Writing Rubric Support Resources *for Teachers*

Many teachers have asked for a "crash course" in writing mechanics because of the criteria in the Strategic Thinking and Reasoning Writing Rubrics. There are many resources included in this document for teachers to use as a need presents itself.

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Topic Sentence & Supporting Details

NEED TO KNOW

Important Terms

Paragraph: a group of sentences that focus on a single idea
Topic: the one thing a paragraph is about
Main idea: the point the paragraph makes about a topic
Topic sentence: the sentence that states the paragraph's main idea
Supporting details: those sentences that explain the topic sentence

What Is a Paragraph?

■ GOAL 1
Structure a paragraph

A **paragraph** is a group of related sentences that develop a main thought, or idea, about a single topic. The structure of a paragraph is not complex. There are usually three basic elements: (1) a topic, (2) a main idea, or topic sentence, and (3) supporting details. The **topic sentence** states the main point or controlling idea. The sentences that explain this main point are called **supporting details**. These details may be facts, reasons, or examples that provide further information about the topic sentence.

As a writer, these paragraph elements provide you with an easy-to-follow structure for expressing your ideas clearly and effectively. As a reader, these same elements help you know what to look for and ensure that you will understand and remember what you read. This chapter will show you how to identify main ideas as you read and how to write clear and concise topic sentences. Chapters 6–8 will show you how to recognize key details as you read and how to provide and organize details as you write.

Read the following paragraph, noticing how all the details relate to one point, and explain the topic sentence, which is highlighted and labeled:

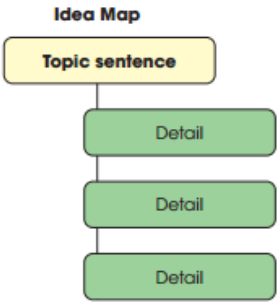
Topic sentence

There is some evidence that colors affect you physiologically. For example, when subjects are exposed to red light, respiratory movements increase; exposure to blue decreases respiratory movements. Similarly, eye blinks increase in frequency when eyes are exposed to red light and decrease when exposed to blue. This seems consistent with the intuitive feelings about blue being more soothing and red being more arousing. After changing a school's walls from orange and white to blue, the blood pressure of the students decreased while their academic performance improved.

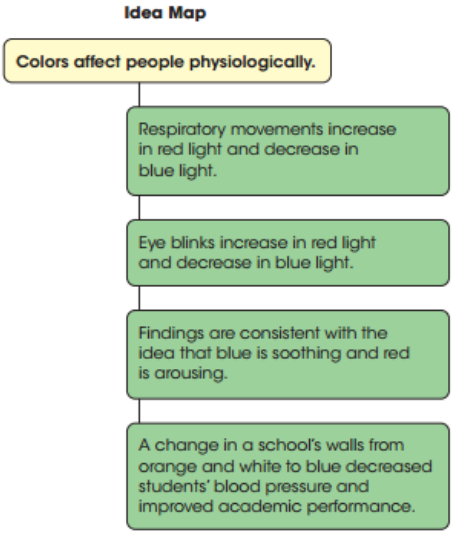
—DeVito, *Human Communication: The Basic Course*, p. 182

In this paragraph, look at the highlighted topic sentence. It identifies the topic as color and states that colors affect people physiologically. The remaining sentences provide further information about the effects of color.

You can think about and visualize a paragraph this way:



Here's how you might visualize the paragraph on color:



Notice how well the topic sentence and details in the above paragraph work together to develop a main idea. The more general topic sentence is explained by the more specific details. You might ask, "How can I tell what is 'general' and what is 'specific' when I am reading?" Here are a few examples. The first three use one-word topics and details; the last two use topic sentences and detail sentences.

GENERAL	emotions
SPECIFIC	love, fear, anger
GENERAL	pollution
SPECIFIC	air pollution, water pollution, solid waste
GENERAL	house building materials
SPECIFIC	lumber, bricks, wall board
GENERAL	Our insurance agent is very professional.
SPECIFIC	She returns calls promptly.
	She reviews our needs every year.
	She explains insurance policies in plain language.
GENERAL	Newspapers include a wide variety of different types of information.
SPECIFIC	Newspapers report world and local news events.
	Newspapers publish human interest stories.
	Newspapers advertise products and services.

