The Topic Sentence Revisited

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Historically considered, the concept of the topic sentence seems to be related to the concept of the *topoi* in classical rhetoric—in the sense of a *topos* or topic as *subject matter* treated in a speech or a portion of a discourse, as a *method of reasoning* about a subject, and as a *place* or *heading* from which arguments are drawn. All of these senses of the word seem to have been maintained in the kind of advice given by 19th-century textbook writers about methods of constructing paragraphs. In order to construct a paragraph, the advice goes, the writer should embody the main idea of the paragraph (its *subject*) in a topic sentence. Then, drawing upon a list of commonplace *methods of reasoning* about the subject (in the form of *headings,* such as comparison, contrast, and cause and effect, that label *relationships*), the writer should develop the central idea contained in the topic sentence into a unified and coherent paragraph.

This connection between the topic sentence and the classical *topoi* is eminently suggestive, but however interesting it may be, the fact is that as an independent concept the topic sentence did not begin to emerge until the mid-19th century. It first appeared in Alexander Bain's discussion of the paragraph in 1866, and it attained fuller development in the late 19th and early 20th century. But the 19th-century conception of the topic sentence has come under considerable attack in recent years because of its deductive origins and because one kind of research has revealed that many contemporary professional writers do not use topic sentences in their writing. I would like to argue, however, that in some kinds of writing the topic sentence can be a valuable rhetorical strategy because it can help writers to organize their ideas and it can help readers to follow the logical development of the writer's ideas. As a means of developing my argument, I would like to look briefly at the origin and development of the concept of the topic sentence, consider the criticisms that have been made of the topic sentence in the 20th century, and then, drawing upon readability research that discusses the topic sentence and schema theory, argue that this kind of research supports the value of using topic sentences in expository prose.

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Origin and Development of the Concept of the Topic Sentence

In his text *English Composition and Rhetoric,* Alexander Bain does not use the term *topic sentence* to refer to the sentence within the paragraph that states the main idea. Bain conceives of a paragraph as "a collection of sentences with unity of purpose" (108) which "handles and exhausts a distinct topic" (108). But in his discussion of the principles that govern the construction of the paragraph, he presents the reader with a concept very much like that of the traditional topic sentence: "The opening sentence," he writes, "unless so constructed as to be obviously preparatory, is expected to indicate with prominence the subject of the Paragraph" (116).

Like Alexander Bain, A. D. Hepburn does not use the term *topic sentence* to refer to the sentence that states the main idea in a paragraph. Since Hepburn considers "the general laws governing the construction of a paragraph" to be "the same as those governing the composition of an entire discourse" (147), he uses the word *theme* to refer to the main idea. (Although Hepburn uses the word *theme* in his discussion of the paragraph, he means by it what later writers call the *topic sentence.*) Hepburn seems to have been the first rhetorician to discuss the placement of the topic sentence in the paragraph. Although he concedes that the topic sentence is not always stated explicitly in the paragraph, he maintains that it may be stated in a brief sentence near the beginning of the paragraph or withheld until the end of the paragraph. It may also be stated at the beginning and repeated at the end for emphasis (153). In addition to Hepburn, there were a number of 19th-century rhetoricians who discussed the placement of the topic sentence in the paragraph, calling it by that term. These include David Hill (73), Albert Raub (181), John F. Genung (196, 197), and Sarah Lockwood and Mary Emerson (240-243).

John McElroy seems to have been the first rhetorician to "label" the main idea of the paragraph the *topic sentence.* In his text *The Structure of English Prose,* McElroy writes: "Unity requires that every statement in the paragraph be subservient to one *principal* affirmation. This principal affirmation is, of course, the topic-sentence, which sets forth the subject of the paragraph" (216).

More often than not, the discussion of the topic sentence emerges from a discussion of paragraph *unity*. For example, in her discussion of the paragraph, Virginia Waddy gives this kind of advice to the composer of paragraphs:

> In order that a paragraph shall possess the quality of unity, it is requisite that the sentence composing it shall relate, each and all, to the one definite division of the subject which they illustrate and explain. A paragraph should have but a single theme—*one central thought,*—and all digressions from this principal thought should be excluded. No sentence has any right to a position in connection with others, unless it is closely related to the preceding sentence or to the one following (256).

Barrett Wendell is more direct: "A paragraph has unity when you can state its substance in a single sentence; otherwise it is very apt to lack it" (124).

