

**LOCATING THE TOPIC SENTENCE AND THE TOPIC NOUN  
-MIDDLE LEVEL-**

(Also see Advanced Level, B2.2)

In order to understand a paragraph, whether easy or hard, a reader must be able to identify the topic sentence and the topic noun. In an easy paragraph the reader can immediately identify the topic sentence and topic noun with little or no conscious effort. In a difficult paragraph, however, a reader may have to analyze the paragraph for its topic sentence and topic noun to ensure understanding.

Below is an easy paragraph. Notice how easily the topic sentence may be identified:

Crabs may have either a soft shell or a hard shell. The soft shell crabs are those that shed their shells now and then. Their skins do not shed for three or four years. Their shells become very hard.

Notice that the first sentence states a general idea announcing the significance of the details which follow:

Crabs may have either a hard shell or a soft shell.

Thus, if the paragraph is well-written, the rest of it should add further information or details about the hardness or softness of crab shells.

The soft shell crabs are those that shed their shells now and then. Their skins do not have a chance to become hard. As they grow older, some do not shed for three or four years. Their shells become very hard.

As result, the reader understands quite readily that the main idea is that crabs may have either a soft or hard shell. The reader can also identify “Crabs may either a soft shell or a hard shell” as the topic sentence and “crabs’ shells” as the topic noun.

Analyze the following more difficult paragraph by underlining the topic sentence and circling the topic noun. Write the topic in the space provided. Also circle all references to the topic noun that appear throughout the paragraph to prove that your choice is indeed the topic noun.

Some of the most profound changes wrought by the computer will be in education. Here, the machine will do more than assist students to solve problems and to locate up-to-date information: It will fundamentally improve and enrich the entire learning process. The Student's educational experience will be analyzed by the computer from the primary grades through university. Computer-based teaching machines, programmed and operated by teachers thoroughly trained in electronic data processing techniques, will instruct students at the rate best suited to each individual. The concept of mass education will give way to the concept of personal tutoring, with the teacher and the computer working as a team. Computers will bring many new learning dimensions to the classroom. For example, they will simulate nuclear reactors and other complex or remote systems, enabling students to learn through a form of experience that could formerly be taught only in theory.

Topic Noun: \_\_\_\_\_

You should have put the parentheses around the first sentence and you should have identified the topic noun as "computers," or "computers and education," or "computers and change in education."

If you had trouble identifying the topic sentence and topic noun, use the question and answer formula below:

Q: What is the paragraph about?

A: Computers

Q: What does the paragraph say about computers?

A: Computers will cause changes in education.

Q: What proof is there that the paragraph is discussing computers and change in education?

A: The key words of the paragraph, or topic noun, are referred to throughout the paragraph. The following chart illustrates this repetition:

Reference to:

Key term or topic noun:	Computers	Change	Education
Reference in paragraph:	Machine	Do more than	Assist students
	It	Improve	Learning process
	Computer	Will be analyzed	Educational experience
	Computer based		Teaching machine
	Computer (and teacher)	Will instruct	Personal tutoring
	Computers	Will bring	Learning dimensions

If you had trouble with the last example, try the formula to help you find the topic sentence and topic noun in the following paragraph. Underline the topic sentence and write the topic noun in the space following the paragraph.

Birds are not the only creatures that migrate to warmer climates for the winter. The American monarch butterfly migrates south to Mexico in the autumn, and returns northward in the spring. These butterflies have also flown vast distances across the Pacific Ocean to form colonies in Hawaii and Australia. Some monarch butterflies have flown even farther, eventually landing in Africa and Europe. Other moths and butterflies are known to travel over long distances, but only the monarch makes an annual round-trip.

Topic Noun \_\_\_\_\_

You should have identified the second sentence as the topic sentence and monarch butterfly as the topic noun.

Now try one more example: Underline the topic sentence and write the topic noun in the space following the paragraph.