Notice that in each of these examples, the specific points explain the general by giving examples, reasons, or further information. In the same way, supporting details in a paragraph explain or support a topic sentence.

Capitalization Checklist

Since every sentence begins with a capital, the how-to's of capitalization seem like a logical place to begin learning about language mechanics. When doing the exercises in this section, refer to the following checklist. Matching your answer to a rule will reinforce the mechanics of writing and secure that knowledge for you.

▶ Capitalization Checklist

- ✓ The first word of every sentence→**Y***es, we do carry the matching bed skirt.*
- ✓ The first word of a quoted sentence (not just a quoted phrase)→*And with great flourish, he sang, "***O** *beautiful for gracious skies, for amber waves of grain!"*
- ✓ The specific name of a person (and his or her title), a place, or a thing (otherwise known as *proper nouns*). *Proper nouns* include specific locations and geographic regions; political, social, and athletic organizations and agencies; historical events; documents and periodicals; nationalities and their language; religions, their members and their deities; brand or trade names; and holidays.
- ✓ The abbreviation for *proper nouns.* Government agencies are probably the most frequently abbreviated. Remember to capitalize each letter.→*The* **CIA** *makes me feel very secure.*
- ✓ Adjectives (descriptive words) derived from *proper nouns.*
  Ex: **A***merica (proper noun)*→the **A***merican (adjective) flag*
- ✓ The *pronoun* **I**.
- ✓ The most important words in a title→Last *March, I endured a twenty-hour public reading of* **A** **T***ale of* **T***wo* **C***ities.*

Punctuation Checklist

Commas

- ✓ Between items in dates and addresses→*Michael arrived at Ellis Island, New York, on February 14, 1924.*
- ✓ Between words in a list→*The university hired a woman to direct the Bursar's, Financial Aid, and Registrar's offices.*
- ✓ Between equally important adjectives (be careful not to separate adjectives that describe each other)→*The reporter spoke with several intense, talented high school athletes.*
- ✓ After a tag that precedes a direct quote→*David whined, "I am famished."*
- ✓ In a quote that precedes a tag and is not a question or an exclamation→*"I am famished," whined David.*
- ✓ Around nonessential clauses, parenthetical phrases, and appositives (A nonessential or nonrestrictive clause is a word or group of words that are not necessary for the sentence's completion; a parenthetical phrase interrupts the flow of a sentence; and an appositive is a word or group of words that rename the noun preceding them)→*Matt's mother, Janie* (appositive), *who has trouble with directions* (nonessential clause), *had to ask for help.*
- ✓ After introductory words, phrases, and clauses→*Hoping for the best, we checked our luggage.*
- ✓ Before conjunctions (Conjunctions are words that link two independent clauses together)→*Drew wanted to experience ballroom dancing before his wedding, so he signed up for lessons at a local hall.*

▶ Punctuation Checklist

Periods

- ✓ At the end of a declarative sentence (sentence that makes a statement)→*Today, I took a walk to nowhere.*
- ✓ At the end of a command or request→*Here's a cloth. Now gently burp the baby on your shoulder.*
- ✓ At the end of an indirect question→*Jane asked if I knew where she had left her keys.*
- ✓ Before a decimal number→*Statisticians claim that the average family raises 2.5 children.*
- ✓ Between dollars and cents→*I remember when $1.50 could buy the coolest stuff.*
- ✓ After an initial in a person's name→*You are Sir James W. Dewault, are you not?*
- ✓ After an abbreviation→*On Jan. 12, I leave for Africa.*

Question Marks

- ✓ At the end of a question→*Why do you look so sad?*
- ✓ Inside a quotation mark when the quote is a question→She asked, "Why do you look so sad?"