In almost all of the early discussions of the paragraph in 19th-century textbooks, the term *topic sentence* is seldom used. Some textbook writers refer to it as the *theme* of the paragraph; others, as the *main thought;* still others, as the *main sentence.* The term *topic sentence* does not begin to appear with any frequency until the end of the century. Fred Newton Scott and Joseph Villiers Denney, in their text *Paragraph Writing: A Rhetoric for Colleges,* devote several pages to a discussion of the topic sentence and to its position in the paragraph. However, they use the term *topic-statement* to refer to the sentence that announces the main idea of the paragraph (28-34). In his text *Composition and Rhetoric,* William Williams uses the term almost incidentally: "Sometimes one or more sentences at the beginning of a paragraph are intended to connect it with the one that precedes, or to prepare the way for the topic sentence" (146). Finally, in their composition textbook, Sara E. H. Lockwood and Mary Alice Emerson not only give a full presentation of the topic sentence, but they also italicize the term to give it its proper importance:

> Since every paragraph is the development of a single topic, it must have a clearly defined central idea upon which every one of its sentences directly bears. This central idea is usually expressed definitely in one of the sentences of the paragraph, called the *topic-sentence* (240).

From 1902 until the mid-20th century, the treatment of the topic sentence in composition textbooks seems to be merely a repetition of the theoretical ideas articulated in the middle and late 19th century.

Criticisms of the Topic Sentence

In the mid-20th century, however, some textbook writers and scholars began to question not only the efficacy of the topic sentence, but even its existence. For example, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren maintained:

> It is frequently said that every paragraph contains a topic sentence, stated or *implied.* A more accurate statement, however, is that some paragraphs have topic sentences and that others do not; for an "implied" topic sentence is one which the reader must construct for himself as a way of summarizing the paragraph in question. Obviously any piece of composition possessing even a minimum of unity may be summed up in some kind of sentence. The "implied" topic sentence, therefore, is an abstraction—a not very useful kind of ghost sentence (220).

Harold C. Martin and Richard M. Ohmann put the matter more forcefully:

> The topic sentence (or thesis statement, as it is sometimes called) is a more or less fictitious entity. It does sometimes make an appearance in so many words, of course, but fully as often it is not something written but what is meant by what has been written. That is, the topic sentence is something a reader extracts from a paragraph and something a writer has in mind as the unity he wants to achieve. The schoolboy notion of a topic sentence as the big firecracker, from which a string of little firecrackers is ignited, has little relationship to the truth (207).

Leo Rockas not only rejected the concept of the topic sentence, but the concept of the paragraph itself. "There is no basic unit larger than the sentence," he argued:

> The paragraph is an arbitrary and conventional unit, susceptible of extensive editorial tampering. Indeed, in recording conversations, the paragraph has not even a conventional status. There the unit is the "line"—not the poetic or typographical line, but "those chunks of talk that are marked off by a shift of speaker." The paragraph is no more bounded than this "line" or "utterance unit," and includes, according to the whim of author or editor, one to any number of sentences. . . . the paragraph is simply a convenient grouping of sentences. In a progression of sentences a few places will be more suited to indentations than others, but you can justify an indentation before almost any sentence of sophisticated prose (6).

One of the earliest scholarly articles to criticize the deductive origins of 19th-century paragraph theory was Paul Rodgers' essay "Alexander Bain and the Rise of the Organic Paragraph." After briefly tracing the development of a paragraph theory, Rodgers complained:

> At this point the modern paragraph fully emerges: an organic structure distinguished by the qualities of unity, coherence, emphasis; devoted to the amplification and enforcement of the single idea announced in its topic sentence; composed of sentences organically conceived; and itself participating in the larger organic structure of the discourse. Bain's "collection of sentences with unity of purpose" may seem a far cry from the foregoing prescription, but his influence and ultimate responsibility for its formulation is clear—as, too, is his responsibility for placing 20th century paragraph rhetoric in a deductive cage, from which it has yet to extricate itself (408).

