

Topic Sentences in the Four Writing Samples

Page 51 of *Acting on Words* asks you to identify the topic sentence for each of the following paragraphs. The exercise asks that for each topic sentence you identify the main topic and the controlling idea. Here are the writing samples, also presented in the text on pages 26 – 29. Following these paragraphs below we provide suggested answers to this exercise.

A Pace of their Own

The speed of speech in various parts of Canada reveals a significant range of difference. Parts of Newfoundland and Montreal present two examples of rapid speech. In her essay “Newfoundlandese, if You Please,” Diane Mooney observes that “[all] Newfoundlanders talk fast; this is just a given” (111). Mooney suggests that certain Irish roots are partly the reason for this. Visitors to Montreal hear a similar quickness of spoken English. This may be due partly to the influence of French, dominant in the city;¹ as well, Yiddish and Mediterranean communities, described by linguist Charles Boberg, have had an influence on the English spoken in the city (Haldane). No doubt the fast city pace of Montreal also influences the speed of speech and vice versa.

In contrast to the speech of Newfoundland and Montreal, much slower patterns occur in other parts of the country, for example, in much of Prince Edward Island (PEI), as well as on the prairies. Robert Deal, owner of a small bed and breakfast on the south shore of PEI, says, “On the Island, things are more relaxed: we don’t drive so fast as people from away, and we don’t rush our conversation.” A similar observation is offered by Brenda Mitchell of Carstairs, Alberta, after a holiday in Montreal. “I couldn’t get over how much faster people talk in this city,” she says. Are ethnic roots as well as lifestyles responsible for the slower pace of speech in these parts of the country? The answer is probably yes.² As Boberg states to Maeve Haldane of the *McGill Reporter*, language variation across Canada is a last bastion of cultural separation from the United States.

Notes

1. See the following online article by University of Montreal linguist Professor Blake T. Hanna, published in *Circuit*, March 1990: “Is French Corrupting Montreal English?” (<http://www.iquebec.ifrance.com/names850/anglais.html>). Hanna’s question makes one think of “Politics and the English Language,” in which George Orwell deplores the influence upon English of foreign words. However, Hanna argues an opposing view: that French (in Montreal) has reinvigorated English to a degree that has not occurred since the eleventh century.
2. As of November 2006, a linguistics course, Ling 790, at the University of New Hampshire, stated the following in its online description: “Canada is a rich environment for socio-linguistic investigation, because there is every possible type of language contact situation imaginable.” See <http://www.unh.edu/cie/canada/students.html>

Works Cited

Deal, Robert. Personal interview. 10 Aug. 2003.

Haldane, Maeve. “Speaking of Montreal.” *McGill Reporter*. 21 Nov. 2002. 18 pars. 16 Aug. 2003. <http://www.mcgill.ca/reporter/06/boberg/>

Mitchell, Brenda. Personal interview. 13 June 2003.

Mooney, Diane. “Newfoundlandese, If You Please.” *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. 2nd ed. Ed. David Brundage and Michael Lahey. Pearson: Toronto, 2009. 414 - 415.

Tony and the Bard

The Sopranos—now entering its final season on HBO—has all the features of a Shakespearian history play, as defined by Norrie Epstein: battlefield heroics, familial relationships, feisty characters, power politics and covert scheming (151). Like Prince Harry overcoming Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part 2*, Tony prevails over an attempted assassination (season 1, episode 12) as does Chris (season 1, episode 21). Shakespeare's use of domestic scenes is paralleled in *The Sopranos* by similar scenes of family relationships involving Tony, Carmela, Meadow, Anthony Junior, and various other members of the extended crime "family." Feisty Shakespearean characters such as Hotspur, Falstaff, and Mistress Quickly find their modern counterparts in *Sopranos* early-season *regulars* like Chris, Uncle Junior, and Janice. In particular, Tony resembles Henry IV in their concealing of private anguish beneath a mask of political action. On the matter of power politics, Shakespeare's histories begin with the question of who will succeed to power, who will prevail in the bitter feud between the houses of Lancaster and York. Similarly, *The Sopranos* begins with the death of the local crime boss, Jackie Aprile, Sr., a consequential power vacuum, and problems of how to gain control according to the old code of honour, which means less to certain characters than it does to Tony. Uniting all of these similarities is the strong appeal that both the histories and *The Sopranos* have for their audiences: we envy the rich and the powerful, we experience the vicarious thrill of sin and danger, and we recognize in the ruthless main characters the same moral compromises that govern our own lives.