Exclamation Points

- ✓ At the end of a word, phrase, or sentence filled with emotion→*Hurry up! I cannot be late for the meeting!*
- ✓ Inside a quotation mark when the quote is an exclamation→*The woman yelled, "Hurry up! I cannot be late for the meeting!"*

Quotation Marks

- ✓ When directly quoting dialogue, not when paraphrasing→*Hamlet says, "To be, or not to be. That is the question."*
- ✓ For titles of chapters, articles, short stories, poems, songs, or periodicals→*My favorite poem is "The Road Not Taken."*

Semicolons

- ✓ Between two independent clauses (an independent clause is a complete thought. It has a subject and a predicate.)→*Edward joined the basketball team; remarkably, the 5′4″ young man excelled at the sport.*
- ✓ Between elements in a series that uses commas →*The possible dates for the potluck dinner are Thursday, June 5; Saturday, June 7; or Monday, June 9.*

Colons

- ✓ Between two complete ideas when the second idea explains the first.→*Keri pushed her dinner away: She had eaten on the car ride home.*
- ✓ Before a list→*Grandma brought Chloe's favorite three sweets: chocolate kisses, Tootsie Rolls, and a Snickers bar.*
- ✓ Between titles and subtitles→*Finding Your Dream Home: A Buyer's Guide.*
- ✓ Between volumes and page numbers→*Marvel Comics 21:24*
- ✓ Between chapters and verse→*Job 4:12*
- ✓ Between hours and minutes→*It's 2:00 A.M.*—time to sleep.

Apostrophes

- ✓ Where letters or numbers have been deleted—as in a contraction→*I looked at my father and whispered, "It's (It is) okay to cry every so often."*
- ✓ At the end of a name where there is ownership (remember to also add an *s* after the apostrophe if the word or name does not end in an *s* already)

→*Mary Jane's horse sprained his ankle during practice.*

Basic Sentence Structure

A sentence is like a Christmas present: Assembly is always required. Fortunately, the instructions are fairly basic. Every sentence must have at least a **subject** and a **predicate**. The subject is the focus of the sentence; it is the *who* or the *what* the sentence is about. The predicate describes the subject; it explains what the subject is or what the subject is doing. The completed idea is called a **clause**, and it is the building block of all sentences.

First, you have to know these terms:

- ✓ **Independent clause:** a clause that expresses a complete thought.→*Monica walked on the grass.*
- ✓ **Dependent (subordinate) clause:** a clause that does not express a complete thought.→*Though it was wet*
- ✓ **A complete thought**→Though it was wet, Monica walked on the grass.
- ✓ **Essential clause:** a dependent clause that is necessary to the basic meaning of the completed sentence.
  →*who are pregnant*
  Women who are pregnant can crave salty or sweet foods.
- ✓ **Nonessential clause:** a dependent clause that is not necessary to the basic meaning of the completed sentence.→*who growls whenever the phone rings*
  Elmo, who growls whenever the phone rings, tried to attack the vacuum cleaner.
- ✓ **Phrase:** a group of words that lack either a subject or a predicate.→*In early spring*
  In early spring, I notice a change in people's attitudes.
- ✓ **Appositive:** a phrase that makes a preceding noun or pronoun clearer or more definite by explaining or identifying it.→*rice pudding and fruit salad*
  Candice's grandfather brought her favorite desserts, rice pudding and fruit salad.

- ✓ **Fragment:** a phrase punctuated like a sentence even though it does not express a complete thought.→*Timothy saw the car. And ran.*
- ✓ **Coordinating Conjunction:** a word that when preceded by a comma or a semicolon joins two independent and equal clauses. (*and, but, so, or, for, nor, yet*)→*Dorothy had a beautiful rose garden, and her yard was a profusion of color every summer.*
- ✓ **Subordinating Conjunction:** a word that makes a clause a dependent clause (*after, although, as, because, before, if, once, since, than, that, though, unless, until, when, whenever, where, wherever, while*)→*After the accident, mourners covered the beaches nearest to the tragedy with roses.*
- ✓ **Conjunctive Adverb:** a word that introduces a relationship between two independent clauses (*accordingly, besides, consequently, furthermore, hence, however, instead, moreover, nevertheless, otherwise, then, therefore, thus*)→*On Tuesdays, I play racquetball; otherwise, I would go with you.*

