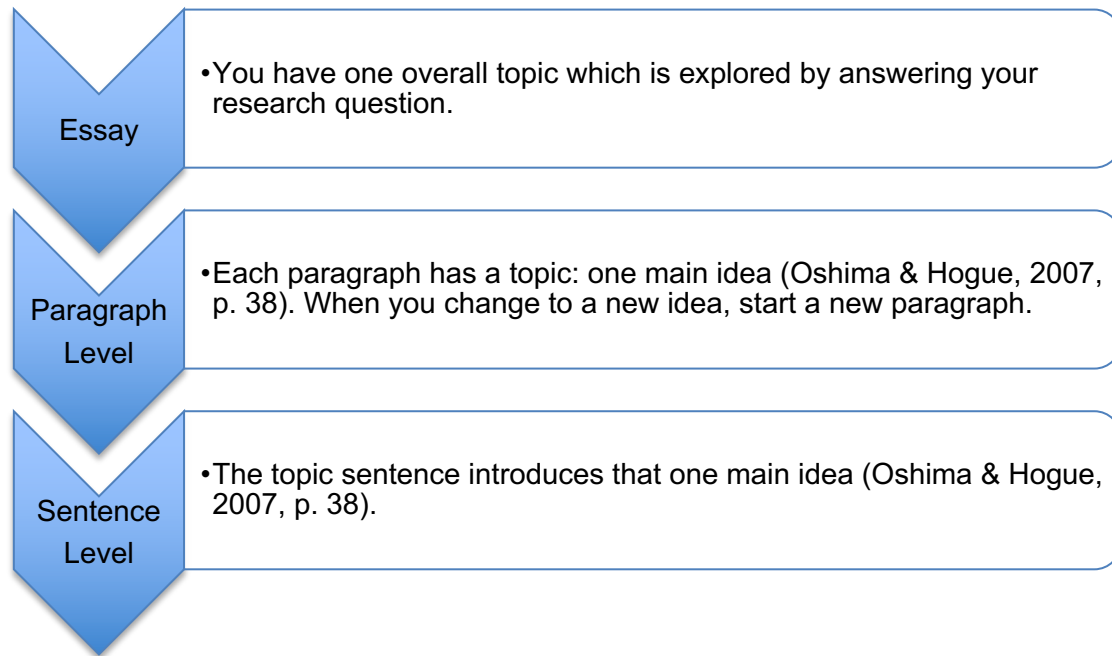


Maintain Coherence: The Topic and Supporting Sentences

Coherent writing presents ideas in a clear, relevant, and organised way (Richards & Schmidt, 2013). A good writer uses a number of different techniques to do this well including:



The Topic Sentence

Most often, the topic sentence is the first sentence in a paragraph (Oshima & Hogue, 2007, p. 40), but it does not have to be. In an inverted paragraph, for example, it will be the closing sentence. The topic sentence is made up of two parts: the “subject” and the “controlling idea” (Oshima & Hogue, 2007, p. 39). Sometimes, there will be a modifying phrase (e.g. over the years, throughout history) before the subject (Pinker, 2014, p. 153).

Topic Sentence		
[Over the years,] different cultures have [had] different ways of deciding <i>who</i> names the baby (adapted from Lebauer, 1998, p. 74).		
Modifying Phrase	Subject	Controlling Idea (Verb/s + complement)
[Over the years,]	different cultures	have [had] different ways of deciding <i>who</i> names the baby.

The topic sentence signals what the whole paragraph will be about.

Coherence is quickly lost if the paragraph moves away from what the topic sentence promises. For the above example, can you guess the content of the supporting sentences?

The Supporting Sentences

These develop the main idea. The direction they take depends on the purpose of the paragraph. For instance, they could be explaining a method, showing cause and effect, or illustrating a point (Fernando et al., 1973, pp. 250–265). Have a look at these supporting sentences; they expand on the preceding topic sentence by telling us who names the baby in two different cultures. We expected nothing less!

Supporting Sentences (Lebauer, 1998, p. 74)
In some cultures there is one special person who chooses the name – perhaps the mother or father, sometimes an uncle. In some cultures the parents decide together. In some places, however, the baby has a ‘say’ in the matter. For example, in some parts of Africa someone reads a list of names while the mother holds the baby. As soon as the baby sneezes the person stops reading and the child gets the last name that was read. In parts of Malaysia the parents follow the same practice, but instead of waiting for the baby to sneeze they wait for it to smile.

The Concluding Sentence

In a short paragraph, the concluding sentence just leads into the following paragraph. When the paragraph is long, however, this sentence restates the main idea/topic sentence using slightly different words (Oshima & Hogue, 2007, p. 38). What concluding sentence would you write for the paragraph above?

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