

Like a paragraph, a longer passage focuses on a single topic, expresses a general idea about that topic, follows a pattern of organization, and uses signal words and phrases to indicate supporting ideas.

The Topic

The topic of a longer passage is usually repeated many times to focus the reader’s attention and to reinforce connections between the topic and the supporting ideas. It is generally mentioned in:

- the title;
- the topic sentence of each paragraph;
- at least one other sentence in each paragraph.

Example:

A. Read the following passage. What is the topic?

Topic: _____

_____ are everywhere these days—on buses, in restaurants, at school, and at the workplace. You see people of all ages, from young children to the elderly, conversing on their _____ as they walk down the street. Clearly, _____ have become an important part of our lives and represent a major technological shift. However, it could also be argued that they have had a significant impact on how we communicate and on social relations in general.

The fact that _____ allow us to stay in touch at all times has clearly had an impact on the way we work. In many professions _____ have in fact been enormously helpful, and probably on many occasions they have made it possible for doctors or firefighters to save lives through quick intervention¹. However, in many other professions, _____ have basically meant more work. The fact that it is possible to stay in touch constantly makes people feel they ought to stay in touch constantly. For these people—especially business managers and others in positions of responsibility—the work day is never over and they end up answering calls from the office while dining with their family or vacationing on the beach.



In daily life, _____ have also brought about some changes in our habits. They can, of course, help solve some of the problems of our busy lives. Motorists stuck in traffic, for example, can use _____ to let people know they will be late. However, this ease of daily communication seems to have fostered² a certain inability to make a decision or stick to a plan. This is especially true of young people who have grown up with _____ and who have become extremely impatient. For instance, if a bus does not arrive exactly on time, they are incapable of waiting a few minutes. Instead, they pull out their _____ and immediately start calling friends or family to arrange other transportation.

Furthermore, apart from the users, _____ can also have an impact on others who happen to be nearby. At concerts or movies, people often forget to turn off their _____, which inevitably start ringing at the worst possible moment. On trains or buses, there is nothing more annoying than someone nearby conversing on a _____, especially since they tend to speak more loudly than normal.

To conclude, though there are certainly many good reasons for having and using _____, we should be aware of how they affect our lives and condition us in many ways. Sometimes it might be useful to remember that until just a few years ago, _____ did not exist, and life went along just fine without them.

¹ *intervention*: action to help

² *foster*: to help to develop a skill, feeling, idea etc.

B. Write the topic at the top of the passage and then compare it with that of another student. (You can find the answer at the bottom of this page.)

C. Write the same topic on all of the blank lines in the passage. Then read the passage again. Why is it easier to understand and follow the ideas with the topic included?

(Topic of the Example passage: cell phones)

The Thesis Statement

In a longer passage, the writer's idea about the topic is stated in a sentence called the thesis statement. Like the main idea in a paragraph, the thesis statement tells the writer's overall idea about the topic. Recognizing and understanding the writer's thesis statement is the key to understanding the ideas in a passage.

Look again at the passage above. The topic is *cell phones*. The thesis statement is: *It could also be argued that they (cell phones) have had a significant impact on how we communicate and on social relations in general.*

Read the passage again. Notice that each paragraph explains a way cell phones influence our lives.

Identifying the Thesis Statement

The thesis statement in English

- includes the topic;
- is usually found in the first paragraph (or paragraphs);
- is always a complete sentence;
- often indicates how the ideas will be developed in the passage;
- is supported by the ideas and information found in all of the paragraphs of the passage.

In English, the thesis statement is near the beginning of a passage because readers expect to learn right away what the passage is about. In other languages and cultures, this is not necessarily true.

Think about how writers express their ideas in your language. Where can you usually find the thesis in a longer passage in your language? Is it the same as in English or different?



EXERCISE 1

A. Read the passage and ask yourself, “What is the topic? What is the writer’s idea about that topic?” Then decide what the topic and the thesis statement are and write them below.

Human Responses to Disaster

Catastrophic events, such as natural disasters and major terrorist attacks, are extremely traumatic¹ for the people involved. In these situations, where one’s own and others’ physical safety is threatened, feelings may range from fear, to horror or helplessness. Studies of catastrophe survivors have taught psychologists how individuals who have undergone such traumas and losses respond to these circumstances. Such research is difficult: Ethics prevent psychologists from creating disastrous events in order to study their effects on volunteer subjects. The only way to study these events is to be on the scene after the catastrophe, getting the story from the survivors while it is fresh on their minds. From these stories, psychologists have theorized that responses to extreme natural and human-caused disasters occur in five stages.

The first stage begins immediately after the event and may last for a few moments or several days. During this period, victims experience psychological numbness—a certain inability to think or feel. They may be in a state of shock and confusion, and they have difficulty comprehending what has happened. This reaction occurs whether or not they have been physically injured themselves during the event.

During the next stage, victims continue to lack awareness of what is going on around them. They appear to function automatically, without conscious² control of their thinking or reacting. Later, they may not remember these moments or their actions. When there has been no warning at all of the disaster—as in an earthquake or the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York—this

stage lasts longer. While people are in this phase, they are also unable to focus their attention on their surroundings or coordinate their actions with other people. This can result in delays in rescue efforts and the loss of lives.

In the third stage after a disaster, victims turn to each other. They pool³ resources and collaborate in trying to deal with the consequences. At this point, they may experience some pride at having managed to survive, they may be hopeful about the future, and they express their willingness to “roll up their sleeves” and try to rebuild. At the same time, they are physically worn out by the impact of the experience and they may not have much reserve energy.

The fourth stage is when victims are most likely to become depressed or even attempt suicide. They experience a letdown⁴ and finally comprehend the full extent of the tragedy. By this time, the public and the media may have lost interest in the disaster and the victims are no longer given special consideration. Though the state of emergency may continue, the survivors feel abandoned and forgotten.

The final period of recovery is the most extended stage, as the survivors struggle to adapt to the changes in their lives. These changes may be personal or they may involve the whole community. In some cases, the victims may have to move elsewhere and start a completely new life. During this phase, survivors feel a basic need to find a meaning in their loss. “Why?” they ask themselves, and they demand answers from those in authority.

(Source: From Zimbardo, Philip G., Robert L. Johnson & Ann L. Weber, *Psychology: Core Concepts* 5/e. Published by Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA. © by Pearson Education. By permission of the publisher.)

¹ *traumatic*: shocking and upsetting

² *conscious*: intended, awake and thinking

³ *pool*: to combine and share

⁴ *letdown*: a feeling of disappointment

Topic: _____

Thesis statement: _____