



A paragraph is not a junk drawer.

You're cooking in someone else's kitchen. Searching for a garlic press, you open a drawer: knives, forks, spoons. *Ah*, you think. *The cutlery drawer*. You try another drawer: A couple of decorative spoons, a corkscrew, take-out packets of soy sauce and pepper flakes, rubber bands, a few keys, birthday candles... What is this drawer, and is there any hope of finding a garlic press here?

Think of a paragraph as a drawer. When your readers "open" it (begin to read it) they should quickly get a sense of its "contents" (topic). As they continue reading, their first impression of its topic should be confirmed. How? Two ways.

First, give your paragraph a topic sentence; that is, a sentence that encapsulates the fundamental point that the paragraph is making, or the key question that it serves to answer. If you're writing about how easy it is to learn to speak French, the goal of one of your paragraphs might be to encourage readers to explore free language-learning apps. Your topic sentence should reflect that goal. It could be quite simple: Many language-learning apps are available free of charge.

Second, make sure that every sentence supports the claim of that topic sentence, or answers the question it implies. In the example above, every sentence in the paragraph should identify and describe language-learning *apps* that are *free*. A sentence about a local language school or an app costing \$4.99 a month would not belong in the paragraph. Like a screwdriver in a cutlery drawer, it would be out of place. It should be moved to a different paragraph.

Sounds simple, right? But if you examine paragraphs in your own writing—whether work-related reports, essays you’ve submitted for classes or publication, or emails or other correspondence—you might find that they lack a clear topic sentence, or that one or more of the supporting sentences doesn’t actually support that topic.

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