Work Cited

Epstein, Norrie. *Friendly Shakespeare: A Thoroughly Painless Guide to the Best of the Bard*. Penguin: New York, 1993.

Publish or Perish

In 1990, historian Page Smith published an indictment of higher education in America, condemning, among other things, the publish-or-perish culture. Now fourteen years later, publish or perish at Canadian universities is, if anything, worse than ever. No longer is the aspiring academic rightly encouraged to research and publish; he or she must publish as many *separate titles a year* as possible. A recent faculty posting in *University Affairs* reflects this disturbing reality: “Relative to research funding ...only Harvard’s faculty publish more than UBC’s” (“Let’s Talk Excellence”). Nothing is said about the quality or value of these publications, or of the compromises made to attain this “distinction.” While the UBC ad writer would no doubt reply that quality is assumed, nevertheless, the ad strongly implies that quantity is priority one. Examples abound of how this emphasis on quantity discourages devotion to farsighted works in favour of feeding the KPI mill.¹ Perhaps more disturbingly, this demand for endless short publications undermines teaching. It is generally acknowledged on university campuses that teaching excellence does not play a sufficient part in advancement; introductory and basic skills-related courses—the sorts of courses that often require the utmost teaching diligence—generally repay their instructors with low status. Surely the university’s ideal of seeking and teaching truth suffers when the seeking consists of rapid-fire publications and the teaching garners diminishing respect.

Note

¹ “KPI” stands for “Key Performance Indicators,” a type of accountability criteria used in business but, according to various critics, unsuitable to the university. See Bruneau, William and Donald C. Savage. *Counting Out the Scholars: the Case Against Performance Indicators in Higher Education*. Lorimer: Toronto, 2002.

Works Cited

“Let’s Talk Excellence.” *University Affairs*. June/July 2003, 24.

Smith, Page. *Higher Education in America: Killing the Spirit*. Viking: New York, 1990.

Eating Your Cake: Is it True What They Say?

Our last two sample paragraphs for this chapter arose from the following fictional scenario. A former business school graduate was asked to write two paragraphs of advice to a graduating class at his alma mater. Here is what he wrote.

Five years ago, as I approached my last year of university, my parents and older relatives – with one exception—all advised me to make as much money as I could first, so that I could do what I really wanted to do later, after looking after financial concerns. My parents are practical people; I knew they wanted the best for me. They reminded me that eating the icing after the cake would still be the best plan, even now that I was grown up. The one person who disagreed was my grandmother. Her sister’s husband had made his family wait to do the things they wanted—moving to the country—and the year that he finally paid off the mortgage and said, “Let’s move,” he died of a heart attack. This story prompted me to do some research.

I happened upon an interesting study reported in *Natural Life Magazine*, November-December 2002. The study tracked the careers of 1,500 business school graduates from

1960 to 1980. From the beginning, the graduates were grouped into Category A and Category B. Category A was people who wanted to make money first and do what they wanted to do later. Category B pursued their true interests right away, confident that money would follow eventually. Eighty-three percent of the graduates were in Category A. Doing our math, we know that only seventeen percent were in category B. Probably you are in Category A, right? After twenty years, there were 101 millionaires overall. Just one of those came from Category A. So am I a millionaire now, five years after graduating? No, I'm not even close. But I'm in no financial stress, my young family is happy, and if I died of a heart attack tomorrow, my wife could honestly say that our time together was joyful and rich.

Work Consulted

“Designing a Livelihood: Do What Your Love & Love What You Do.” Natural Life Magazine. Nov-Dec 2002. www.life.ca/nl/88/livelihood.html/ 10 December 2006.

Suggested Answers

“A Pace of their Own”

First paragraph

Topic sentence: The speed of speech in various parts of Canada reveals a significant range of difference.

Topic: speed of speech in various parts of Canada

Controlling idea: It shows a **significant** range of difference.

Second Paragraph

Topic sentence: In contrast to the speech of Newfoundland and Montreal, much slower patterns occur in other parts of the country...