One of the most severe critics of the concept of the topic sentence was Virginia Burke. In her article "The Paragraph: Dancer in Chains," after briefly reviewing recent theories of paragraph theory, she concluded: "Where are we, then, in our understanding of the paragraph? Not much further than our colleagues were seventy years ago" (42). Then she continued:

> Our problem is dramatized, I think in our confusions over the term *topic sentence*. To some, *topic sentence* is synonymous with *thesis sentence*, a term too narrow and demanding to dominate practice; indeed, it does not dominate practice outside the classroom. To others, *topic sentence* is widely inclusive, ranging from those sentences which express the major idea of the paragraph to those sentences which merely signal some sort of change. This is stretching the familiar meaning of *topic* quite a bit it seems. To still others, *topic sentence* means "top" sentence, which, in turn, may have no other meaning than "first"—the first sentence in the paragraph—or may mean "topic sentence" expressing the main idea. Aware of these ambiguities, we have added a few more terms: *introductory* and *transitional*. . . . At the end of a paragraph which, before we took it out of context, was probably related to a larger field of meaning, we struggle to find a concluding sentence and grieve when it is not there. Many paragraphs do not conclude much of any thing. But we want them to (42).

In his essay "A Generative Rhetoric or the Paragraph," Francis Christensen was equally severe in his criticism of the traditional concept of the topic sentence:

> The chapters on the paragraph in our textbooks are so nearly alike in conception that one could almost say that, apart from the examples, the only striking difference is in the choice of . . . *indention.* The prescription is always the same: the writer should work out a topic sentence and then choose one of the so-called methods of paragraph development to substantiate it. The topic sentence may appear at the beginning or at the end of the paragraph or anywhere in between, or it may be merely "implied," a sort of ectoplasmic ghost hovering over the paragraph (54).

Finally, Richard Braddock's often-cited study "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose" seemed to put the proverbial nail in the coffin of the concept of the topic sentence. After examining a number of expository paragraphs in a sampling of contemporary professional writers, Braddock discovered that fewer than half of the paragraphs had explicit topic sentences, that only 13% began with a topic sentence, and that only 3% ended with a topic sentence (299-301). However, what many teachers of composition have overlooked was Braddock's surprising conclusion:

> This sample of contemporary professional writing . . . does not at all mean that composition teachers should stop showing their students how to develop paragraphs from clear topic sentences. Far from it. In my opinion, often the writing in the 25 essays would have been clearer and more comfortable to read if the paragraphs had presented more explicit topic sentences. But what this study does suggest is this: While helping students use clear topic sentences in their writing and identify variously presented topical ideas in their reading, the teacher should not pretend that professional writers largely follow the practices he is advocating (301).

Readability Research on the Topic Sentence

Braddock's study appeared in the winter of 1974, just when reading research was beginning to support the value of using topic sentences in expository prose. (To readability researchers, the topic sentence is the sentence within the paragraph that states the main idea.) For example, in their study "Effects of a Superordinate Context on Learning and Retention of Facts," Robert Gagne and Virginia Wiegand report that topic sentences can influence the way a reader will process the sentences that follow in a paragraph. The topic sentence not only acts as an advance organizer of the ideas in a paragraph, but it also helps the reader to remember the content of the paragraph (409).

In his article "Perceiving the Structure of Written Materials," James Coomber argues that readers who read each paragraph in an essay, sentence by sentence, without regard for the main idea of that paragraph or some larger structural pattern, may recall details, but miss the main ideas that the para-

graphs are trying to convey. His study investigated the ability of college students to perceive main ideas in paragraphs (264-265). And in his study of the reading comprehension of sixth grade students, Mark Aulls discloses that the students who read paragraphs containing topic sentences obtained higher recall scores than those who read paragraphs that contained no topic sentences (391).

In two separate studies investigating the location of topic sentences in paragraphs, John Richards (599) and Paul Clements (8-9) report that readers remember more of what they read when topic sentences are placed first in the paragraph. They reasoned that topic sentences prepare the memories of readers to receive the subsequent ideas. In her study of the reading comprehension of college students, Ann Fishman reaches a similar conclusion. When topic sentences are placed in the initial position in paragraphs, they simplify the mental operations of the reader because the reader knows in advance the content of the paragraphs (159-169).

In a series of articles dealing with his research on reading comprehension, David Kieras argues for the importance of global coherence in constructing paragraphs and longer stretches of discourse. Good paragraphs, according to Kieras, contain topic sentences in initial position in the paragraph, followed by connected, coherent sentences. Good essays contain both global topics that help to organize the entire discourse and paragraph topics that help to organize the individual paragraphs. Bad paragraph construction results in longer reading time, lower recall of the content of passages, and an inability to grasp the main ideas in paragraphs and other units. If, in constructing a text, a writer does not present readers with topic sentences or some other form of topical propositional structure, then they must engage in the time-consuming process of making inferences and constructing topical propositions of their own.

