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The Headless Paragraph: Back-forming Topic Sentences

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Writing Bootcamp Unit
Topic Sentence Exercise

The Headless Paragraph: Back-Forming Topic Sentences

Abstract:

This exercise is designed to give students practice in creating and understanding topic sentences. Rather than asking students to create their own paragraphs headed with topic sentences, this exercise gives students the paragraphs and asks them to synthesize the topic sentences from the content provided. Such back-formation can help students grasp that a topic sentence does not merely start the paragraph, but also organizes and summarizes its key content.

Standards:

W.9-10.1 (Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.)

W.9-10.2 (Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.)

Procedure:

You can start the class with a quick re-cap or explanation of the purposes of topic sentences. I use a variety of verbs to show the impact of these structures; I tell students that the topic sentences *introduce*, *summarize*, *advertise*, and even *govern* the paragraph.

Hand out the worksheet (see Materials, below). Walk through it for a minute with students so that they understand the task. You might even mention that students need to follow the cues of the paragraphs; the second example is a good one here, with its “On the one hand/but at the same time” dichotomy.

Students complete the worksheet. The work may take students 10-15 minutes, because a fair degree of comprehension is involved. (Feel free, of course, to adapt the examples to your own classes; you may wish to make easier or harder paragraphs.)

Walk through some of the created topic sentences for each paragraph, so that students get a sense of what makes a good topic sentence effective. Note that the best topic sentences will convey the central point of the paragraph, and that concision and eloquence are added bonuses.

Afterward, you can follow up with a student-led version of this exercise. Ask students to write a paragraph on a topic they will find interesting. (At this residential school, with newly-arrived students, I ask students to write a paragraph describing their roommates.)

After five minutes or so, when students are done, ask for a few volunteers to read their paragraphs, but **without their topic sentences**. After each headless paragraph, other students will have to guess what the topic sentences would be. A few guesses will make the final unveiling interesting, and you can, if you'd like, introduce a competitive element by which the writer decides whose version of the topic sentence comes closest to the writer's intent.

Materials:

Please read the following paragraphs and devise a topic sentence that introduces and accommodates its ideas. Write your topic sentence on the blank line at the top of each paragraph.

The floor was sticky, the paint on the walls was flaking off, and there was an iguana in an unwashed cage in the corner. Two of my dinner companions received the wrong order, but the waiter wasn't interested in correcting the problem – he waved us off and went on a cigarette break. The jukebox at Pizza Palace constantly blared some ill-chosen rock anthem at ear-splitting levels.

On the one hand, picnics are a chance to get out into the open air and experience nature for a few hours. Snacking on summer sausage in the shade of an overhanging willow tree can be pure bliss, and fruit tastes especially good after being dunked in a mountain stream. But at the same time, ants and grasshoppers can quickly overrun your blanket, carting off your crackers crumb by crumb and your patience nerve by nerve. Unprotected sun may sap your strength, leaving your group vulnerable to petty arguments.

The native people of Pandora resist foreign access to “unobtainium,” an extremely lucrative element that sits beneath - as subterranean as oil - their forest home. They vow to protect their homeland from usurpation. For their part, the American military leaders promise to take the valuable resource through sheer force, a lasting imperial strategy. Most tellingly, there are several blatant references to lethal American military policies in *Avatar*, including “Shock and Awe,” pre-emptive strikes, and the overall War on Terror: “we will battle terror with terror,” says the security chief.

Laptop computers are an obvious example: business people who used to enjoy work-free

flights may now feel compelled to tap away at keyboards as they fly across the country; the PC revolution has brought the potential for ongoing writing and research work into most homes. PDAs only compound the problem, as those devices enable us to email colleagues and keep working in the subway, the car, and even the shower. Few workers on deadline can make it through a meal without updating files or taking necessary calls.