To construct a sentence:

- ✓ Always have at least one independent clause in the sentence.
- ✓ Join two independent clauses with a semicolon or a comma and a **conjunction**.→*Chaucer was a narrator, and he was a pilgrim in his* Canterbury Tales.
- ✓ Do not run two or more independent clauses together without punctuation; that error is appropriately called a **run-on**. Wrong: *Chaucer was a narrator and he was a pilgrim in his* Canterbury Tales.
- ✓ Do not separate two independent clauses with just a comma; that error is called a **comma splice**. Wrong: *Chaucer was a narrator, he was a pilgrim in his* Canterbury Tales.
- ✓ Do not use a **conjunctive adverb** (the words *accordingly, besides, consequently, furthermore, hence, however, instead, moreover, nevertheless, otherwise, then, therefore, thus*) like a **conjunction**. Wrong: *Chaucer was a narrator, moreover he was a pilgrim in his* Canterbury Tales.
- ✓ Use a comma after a conjunctive adverb when it follows a semicolon. (See Conjunctive Adverbs)
- ✓ Use a comma after introductory words, phrases, and clauses. (See Subordinating Clauses)
- ✓ Use commas around nonessential clauses. Do not use commas around essential clauses. (See Nonessential and Essential Clauses)
- ✓ Use commas around appositives. (See Appositives)
- ✓ Use commas around parenthetical elements (a word or group of words that interrupt a sentence's flow).→*Mrs. Moses, that mean old crone, yelled at little Paula for laughing too loud!*

Modifiers (Adjectives & Adverbs)

Adjectives and adverbs modify subjects and/or their actions in a sentence. In the sentence, "The orange and striped cat leapt nimbly across the dresser," adjectives and adverbs specify what kind of cat (an "orange and striped cat") and how that cat leapt ("nimbly"). All too often, adjectives and adverbs are confused for one another. However, in this section, you will put each in its proper place and in its proper form.

First, you have to know the definition of a modifier:

✓ A modifier describes or limits another word.→*Lily* is a subject. Add the word *tiger* before lily and the subject is modified: It is now a specific type of lily. *Pushed* is an action word. Add *shyly* and the action is limited: It is now a gentler action. Put the subject, its action, and the modifiers all together and the sentence reads: *Unlike its fierce namesake, the tiger lily pushed its head shyly through the soil.*

Types of Modifiers

✓ **Adjectives** modify nouns or pronouns. (*Hint:* An *adjective* answers one of three questions: which one, what kind, or how many?)

✓ **Adverbs** modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or whole groups of words. (*Hint:* An adverb answers one of four questions: where, when, how, or to what extent?)

✓ **Comparatives** are adjectives and adverbs used to compare two things.

✓ **Superlatives** are adjectives and adverbs used to compare more than two things.

Follow this guideline and you will do well (*well* describes the verb *to do*; therefore it is an adverb!):

✓ Always identify whether a modifier describes or limits a sentence's subject or its action.

✓ Use *good* and *bad* to describe nouns.

✓ Use *well* and *badly* to describe verbs, except when *well* means "fit" or "healthy." When *well* describes a state of being, it is an adjective.→*With repetition, you will soon write well. Well* describes how the subject writes; it is an adverb. *After two months of physical therapy, Bob was well. Well* describes Bob's state of being; it is an adjective.

✓ Use an adjective after a *linking verb*. The following words are linking verbs when they express a state of being: *look*, *sound*, *smell*, *feel*, *taste*, *appear*, *seem*, *become*, *grow*, *turn*, *prove*, *remain*, and *stay.* →*Howard leaned over and surreptitiously smelled Lee; she smelled sweet. Surreptitiously* describes how Howard sniffed at the other person; in this case, it is an adverb because it describes the act of smelling. *Sweet* describes Lee; the word *smell* links the adjective back to the subject.

