Topic Sentences

An effective paragraph leaves readers with a clear understanding of one main idea that has been explained in detail. The sentence stating the main idea, the topic sentence, makes an assertion or claim that is supported, defined, or developed in the other sentences of the paragraph. In this way, the topic sentence acts as an umbrella that covers all of the remaining sentences in a paragraph.

Guidelines for Topic Sentences

1. A good topic sentence states an idea that requires explanation. If this sentence states a fact, it should not be overly obvious.

   **Too obvious:**
   
   The Rocky Mountain states are in the western United States.

   *To make it less obvious, try instead to express an attitude about the fact you’re focusing on, and do so in fairly specific words.*

   **Poor:**
   
   The Rocky Mountain states are nice places to live.

   **Better:**
   
   The Rocky Mountain states are among the most livable in the United States.

2. A good topic sentence states an idea that is narrow enough to be discussed in one paragraph.

   Although the “Better” topic sentence we came up with under guideline #1 expresses a clear attitude, which is good, it’s a little too broad. Let’s try to narrow the focus:

   **Poor:**
   
   The Rocky Mountain states are among the most livable in the United States.

   **Better:**
   
   Living in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is very pleasant because of the beautiful environment.

3. A good topic sentence makes an exact statement, not a vague one.

   Although the “Better” topic sentence we came up with under guideline #2 expresses a clear attitude and is narrow enough to fit in one paragraph, it’s still a little vague. Let’s try to get more specific:

   **Poor:**
   
   Living in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is very pleasant because of the beautiful environment.

   **Better:**
   
   Living in Colorado Springs, Colorado, gives citizens the uniquely pleasant opportunity to enjoy Pike’s Peak and the Garden of the Gods.