

DEVELOPING A PARAGRAPH FROM A TOPIC SENTENCE

By Mary Lamb

To develop a paragraph from a topic sentence, all you have to do is to ask the topic sentence questions. Then you take the answers to these questions, and write a paragraph out of them. With this method, you will never have trouble filling up space again—you will always have something to say!

Every topic sentence raises questions that you expect the paragraph to answer. For example, in this paragraph, you would probably expect me to list questions that some topic sentences might raise, like “why,” “where,” “when,” “to what extent,” and, especially, “for example.” The actual questions that you ask, however, depend upon the topic sentence itself.

What questions would you ask for the following topic sentences?

1. Every topic sentence raises questions that you expect the paragraph to answer.
2. The working poor have suffered enough.
3. Today children are more difficult than they used to be.
4. Southern Illinois University offers many different kinds of courses.
5. Writing a term paper is a difficult task.
6. The young people of today question their religious beliefs.
7. Dogs are inexpensive to care for.
8. The Writing Center has friendly tutors.

Here is a very short paper. Pretend it was written by a friend of yours who needs advice—how would you tell him to lengthen it? Try out this method of asking questions to the topic sentence.

SIU is in session again, and students have returned to the campus. They are here for many different reasons. Students come to college to become qualified for a job, to avoid unemployment, and to find a husband or wife.

The first and probably the most important reason for attending college is to be trained for a job. Students attend classes to learn about their career choice and how difficult it will be. This reason is the highest among students because they feel an education is important for their job.

Second, people attend college to buy time before starting work in hopes that the job market will rise. They feel it will be hard to get a good job, and college may be used as a waiting period. Also a basic understanding of life and independence may be experienced.

Lastly, some people attend college to find a husband or wife. A young woman may attend college to extend her social life and to find the man she wants to marry. The same can also be said about men. There is no better way to meet people than while attending college.

List the questions you have asked one of these topic sentences. (These questions will not appear in the paragraph. You will just use these questions to find material.) Then take the answers to these questions and rewrite one of these paragraphs for your friend.

Here is a paragraph one student wrote, using this technique of asking questions to the topic sentence. You might keep it in mind while writing your own paragraphs.

Paragraphs want to be developed. How would you feel if you were an underdeveloped paragraph? You would try to act big so that you could get along with the really developed paragraphs. You might use impressive words or catchy clichés to attract attention. But all this would be superficial. Deep down in your topic sentence, you would sense your insufficiency and would feel uneasy when in the presence of developed paragraphs.