✓ Use the adjective *fewer* to describe plural nouns and the adjective *less* to describe singular nouns.

✓ Use the word *number* to describe plural nouns and the word *amount* to describe singular nouns.

✓ Add *-er* to a modifier or place the word *more* or *less* before the modifier to compare two things. This creates a comparison. (*Hint*: One to two syllable modifiers usually receive the suffix *-er*; modifiers with more than two syllables use *more* or *less* before them.)

✓ Add *-est* to a modifier or place the word *most* or *least* before the modifier to indicate the extreme degree of a thing (*Hint*: One- to two-syllable modifiers receive *-est*; modifiers with more than two syllables use *most* or *least* before them.)

✓ Avoid double comparatives or double superlatives. Adding the suffix *-er* or *-est* to a modifier and preceding the modifier with *more* or *most* is redundant.→*Lindsey amazed the class with her grammatical skills; she was the most smartest person they had ever seen.* Lindsey is already *the smartest. Most* also means smartest—the phrase *most smartest* is redundant.

✓ Avoid double negatives unless you mean to express the positive.→*Tom hardly did not feel tense whenever he approached grammar. Hardly* and *did not* cancel each other out. The sentence really reads: *Tom felt tense whenever approaching grammar.*

✓ Avoid illogical comparisons. Some words already indicate an extreme degree; like double comparatives and double superlatives, adding the word *more* or *most* before such words is redundant. →*Some women believe Brad Pitt is more perfect than Matt Damon.* There are not degrees of perfection; one is either perfect or not perfect. However, one can more nearly approach perfection than someone else.

Agreement (Subject-Verb, Pronouns, & Tense)

Agreement is a very important step in constructing a coherent sentence. There are three basic agreements in a sentence: subject-verb agreement, tense agreement, and antecedent-pronoun agreement.

First, you have to know the definition of a verb:

✓ **Verb**: a word or group of words describing the action or the state of being of a subject.

Subject-Verb Agreement

✓ If the subject is singular, the verb is singular; if the subject is plural, the verb is plural→*Mrs. Hendrickson feeds the birds every day.* Or: *The Hendricksons feed the birds every day.*

✓ Subjects joined by *and* are plural and receive a plural verb→*Jolie and Lara swim together every Thursday.*

✓ Subjects joined by *or* or *nor* adopt the singularity or plurality of the last subject; accordingly, the verb matches it→*Either that cat or those dogs have been eating my snacks!*

Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

✓ *Each, either, neither, anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, no one, nobody, one, somebody,* and *someone* are singular pronouns and receive singular verbs.

✓ *Both, few, many,* and *several* are plural pronouns and receive plural verbs.

✓ *All, any, most, none,* and *some* can be singular or plural pronouns, depending on their use. These pronouns can receive plural or singular verbs.

✓ Do not be confused by words or phrases that follow a subject that are not the subject→*One of the chairs is damaged.*

His work, one of the many works exhibited here today, is refreshingly naive.

Tense Agreement

✓ Maintain one tense in a complete thought: past tense or present tense.→

Incorrect: *In the game of hide and seek, Bobby chased Mary and tag her from behind.*

Correct: *In the game of hide and seek, Bobby chased Mary and tagged her from behind.*

Incorrect: *Dusk had just settled when I see a fawn timidly step onto the beach.*

Correct: *Dusk had just settled when I saw a fawn timidly step onto the beach.*

Do not use *of* in place of *have.*

You cannot avoid pronouns. *Pronouns* substitute for nouns. Instead of saying, "Because Janie was late, Janie hopped on Janie's moped, and Janie raced to the wedding," you would say, "Because Janie was late, *she* hopped on *her* moped, and *she* raced to the wedding."

In this section, you will not only clarify ambiguous pronouns and assure pronoun-antecedent agreement, you will also grapple with contractions. All too often, certain pronouns and contractions are confused. "The file cabinet drawer snagged on an overstuffed folder; *it's* now stuck just before *its* halfway point." *It's* is a contraction meaning *it is,* while *its* is a possessive pronoun meaning the drawer's halfway point. The only visual difference between the two is an apostrophe neatly inserted between the *t* and the *s* in the contraction.

