

INSTRUCTOR: Topic sentences and support. A paragraph is a group of connected sentences. Here is an example.

Most paragraphs focus on a main idea, which is usually stated in a topic sentence. A paragraph's topic sentence tells us what the paragraph is about. You can usually find the topic sentence at the very beginning of a paragraph. In some cases, the main idea is implied rather than written out in a topic sentence. But whether stated or implied, the paragraph's topic sentence tells us the author's main point.

To determine the topic sentence or main idea of a paragraph, start by reading the whole paragraph.

"Nearly all living creatures manage some form of communication. The dance pattern of bees in their hive help to point the way to distant flower fields or announce successful foraging. Male stickleback fish regularly swim upside-down to indicate outrage in a courtship contest. Male deer and lemurs mark territorial ownership by rubbing their own body secretions on boundary stones or trees. Everyone has seen a frightened dog put his tail between his legs and run in panic. We, too, use gestures, expressions, postures, and movement to give our words point."

After reading the whole paragraph, return to the first sentence, where the topic sentence is likely to be, and ask yourself the following questions.

Does the sentence contain the topic of the paragraph? Yes. The topic of the paragraph seems to be the communication of various creatures, which is mentioned in the highlighted sentence. Does the sentence state the most important point about the topic? Yes. The highlighted sentence makes the important point that most creatures communicate.

Is the sentence more general than other sentences in the paragraph? Yes. The communication of creatures is more general than the communication of specific

creatures mentioned in the remaining sentences. Do the other sentences in the paragraph provide more information about the main idea sentence? Yes. The other sentences discuss the ways specific creatures communicate.

We can now feel confident that the first sentence is the topic sentence. In other paragraphs, the topic sentence may be second, or sixth, or even implied. Use the questions to find a stated topic sentence or to find the implied main idea.

Topic sentences and implied main ideas are backed up with supporting details, which can consist of evidence, examples, illustrations, specific instances, and other kinds of information. In the paragraph, the topic sentence is supported by several examples of animal communication. Notice that the topic sentence is the only one that is general enough to be connected to every other statement in the paragraph.

Supporting details usually form the bulk of a piece of writing. In our example paragraph, the five sentences that give examples of different creature behaviors back up the author's main point that most creatures communicate.

Remember, topic sentences state the main idea of the paragraph and they are backed up by supporting details. Readers expect statements to be backed up with proof, and good writers provide that proof.