

Topic Sentences, Signposts, and *Official Style*

In the last few weeks, I've talked about how to use evidence to argue for your thesis and why you should consider counter-arguments. Now we turn to more practical matters, including how to fashion sentences and paragraphs. What makes sentences and paragraphs effective?

For paragraphs, clear topic sentences are crucial. A topic sentence functions in a paragraph much in the way that a thesis statement does for an argument as a whole. It announces the overall point of the paragraph. As you write, and particularly as you rewrite and edit, you should make sure that each paragraph contains an identifiable topic sentence, usually close to its beginning. You do not want your readers to find themselves ensnared in a thicket of detail, wondering where they are.

Elizabeth Abrams, of Harvard's Expository Writing Program, points out that "there's no set formula for writing a topic sentence." Rather, she suggests, "you should work to vary the form your topic sentences take. Repeated too often, any method grows wearisome" (Section 11, "Topic Sentences and Signposting," in the Writing Center handbook entitled "Strategies for Essay Writing"). Abrams goes on to give a useful list of commonly encountered types of topic sentences:

Complex sentences. These are sentences that combine a transition from the previous paragraph (see our next section on "Signposts") with a statement of the main point of the new paragraph.

Questions. Asking a question can be a very effective way of setting up the thrust of a paragraph – just as long as you make sure you answer it.

Bridge sentences (a term Abrams borrows from John Trimble). Abrams points out that "like questions, bridge sentences . . . make an excellent substitute for more formal topic sentences. Bridge sentences indicate both what came before and what comes next (the "bridge" paragraphs) without the formal trappings of multiple clauses." Abrams's example: "But there is a clue to this puzzle."

Pivot sentences. These are more unusual. They come in the middle of a paragraph, indicating that the paragraph will change direction. Such topic sentences are often found in "signpost paragraphs" that themselves serve as a pivot in the larger structure of the argument as a whole. Abrams points out that they are often used to introduce the refutation of counter-evidence ("But what about the following objection?")

If topic sentences indicate where that particular paragraph is going (and where it just was), "signposts" indicate where the whole paper is going, often summing up where it's been in the process. They most often come at turning points in the essay, the moment before you're about to talk about a more subtle similarity between two thinkers or consider a qualification to your argument.

Ex. of a “signpost”: “To sum up, the major weakness of exclusivism is that it implies that adherents of the one true religion are privileged in some way. Yet this claim cannot be fair.”

Both topic sentences and “signposts” orient your readers, prevent them from getting lost. They will be grateful for such aid.

Finally, a brief word about “Official Style.” It names a style that uses wordiness and obfuscation in an effort to sound important (or as a default mode for writers who aren’t yet clear about their ideas). It is often rife in the fine print governing your credit card and in academic prose. You should avoid its siren song: it makes thinking difficult and reading a chore. Official Style is characterized by passive or “to be” (e.g., “is, are, has been”) verbs; Latinate vocabulary (words ending in –tion); and round-about ways of saying things.

Ex. “The fact that all selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process, and are individual reflections of it—or rather of this organized behavior pattern which is exhibits, and which they comprehend in their respective structures—is not in the least incompatible with or destructive of the fact that every individual self has its own peculiar individuality.”¹

How to deal with such an Official Style monster? First try to figure out the core ideas (society dictates behavior, yet we have this idea of a “unique self”); second, find an active verb to replace the lame “is”; finally get rid of all the extra words. Then revise. A revised version of the above could be something like:

The fact that society constitutes the self does mean all selves are the same.

Much easier to read, isn’t it?

¹This example, as well as the term “Official Style,” is taken from Richard Lanham’s book “Revising Prose,” which we refer you to for many more suggestions about how to write clearly. Other material in here is taken from Tom Jehn and Harvard’s Expository Writing website, <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k24101>.