

Topic Sentences

Every paragraph will have a sentence that **signals to the reader the subject of the paragraph** that s/he is about to read. This sentence, often, but not always, the opening sentence, is called the topic sentence. Topic sentences also act as links between the paragraphs of a text and are, therefore, an essential element in the structure of a text. Topic sentences, therefore, play two crucial textual roles: they act as a form of courtesy to the reader, by guiding him/her through the text's content, while creating a solid scaffold to help hold the text together. Readers use topic sentences as signposts and when writing you are advised to think carefully about your topic sentences, because not only do they help create a positive effect on the reader, an effective use of topic sentences will help you, the writer, establish a systematic method to organise what you want to say.

Task: Consider the topic sentences of the following text. Before reading on try to predict what the content of the rest of the paragraph will be. Discuss with a partner how these topic sentences operate and what effect they might have on the reader.

Where the Third World is First

There are plenty of grim statistics about childhood in the Third World, showing that the fight for survival is long and hard. But in the rich world, children can suffer from a different kind of poverty – of the spirit. For instance, one Western country alone now sees 14,000 attempted suicides every year by children under 15, and one child in five needs professional psychiatric help.

There are many good things about childhood in the Third World. Take the close and constant relationships between children and their parents, relatives and neighbours. In the West, the very nature of work puts distance between adults and children. But in the Third World villages mother and father do not go miles away each day to do abstract work in offices, shuffling paper to make money mysteriously appear in banks. Instead, the child sees mother and father, relations and neighbours working together, and often shares in that work. A child growing up in this way learns his or her role through participating in the community's work: helping to dig or build, plant or water, tend to animals or look after babies – rather than through playing with sand and water in kindergarten, collecting for nature trays, building with construction toys, keeping pets, or playing with dolls.

These children may grow up with a less oppressive sense of space and time than their Western counterparts. Set days and times are few and self-explanatory, guided mostly by the rhythms of the seasons and the different jobs they bring. A child in the rich world, on the other hand, is constantly with a wristwatch as one of the earliest signs of growing up, so that he or she can worry along with their parents about being late for school times, meal times, clinic times, bed times, the times of TV shows. Third World children are not usually cooped up indoors, still less in high-rise apartments. Instead of fenced-off play areas, dangerous roads, 'keep off the grass' signs and 'don't speak to strangers', there is often a sense of freedom to move and play. Parents can see their children outside rather than observe them anxiously from ten floors up. And other adults in the community can usually be relied on to be caring rather than indifferent or threatening.

Of course, twelve million children under five still die every year through malnutrition and disease. But childhood in the Third World is not all bad.

(Christian Aid Publication <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>)

There are many exercises available on the web for you to practise working with topic sentences. It is worth investing your time in understanding what is it that makes an effective topic sentence, as the successful use of this fundamental block in paragraph structure will greatly enhance your written work.