Middle Paragraphs: Topic Sentence and Controlling Idea

Explanation:

The writing done by college students is almost entirely exposition: that is, it clarifies or supports a topic. Expository essays (sometimes called “themes” or “impromptu”) usually consist of an introductory paragraph, ending with the thesis sentence for the entire paper; a concluding paragraph; and, between them, two to five middle paragraphs. We are concerned only with these middle paragraphs.

Students are usually advised to begin each middle paragraph with a topic sentence, which not only helps the reader quickly understand the paragraph but also helps the writer know what should and what should not be included in that paragraph.

Often, however, students are unsure to what a good topic sentence is, or how to make it limited and precise enough to function best.

A good topic sentence is one that contains a controlling idea; that is, the idea within the topic sentence as a whole, about which the paragraph is to be written. A controlling idea may be a clause, a phrase, even a single work.

The following is a group of topic sentences in which the controlling idea is underlined:

1. The castle on the hill outside town was haunted. In the paragraph for which this is the topic sentence, the writer can discuss only the castle and only its being haunted. Anything else would be off topic and would cause the paragraph to lack unity.

2. Everyone’s life is full of near misses.

3. Many causes led to the start of the Great Depression of the 1930’s.

4. With all the critical things that had been printed about the candidate’s personal life, his honor was at stake.

5. Any program of providing for the very poor involves great expense.

Exercise I: Underline the controlling idea (clause, phrase, or word) in each of the following topic sentences:

1. For young people, loud music seems to have a special appeal.

2. Tom, who went through the war with me, has proved to be a real friend.
3. A bunsen burner is a simple mechanism.

4. The hostility between the two countries threatens to disturb international peace.

5. Becoming an engineer was Mark’s burning desire.

6. History, it is said, repeats itself.

7. The combination of Na, a dangerous chemical element, with C1, another dangerous element, produces a substance essential to the human body.

8. What is country music?

9. Save me.

10. Save me first.

As stated above, all material included in a paragraph must support the controlling idea or the paragraph will lack unity.

Exercise II: In this paragraph, the controlling idea of the topic sentence has been underlined. Cross out any material in the paragraph that fails to support the controlling idea:

Motorists traveling in states east of the Mississippi River soon realize that certain towns and cities on their itinerary have famous namesakes here at home and abroad. Since the more populous states are in the East, there are more names to choose from. Georgia and Florida have a Milton; Illinois, a Carlyle; New York, a Homer and Ovid; and Pennsylvania, a Seneca. Many students know that Milton was blind when he wrote *Paradise Lost*. Columbus is found in Arkansas, Georgia, and Ohio; De Soto and La Salle Illinois; and Ponce de Leon in Florida. Columbus is found in Arkansas, Georgia, and Ohio; De Soto and La Salle Illinois; and Ponce de Leon in Florida. Even today, the Fountain of Youth, which Ponce de Leon discovered, produces a million gallons of water each hour. Washington appears in eleven states, among which are Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, and Virginia, and of course District of Columbia. Eight states claim Lincoln, including Alabama, Maine, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and Vermont. One might expect to find a Lincoln in Kentucky, since he was born near Hodgenville in a cabin still preserved in a granite memorial there. From prominent ancient cities, Illinois selected Athens, Rome, Sparta, and Troy; New York chose Athens, Babylon, Ithaca, Rome, and Troy. In fact, Troy appears in no less than eight other eastern states: Alabama, Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Texans may have been motivated by a sequential optimism when they named six of their communities Earth, Eden, Tranquility, Happy, Blessing, and Paradise, to say nothing of Road Rail Flat, Scenic Loop Playground, and Twenty-nine palms.
Answers to Exercises:

Exercise I:

1. For young people, loud music seems to have a special appeal.

2. Tom, who went through the war with me, has proved to be a real friend.

3. A bunsen burner is a simple mechanism.

4. The hostility between the two countries threatens to disturb international peace.

5. Becoming an engineer was Mark’s burning desire.

6. History, it is said, repeats itself.

7. The combination of Na, a dangerous chemical element, with C1, another dangerous element, produces a substance essential to the human body.

8. What is country music?

9. Save me. (Either word)

10. Save me first.

Exercise II:

The following ideas do not support the controlling idea of “famous namesakes”:

- The reference to Arkansas and Texas because the topic sentence limits the discussion to states east of the Mississippi River.

- The irrelevant reference to Milton’s blindness, the Fountain of Youth (and how much water it produces), and the Lincoln Memorial in Hodgenville, Kentucky—none of these support the controlling idea.

- The examples of Texas place names, which are irrelevant because (with the possible exception of Earth and Eden) the towns mentioned do not have namesakes here or abroad.

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states are in the East, there are more names to choose from. Georgia and Florida have a Milton; Illinois, a Carlyle; New York, a Homer and Ovid; and Pennsylvania, a Seneca. Many students know that Milton was blind when he wrote *Paradise Lost*. Columbus is found in Arkansas, Georgia, and Ohio; De Soto and La Salle Illinois; and Ponce de Leon in Florida. Columbus is found in Arkansas, Georgia, and Ohio; De Soto and La Salle Illinois; and Ponce de Leon in Florida. Even today, the Fountain of Youth, which Ponce de Leon discovered, produces a million gallons of water each hour. Washington appears in eleven states, among which are Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, and Virginia, and of course District of Columbia. Eight states claim Lincoln, including Alabama, Maine, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and Vermont. One might expect to find a Lincoln in Kentucky, since he was born near Hodgenville in a cabin still preserved in a granite memorial there. From prominent ancient cities, Illinois selected Athens, Rome, Sparta, and Troy; New York chose Athens, Babylon, Ithaca, Rome, and Troy. In fact, Troy appears in no less than eight other eastern states: Alabama, Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Texans may have been motivated by a sequential optimism when they named six of their communities Earth, Eden, Tranquility, Happy, Blessing, and Paradise, to say nothing of Road Rail Flat, Scenic Loop Playground, and Twenty-nine palms.