to Kabbalah to oral traditions of Rabbinic Judaism). In this case, the **signposting** indicates the sequence of the writer’s methodology.

Part Two: Connecting Topic Sentences to a Thesis

1. **Distribute Handout 2, “The Disgrace of Man,”** introducing it as a student’s analysis of George Orwell’s essay “A Hanging.”
 - Explain that Orwell’s short essay is an autobiographical account of witnessing the execution of a criminal in British-occupied Burma.
 - Disclose that contextual information generally found in introductions has been removed in order to highlight the thesis statement, and that the essay’s conclusion has been omitted.
2. **Read the first paragraph aloud and return to the thesis statement on the board.** Ask:
 - *How can we unpack this writer’s thesis statement into stages or components?*
 - *In other words, what claims is the writer making?*
 - *What reasons does the writer provide for these claims?*
 - Elicit understanding that the thesis **analyzes the rhetorical function of Orwell’s figurative language and personification; identifies the subsequent effects on the reader; and complicates this reading by revealing a counterintuitive pattern.**
 - Establish a color code to parse the three key clauses of the two-sentence thesis statement, and ensure that students have done the same with three different highlighters:

Orwell artfully **employs** figurative language and personification to reveal people’s inhumanity to one another, **thereby** prompting the reader’s sympathy and self-examination. Despite his insistence on universal moral responsibility, **however,** Orwell’s depiction of race and nationality nevertheless reflect his own Eurocentric values.

3. **Distribute Handout 3, “Topic Sentences as Links.”**
 - Observe that the complex argument in the thesis statement above requires the writer not only to elaborate on the three mini-claims, but also to relate them to each other.
 - Thus, **effective topic sentences** tend to:
 - (1) **Direct how the paragraph will reflect the thesis** (or a portion thereof) *and*
 - (2) **Bridge, turn against, or otherwise link the paragraph to other paragraphs.**
 - Inform students that Handout 3 will serve as a place to record the group’s findings on how each topic sentence relates to the thesis statement and to paragraphs that precede and follow.
4. **Read each paragraph aloud together, and ask students to identify the topic sentence.**
 - When consensus is reached, ask students to color-code the topic sentence as it corresponds to the thesis statement’s parts, thereby opening discussion of how the topic sentence elaborates and explicates the thesis. (See the **Reference Sheet** for a complete color-coding.)
 - Segue to how each topic sentence relates to other paragraphs, particularly adjacent ones. (This will require recursive discussion that focuses first on an individual graph and then on its neighbors.)
 - As students reflect on each topic sentence, record takeaways on the whiteboard, eliciting observations such as:

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	How does the topic sentence relate to the thesis?	...to other paragraphs?
¶ 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fleshes out how figurative language reveals inhumanity: it casts the prisoner as sub-human 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes first half of comparison completed in ¶2: figurative language dehumanizes the human prisoner, but personification animates his inanimate body parts
¶ 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fleshes out how personification reveals inhumanity: it underscores the prisoner’s vitality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completes comparison begun in ¶1: the “in contrast” signposts the pivot from ¶1
¶ 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explains the significance of the literary devices: they elicit sympathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note that this topic sentence is not the first line, but follows a transition from the close of ¶2 • The “but” prepares the reader for complication in the second half of the essay • The conclusion drawn here becomes the premise of ¶4’s topic sentence
¶ 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before comma: Reaffirms that Orwell prompts sympathy but suggests more is happening • After comma: Asserts precisely the writer’s counter-interpretation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before comma: synthesizes the analysis presented in ¶s 1, 2, and 3

Part Three: Developing Topic Sentences

1. **Ask that students practice evaluating and revising their own topic sentences.**
 - Students who have brought a thesis-driven essay may investigate how their topic sentences expound their essay’s thesis and reveal the relationships between paragraphs.
 - Students with smaller pieces of writing may examine how each topic sentence encapsulates and directs the development of each paragraph.
2. **Wrap up.** Time permitting, share student revisions and discuss suggestions for further refinement.

MODEL TOPIC SENTENCES

1. Although Vermeer's painting *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* depicts an ordinary task, the artist's use of blue reveals that he isn't creating a straightforwardly "realistic" scene.
2. Critics may thus consider these images profane, but what happens when they are actually outlawed?
3. To say that the elite hold all the power, however, would be to claim that this "vertical pressure" is only a unidirectional force.
4. In order to explore how Madonna's attraction to Kabbalah affects her art, an understanding of the oral traditions of Rabbinic Judaism must be acquired first.

“THE DISGRACE OF MAN”

...George Orwell’s essay “A Hanging” graphically depicts the execution of a prisoner, clearly emphasizing the universality of the tragedy. Orwell artfully employs figurative language and personification to reveal people’s inhumanity to one another, thereby prompting the reader’s sympathy and self-examination. Despite his insistence on universal moral responsibility, however, Orwell’s depiction of race and nationality nevertheless reflect his own Eurocentric values.

¶ 1 Orwell uses figurative language (simile and metaphor) to show that the prisoner is treated more like an animal than a human being. The cells of the condemned men, “a row of sheds...quite bare within,” are “like small animal cages” (366). The prisoner’s cry resounds like the “tolling of a bell” rather than a human “prayer or a cry for help” (369); after he is dead, the superintendent pokes at the body with a stick. Orwell thus establishes the lack of human concern for the condemned prisoner.

¶ 2 In contrast, Orwell emphasizes the “wrongness of cutting a life short” (368) by personifying the parts of the prisoner’s body as taking on human behavior. He describes how “the lock of hair danced” on the man’s scalp, how “his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel,” and how all his organs were “toiling away” like a team of laborers. In personifying these bodily features, Orwell forces readers to confront the prisoner’s humanity, to become more aware of the magic of life.

¶ 3 To end that magic is an “unspeakable wrongness” (368). But readers understand this fully because Orwell’s literary devices prompt our sympathy. We pity the prisoner when we contrast him with the animalistic metaphors, and we empathize with him when we see his organs and body parts alive and active. Certainly we are meant to understand the hanging as an injustice.

¶ 4 Nevertheless, while some may argue that Orwell’s literary devices are intended only to invoke readers’ sympathy, he also seems unable to divorce himself from identifying people by their nations and races. Every participant—the European army doctor, the Indian warders, the Eurasian jailer, the Burmese magistrate—is identified by his nationality. Orwell describes watching “brown silent men” (366) and “the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of [him]” (367). The preoccupation with the skin of the prisoner serves to racialize him when no one else receives this treatment. Moreover, the prisoner has “the bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees,” as though he possesses insufficient control over his own body (367). The unnamed prisoner is, after all, just “a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man,” and not a commanding figure of dignity in the face of violence (366)....

Portions of this text adapted from Francis, Susan. “The Disgrace of Man,” Models for Writers. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010. 67-70.

TOPIC SENTENCES AS LINKS

	How does the topic sentence relate to the thesis?	How does the topic sentence relate to other paragraphs?
¶ 1		
¶ 2		
¶ 3		
¶ 4		

REFERENCE SHEET

“THE DISGRACE OF MAN”

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