Topic: patterns of speech in other parts of the country

Controlling idea: They are **much** slower

“Tony and the Bard”

Topic sentence: *The Sopranos* ... has all the features of a Shakespearian history play ... battlefield heroics, familial relationships, feisty characters, power politics and covert scheming.

Topic: the resemblance between *The Sopranos* and Shakespeare’s history plays

Controlling idea: The resemblance is **remarkably complete** (“all the features”)

This particular topic sentence, like the direct list thesis sentence of an essay (pp. 80-81), includes its reasons in support of the controlling idea. The resemblance is complete because it extends to “battlefield heroics, familial relationships, feisty characters, power politics and covert scheming.” The rest of the essay is organized in accordance with these previewed features.

“Publish or Perish”

Topic sentence: ... [p]ublish or perish at Canadian universities is ... worse than ever.

Topic: publish or perish at Canadian universities

Controlling idea: It is **worse than ever**.

“Eating Your Cake: Is It True What They Say?”

First paragraph

Topic sentence: [partly implicit] Five years ago, as I approached my last year of university, I had to choose how to live my life.

Topic: choosing how to live your life

Controlling idea: The choice is **extremely important**

Second Paragraph

Topic sentence: [partly implicit] A study in *Natural Life Magazine* and my own experience suggests that rather than starting your career in pursuit of money it is wise to do the things you like and trust that money will follow.

Topic: doing the things you want.

Controlling idea: Doing the things you want is the **best** choice...

Commentary

Scholarly writing favours a style that is direct, clear, explicit, and quite formal in displaying these attributes. Accordingly, the paragraphs in the first three writing samples all present topic sentences at the start of the paragraph (deductive placement). In all cases but one, the topic sentence opens the paragraph. In “Publish or Perish” an introductory sentence provides background to the topic, but it is followed promptly by a second sentence repeating the topic and providing the controlling idea. The second writing sample demonstrates a fairly common case of an initial paragraph with a broad topic sentence followed by a paragraph with a narrower topic sentence, one that pursues a sub point in support of the previous paragraph’s controlling idea. The first paragraph asserts that speed of speech across Canada is extremely diverse and goes on to look at regions where speech pace is rapid. Once this example has been discussed, however, the paragraph has become long. Breaking into a new paragraph to look at regional examples of slow pace makes sense, so the new topic sentence adjusts accordingly to this tightened focus on a point in support of the previous paragraph. In other words, some paragraphs make broader claims than do others, depending on where the writer is at in the progress of a particular discussion. But note that in all effective paragraphs, the topic is narrow enough to be handled in the normal allotment of 6 – 12 sentences.

The fourth writing sample presents a contrast to the others in that it is more informal in style and relies considerably on personal narrative, particularly in the first paragraph. As discussed in *Acting on Words*, pp. 91 and 199-200, when writing is narrative, personal and evocative or expressive rather than formally explicit, the controlling idea may be stated at the end (inductive placement), may be sprinkled in different places, or may not be directly stated at all. In such cases, readers must follow clues in the writing to infer the controlling idea and put it into words. In such cases, readers will naturally suggest somewhat different wordings. In support of the topic sentence wording that we propose for the first paragraph of “Eating Your Cake,” we considered the narrative direction of that paragraph. Through a personal story, the writer presents a debate within his family concerning how he should live his life. The story ends on an intense level with reference to his great uncle’s heart attack, which seems to suggest the seriousness of making a meaningful choice (doing the best things *before* that inevitable end). By mentioning that this debate and particularly his grandmother’s caution (which is placed last, in a position of impact) prompted him to do some further research and thinking, he signals that his choice has yet to follow. So we conclude that the paragraph is basically telling us that the writer faced having to make a decision on a crucial debate about how to live.

The second paragraph provides more explicit topic statement than does the first, if one looks toward the end of the paragraph. In wrapping up his report on the study, the writer informs us that the results endorsed the practicality of doing the things one wants to do. He then says that although he is not a millionaire, he has more than enough money to be happy, and that his family life has indeed been rewarding. The study results and his own experience are the reasons offered in support of the controlling idea on the topic of doing what he has done, which the controlling idea stresses is a choice and one that deeply matters. The logical flow and shift of focus from the first paragraph to the second is from the idea that life presents a difficult and important decision to be made between two choices to the idea of why one choice is preferable.