Paper has a long history. Though there are many kinds of paper used all over the world today, for hundreds of years the knowledge of papermaking was restricted to a small part of the globe. The ancient Egyptians invented a type of paper from papyrus (reed) stalks, but paper similar to what is used today wasn't invented until A.D. 05, in China. There, the emperor's minister of public works, Ts'ai Lun, discovered a process for making paper from the inner bark of the mulberry tree. The Chinese later discovered that a quality paper could be made by pounding rags or hemp. Finally, in A.D. 751 the Arabs acquired the secrets of papermaking from some Chinese whom they had captured in battle. The Europeans were the last to use paper, finally obtaining it from the Arabs in Spain during the Crusades. The modern method of making paper from wood pulp was invented during the 1800s, and in terms of history, that invention is relatively new.

Topic Noun \_\_\_\_\_

You should have underlined "Paper has a long history." and written "paper's history" or "the history" or the "the history of paper" as the topic noun.

## EXERCISE

Underline the topic sentence in each of the following paragraphs. Write the topic noun in the space following the paragraph.

1. On the morning of March 11, 1932, two men huddled in a pasture on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. Through the mist they could see the outline of a bird. It uttered its call. The bird paused as if waiting for a reply. For many, many years, the sandy flats of Martha's Vineyard had echoed and reechoed with the hollow mating call. Now there was no answer. The bird flew upward through the mist and was not seen again. On the fateful morning, the two men were the last to see and hear what once had been among America's most numerous birds—the heath hen.

Topic Noun \_\_\_\_\_

2. The boomerang, one of the deadliest and oldest of weapons, is also a fascinating plaything in the hands of an expert. The curved throwing stick used by the people of Australia for war and for hunting can be hurled so as to turn in the air and come back almost to the place of launching. Some experts hurl a boomerang the length of a football field before it starts coming back at the speed of fifty miles per hour. It is only fitting that the boomerang with its curved arms looks like the swept-back wings of a jet aircraft.

Topic Noun \_\_\_\_\_

3. For hundreds of years it was believed that air was a single substance. But it is now known that air is a mixture of several gases. Two common gases, nitrogen and oxygen, make up about 99% of the total volume of the air. About 78% of the air consists of nitrogen, and nearly 21% is oxygen. The remainder consists of very small quantities of carbon dioxide, hydrogen, and ozone, and of the rare gases neon, krypton, and xenon. Besides these gases, air contains water vapor and many small particles of solid matter. The particles most commonly found in the air are salt from the sea, dust from the earth, microbes, and the pollen grains and spores produced by plants.

Topic Noun \_\_\_\_\_

4. The boar's head was a favorite food at Christmas Day banquets in England of the Middle Ages. Out of the kitchen it would come—a great holly-decorated head of a hog with an apple in its mouth, gorgeously ornamented and smoking. Held aloft on a silver platter, the boar's head was illuminated by the glow of many candles and torches, and provided a sight sufficient to set many mouths watering. Other platters would follow with every conceivable eatable—but it was the boar's head that marked the high point of a Christmas celebration and a certain sign that a magnificent banquet had begun in Merry Old England.

Topic Noun \_\_\_\_\_

5. In 1866 Horatio Alger became a social worker in New York. He devoted much of his time to the Newsboys Lodging House. His association with penniless struggling boys gave him the background and inspiration for the books that were to make him one of the most popular writers America has ever produced. It also gave him the “rags to riches” theme for such series as Ragged Dick, Luck and Pluck, and Tattered Tom. Horatio Alger achieved the success and wealth that the hard working heroes of his books did. He died poor, however, since he gave most of his money to charity.

Topic Noun\_\_\_\_\_

6. In 1085, William the Conqueror ordered a census of England. This was the first official record of property owners living in England and the amount of land and goods they owned. This survey, written in Latin and completed in 1086, consists of two volumes. Originally it was called the “Book of Winchester,” after the cathedral city where the manuscripts were kept. Later, this record was referred to as the Domesday (or Domesday) Book, meaning a day of judgment or reckoning. As historical document and unique storehouse of information, the Domesday Book is unsurpassed in the history of medieval Europe.