Readability Research and Schema Theory

Readability research, then, shows the value of topic sentences in organizing paragraphs; research in schema theory demonstrates the importance of verbal schemata and macropropositions in organizing complete texts. According to this theory, a schema is a mental representation of concepts stored in memory. A verbal schema is a network of propositions that is abstract and general and that is stored in long-term memory. These schemata influence the way we perceive and remember things. To schema theorists, reading comprehension requires skill in following the organization of a passage. Understanding the content of a passage will be more complete if the reader has a general idea of the author's intention. One of the most important ways of signaling that intention is by supplying the reader with an appropriate frame of reference so that new information can be related to information the reader already possesses. Cognitive psychologists call the kind of organizational framework on which the content of a passage is built a *macrostructure.*

A *macrostructure* is an organizational pattern consisting of the most abstract and general sentences in a discourse. These sentences are called *macropropositions*. Macropropositions resemble topic sentences in many respects. Like topic sentences, they express main ideas. Like topic sentences, they divide a discourse into meaningful units. Like topic sentences, they can be directly expressed in a discourse, or they can be inferred from the semantic content of a passage. Unlike topic sentences, however, they more frequently organize chunks or sections of a discourse, rather than individual paragraphs. Macropropositions are usually higher-level propositions than topic sentences, but in a specific context, a macroproposition and a topic sentence may be one and the same thing. (These are relative rather than absolute distinctions, of course. If a topic sentence helps to organize not only the specific paragraph in which it has been placed, but also the paragraphs that follow, then it serves as a macroproposition in that particular discourse.) If a writer does not use a macrostructure to organize a text or uses an organizational pattern that is not easily identifiable, or is inefficient, then the reader must impose a pattern on the text. The result may be a longer reading time, difficulty in understanding the text, and poorer retention of the text content.

Many of the early studies that deal with macrostructures and text comprehension have to do with summarizing stories. However, the studies conducted by Bonnie Meyer and her associates focus almost exclusively on expository prose. In these studies, Meyer and her associates argue for the use of macropropositions as a means of clearly signaling the author's intention. These macropropositions function in a discourse much as topic sentences do. Not only do they divide a piece of writing into meaningful units, but they also summarize the main ideas of these units.

In one study, Meyer and her co-researchers gave 102 ninth grade students passages of expository prose to read. One passage was organized by comparison and contrast; the other, by means of problem and solution. Further, one version of each text had a clearly defined organizational pattern in the form of a global macrostructure appropriately signaled to the reader. This macrostructure consisted of a sequence of macropropositions which, like the topic sentences they resemble, summarized the main ideas of the paragraph or paragraphs that followed. The other version did not have a clearly defined organizational plan, nor did it contain topic sentences or macropropositions (82-96).

The students participating in this study were divided into groups of good, average, and poor readers on the basis of reading achievement tests. After reading one version of each passage, they were asked to write down all they could remember in their own words. In addition, they took a recognition test consisting of sentences taken directly from the text, paraphrases of such sentences, inferences, and statements completely unrelated to the text. Students who tested high in reading comprehension tended to use *top-level sentences* and global structures similar to those used by the author of the passage to organize their own recall protocols. Students with low reading comprehension skills did

not. Students who used the top-level structure of the text recalled more information than those who did not. These top level structures, like the topic sentences in the Gagne and Wiegand study, acted as advance organizers of the ideas in the subsequent paragraphs and helped the students to remember the content of the passages read (82-96).

In a related study, Brendan Bartlett gave ninth-grade students two passages of expository text to read and to recall. One passage was organized by means of comparison and contrast. The other had an attributive (description) organizational pattern. In this study, one group of students *was taught* to identify comparison and contrast and attributive top-level structures and to use them to organize their recalls. A second group was not given formal instruction in the use of these patterns. The result was that students who were given formal instruction in the use of top-level structures recalled more than students who were not. Further, after a delay period of three weeks, the students given formal instruction could still use the strategies they had learned and could recall more of the text than students who were not given formal instruction (42-53, 128-129). As in the study by Meyer and her associates, in this study the top-level sentences enabled students to remember more of what they read and to organize their recalls more effectively.

Harriet Salatas Waters, in a more recent study, asked 48 college students to read and then to recall short passages of description. In addition, they had to rank the sentences on the basis of their relative importance in the text. Half of the students rated the macropropositions the most important. One-fourth saw no relationship between rank and importance. However, according to Waters, all of the students recalled the macropropositions (those sentences which summarized the main ideas of single paragraphs or a sequence of paragraphs) better than they could recall the subordinate sentences (294-299).