Do You Know These Terms?

✓ **Antecedent**: In the last example, Janie is the specific noun that *she* and *her* replace; so Janie is the *antecedent.* The presence of the antecedent in a sentence is as important as which pronouns substitute for it.

✓ **Contractions**: When two words are made into one by omitting letters and using an apostrophe to highlight the omission—that's a contraction.

✓ **Subjective, Objective, and Possessive Cases**: Persons or things (nouns) acting on other things are subjects. Pronouns that refer to these subjects are in the subjective case (*I, you, he, she, we, they, who*). Persons or things acted upon (in other words, they are not performing the action) are objects. Pronouns that refer to these objects are in the objective case (*me, you, him, her, us, them, whom*). Subjects or objects that claim ownership of something are possessors. Pronouns that claim their possessions are in the possessive case (*my, your, his, her, our, your, whose*).

✓ **Avoid Ambiguous Pronoun References.** The antecedent that a pronoun refers to must be clearly stated and in close proximity to its pronoun.

If more subjects than one are present, indicate which subject is the antecedent.→*When Katherine and Melissa left for England, she promised to write me about all their adventures.* Who is *she*? Katherine or Melissa?

Pronouns should

- ✓ Agree in number with their antecedent: Singular antecedents use singular pronouns, and plural antecedents use plural pronouns.
- ✓ *Compound antecedents* joined by *and* use plural pronouns.→*A horse and a donkey make a mule.* Even though the horse and the donkey are singular subjects, together they create one plural subject.
- ✓ *Compound antecedents* joined by *or* or *nor* use pronouns that agree with the nearest antecedent.→*Neither my one cat nor my four dogs are as difficult to maintain as my one pet fish.*
- ✓ *Collective nouns* use singular pronouns unless it is obvious that every person or thing in the group act individually.→*The company mandated a universal naptime for all its employees. They felt workers could sustain productivity longer into the afternoon if they rested in the early afternoon.* Unless it is a one-person operation, a company usually employs many people. However, *it* is treated like a singular noun. In the first sentence, the singular pronoun *it* substitutes for *company*. In the second sentence, individuals in the company feel separately, and so the plural pronoun *they* replaces the subject.
- ✓ Persons receive the pronouns *who, whom,* or *whose,* not *that* or *which.*
- ✓ After *is, are, was,* or *were* use the subjective case.
- ✓ Pronouns preceding or following *infinitive verbs* (the plain form of a verb preceded by *to*) take the objective case.→*Billy Jean begged him to play catch, but he did not want to play ball with her at that moment.* In the first clause, *him* is the subject; in the second clause, *her* is an object. Despite their difference, both take the objective case because of the infinitive *to play*.

What is Academic Vocabulary?

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) define academic vocabulary words as the words that are traditionally used in academic dialogue and text. Specifically, it refers to words that are not necessarily common or that children would encounter in conversation. These words often relate to other more familiar words that students use. For example, rather than watch, observe. They are also words that help students understand oral directions and classroom instructional dialog. They also help students to comprehend text across different content areas- including math, science, and social studies/history.

This may also look like students using **specific vocabulary from your content area**.

Links to Additional Resources

- Mechanics of Writing
  - http://catalogue.pearsoned.co.uk/samplechapter/0131428993.pdf
- Topics, Main Ideas, and Topic Sentences (sample exercises)
  - http://www.pearsonhighered.com/showcase/inconcert/assets/pdf/McWhorter_0321850378_C05.pdf
- Managing the Punctuation Jungle
  - http://www.yourdictionary.com/index.php/pdf/articles/54.punctuationjungle.pdf
- 501 Grammar & Writing Questions (source for most info in this document)
  - http://www.misd.net/languageart/GrammarInAction/501GrammarandWriting3e.pdf
- Resources for Academic Vocabulary
  - http://www.englishcompanion.com/pdfDocs/acvocabulary2.pdf