Topic Noun\_\_\_\_\_

7. Columbus once saved his life because he knew from scientific facts in his almanac just when there was going to be an eclipse of the moon. He was marooned on the island of Jamaica for many weeks in the year 1504. The natives were unfriendly and refused to give him any food. Columbus warned them that if they did not feed him, he would turn off the light in the sky at night. His almanac had told him that on the night of February 29<sup>th</sup>, there would be a total eclipse of the moon. But the poor Indians didn’t have any books to give them this information. So when the eclipse did not occur they were terrified. They gave Columbus all the food he needed and begged him, in return, to give them back the light.

Topic Noun\_\_\_\_\_

8. Criminals were once considered sinners who chose to offend against the laws of God and man. They were severely punished for their crimes. Modern criminologists regard society itself as in large part responsible for the crimes committed against it. Poverty, poor living conditions, and inadequate education are all causes of crime. Crime is fundamentally the result of society’s failure to provide a decent life for all the people. It is especially common in times when values are changing, as after a war, or in countries where people with different backgrounds and values are thrown together, as in the United States. Crimes, generally speaking, are fewer in countries where there is a settled way of life and traditional respect for law.

Topic Noun\_\_\_\_\_

9. In the western part of our country where the Plains Indians lived, a little mouse called the “bean mouse” became a guide to rich stores of delicious and nourishing but difficult to find food. Each season, the little animal would industriously search out the rare beans, and cache them away in its nest. The Indians learned of this and found out the hiding place. They collected most of the beans for themselves. When the mouse returned to its home and found only a few of the tasty beans left, it set to work, harder than ever, gathering more beans. This was a fine thing for the Indian, who had only to look for the nest, while the mouse had to look for the bean. But the Indian returned the favor by always making sure that the animal had enough for the winter.

Topic Noun\_\_\_\_\_

10. During past ice ages, the earth was much colder than it is today and a great deal of the earth’s water supply rested in the form of ice on the polar regions. As consequence, the level of water in the oceans was considerably lower than at present. In addition, many mountains in such places as Greenland and Norway produced great valley glaciers which cut deep gouges in the mountainside in their descent to the sea. After thousands of years, such glacial valleys had steep cliff-like walls produced by the scouring action of their glaciers. When warmer times came, the poplar ice began to melt and the ocean levels began to rise. In addition, the glaciers became much shorter and no longer reached the lower levels of the mountain. As a result, many of the glacial valleys were flooded by the advancing sea. These partly-flooded glacial valleys along seacoasts are called fiords. They usually extend well inland, providing deep water for the navigation of large ships. The steep cliffs along the shorelines provide a natural condition for the formation of many waterfalls, giving fiords a reputation as the most spectacular form of coastal scenery.

Topic Noun\_\_\_\_\_

## ANSWER KEY

1.	T.N.	The last heath hen
	T.S.	On that fateful morning, the two men were the last to see and hear what once had been among America's most numerous birds—the heath hen.
2.	T.N.	boomerang
	T.S.	The boomerang, one of the deadliest and oldest of weapons, is also fascinating plaything in the hands of an expert
3.	T.N.	The make-up of air
	T.S.	But it is now known that air is a mixture of several gases.
4.	T.N.	The boar's head
	T.S.	The boar's head was a favorite food at Christmas Day banquets in England of the Middle Ages.
5.	T.N.	Horatio Alger's success
	T.S.	Horatio Alger achieved the success and wealth that the hard working heroes of his books did.
6.	T.N.	Domesday book
	T.S.	As a historical document and unique storehouse of information, the Domesday Book is unsurpassed in the history of medieval Europe.
7.	T.N.	Columbus' knowledge of science.
	T.S.	Columbus once saved his life because he knew from scientific facts in his almanac just when there was going to be a eclipse of the moon.
8.	T.N.	Crime
	T.S.	Modern criminologists regard society itself as in large part responsible for the crimes committed against it.
9.	T.N.	How the Indians used the bean mouse.
	T.S.	In the western part of our country where the Plains Indians lived, a little mouse called the "bean mouse" became a guide to rich stores of delicious and nourishing but difficult to find food.
10.	T.N.	Formation of fiords
	T.S.	These partly-flooded glacial valleys along seacoasts are call fiords.