Finally, in a study conducted by Raymond Guindon and Walter Kintsch, subjects were asked to read paragraphs which contained macropropositions that summarized text content. They were then given a word recognition test consisting of pairs of words, two from the macropropositions (the topic-sentence-like summarizing statements) and two from the micropropositions (the sentences that supplied the supporting details). Subjects remembered more words from the macropropositions than from the micropropositions. Further, their responses to the words taken from the macropropositions were faster and more correct than were their responses to word pairs taken from subordinate statements (508). In sum, all of these studies support the value of what is conventionally called the *topic sentence.*

Implications for the Teaching of Writing

What, then, does this survey reveal about the usefulness of the topic sentence in the teaching of writing? Readability research demonstrates that if writers use topic sentences or macropropositions to divide a text into meaningful units and to summarize the main ideas in the paragraphs that follow, then their

readers will recall more of what they have read and will read more efficiently (i.e., read faster) than they would if writers presented the same information in a less organized or random fashion. In brief, topic sentences and macropropositions can help writers to organize their ideas more effectively and readers to follow the logical development of the writer's thoughts.

If we base the teaching of writing on the way people actually write (i.e., on rhetorical performance), then the topic sentence will be of limited use in the teaching of writing, since many professional writers do not use topic sentences. But if we base our teaching on what people can accomplish with language (i.e. on rhetorical competence), as it seems to me 19th-century composition theorists did, then the topic sentence can be a useful resource that writers can turn to if the need arises. What human beings can accomplish through language is not circumscribed by their previous performances. Although these performances may constitute the history of their use of that ability, they do *not* establish its limits.

I am not suggesting that we should tell students that every paragraph *must* have a topic sentence or that all topic sentences *should* be placed in the initial position in paragraphs. What I am suggesting, however, is that if the occasion, audience, intention, and kind of discourse warrant it (as, for example, in some kinds of expository writing whose aim is to give clear directions or advice for a general audience), then students might profitably use topic sentences or macropropositions or some other form of explicit representation of global structure to organize their writing. Since composition characteristically deals with the discovery of the available means of exposition and persuasion, it makes little sense not to teach the available means simply because some writers don't choose to avail themselves of those means.

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(Notes to "Paragraphing for the Reader," continued from page 430)

6. Frank Koen, Alton Becker, and Richard Young, "The Psychological Reality of the Paragraph, Part I," *Studies in Language and Language Behavior*, 4 (February, 1967), Univ. of Michigan; rpt. in *Technical Communication: Selected Publications by the Faculty*, Department of the Humanities, College of Engineering, University of Michigan, 1977. This article is not listed in the *Style* bibliography of the paragraph cited in note 3.

7. Paul C. Rodgers, "A Discourse-centered Rhetoric of the Paragraph," *College Composition and Communication*, 17 (February, 1966), 2-11; "The Stadium of Discourse," *CCC*, 18 (October, 1967), 178-85.

8. Joseph Williams offers a related critique of Christensen's model in "Nuclear Structures of Discourse," in *Selected Papers from the 1981 Texas Writing Research Conference*, ed. Maxine C. Hairston and Cynthia L. Selfe (Austin: Texas Writing Research Group, 1981), pp. 165-89.

9. The normal psycholinguistic pattern of a sentence follows a "given-new" progression. It is well described by H. H. Clark and Susan E. Haviland in "Psychological Processes as Linguistic Explanation," in D. Cohen, ed., *Explaining Linguistic Phenomena* (Washington, DC: Hemisphere, 1974), pp. 105-6. M. A. K. Halliday has also explored the consequences of the given-new pattern in several articles, e.g., "Language Structure and Language Function," in J. Lyons, ed., *New Horizons in Linguistics* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 161-65.

10. Computerized word-processing makes it easier for writers to experiment with alternate paragraphing strategies because the results are immediately visible. This article, for example, was initially prepared on WYLBUR, UCLA's computer editing system. We were able to try the effect of indenting and rearranging repeatedly, examining the results on the screen and erasing versions we thought ineffective.

11. The minor sentence (a concept which should liberate students from "frag.") was identified and described by Charles R. Kline and Dean Memering in "Formal Fragments: The English Minor Sentence," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 11 (Fall, 1977), 97-109.