

## What is a topic?

Topic is another word for subject. It answers the question, “Who or what is the paragraph (or article) about?” The topic is stated as a single word or phrase—not a complete sentence.

## Why is identifying the topic important?

Identifying the topic is key to monitoring your comprehension, getting the full meaning of the text, and answering your instructor when she asks, “So what is this section about?” Once you identify the topic, you can more easily determine the author’s main idea (See Identifying Main Ideas skill sheet).

## How do I get started?

Preview your text before you begin. Ask yourself, “What is the article about?” The answer can often be found in the title. If the topic is not specifically stated in the title, you will want more information before reading the entire article. Preview further by reading subtitles and headings. Look at diagrams and/or visual aids. Read the introductory material, opening paragraph, final paragraph. If the text is only one paragraph long, read the first and last sentences. The point is to quickly gain as much understanding as possible.

### Finding the Topic

- **Ask yourself, “Who or what is the paragraph (or article) about?”**
- **Use these clues to help you:**
  1. Look for a heading or title.
  2. Look for pictures and words in special print, such as **bold**, *italics*, or color
  3. Read the first and last sentences of the paragraph.
  4. Look for repeated words in a paragraph. It helps to use a pencil to circle or box repeated words and ideas.
  5. Look for something mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph and then referred to throughout the paragraph by pronouns or by other words.
  6. Look for ideas that are implied, or suggested, in addition to being named.

**This mnemonic (memory trick) will help you recall these strategies for finding topics.**

#### **FIRST**

- **F is for subject of the First sentence.**
- **R is for a Repeated word or phrase.**
- **ST means that all sentences deal with the Same Thing**

### Phrasing the Topic

- **Write a single word or phrase.** If more than one idea is repeated or referred in a paragraph, the topic needs to be expressed in a phrase rather than a single word.
- **Strike a balance.** Be general enough to include everything discussed but specific enough to exclude what isn’t. The word “tests,” for example, does not tell whether the paragraph is about taking tests, creating them, or cheating on them.

Compare the general and specific topics listed below:

#### General

tests  
broadcasting

#### Specific

taking essay tests in college  
telecommunications policy in China

- **Never write complete sentence.**

#### Correct:

tips for essay tests  
taking essay tests in college

#### Incorrect:

Learn to take essay tests.  
There are many essay tests in college.

## What is this paragraph about?

### Find the Topic.

#### 1. Look for a heading or title.

“Re-Entry Students” is a general topic. This topic seems rather broad. There are many elements in a re-entry student’s life. Which does the author discuss?

To find the specific topic, look for more than one person, place, or idea repeated or referred in a paragraph.

#### 2. Look for pictures or words in special print.

There were no pictures or words in bold or italics.

#### 3. Read the first and last sentences of the paragraph.

In the first sentence the phrase “positive effect” is used. In the last sentence, the verb improve is used twice.

I have found my specific topic:  
the effects of re-entry students.

Now that I have an idea of what my topic is, I double-check by reading the entire paragraph and continue with the Finding the Topic clues.

#### 4. Look for repeated words in a paragraph and/or something mentioned at the beginning and then later referred to by pronouns or by other words.

I see that the author uses the words “help,” “enjoyment,” and “benefits” as synonyms for “improve.” I also notice that the article isn’t just about re-entry students in the classroom, the author repeats the word “community” and renames community as “private businesses and government agencies.”

#### 5. Look for ideas that are suggested in addition to being named. The author gives positive examples of the effects of re-entry students. He explains how they are “models of dedication and hard work,” “add a wealth of information and perspective to a class,” “become workers with better skills,” and

“better-informed citizens and voters.”

### Re-Entry Students

Re-Entry students have a positive effect on college students, instructors, and the community. They are called “re-entry” students because they have been out of school for a period of time and have come back. Often students take college courses and then leave school for a variety of reasons: jobs, military training, family obligations, indecision about careers. No longer are college classes primarily made up of 18- to 20-year-old recent high school graduates. In many colleges, the average age of all students is approaching 30 years. Occasionally a student graduates from college for the first time at the age of 70 years or older. For younger students, re-entry students are often models of dedication and hard work. Returning men and women help set a mature tone in the classroom, and their life experiences add to the enjoyment of class discussions. Instructors often notice improved student interaction in a class with a wide variety of ages and backgrounds. Students who have had careers in the workplace, the military, or as homemakers add a wealth of information and perspective to a class. Finally, the community benefits from better-educated citizens of all ages. Private businesses and government agencies get workers with better skills and the community gets better-informed citizens and voters. When students re-enter college to improve their lives, they also improve the lives of countless others.

[http://faculty.spokanefalls.edu/InetShare/AutoWebs/alexisn/RR4%20Ch%203\\_4.pdf](http://faculty.spokanefalls.edu/InetShare/AutoWebs/alexisn/RR4%20Ch%203_4.pdf)

### Phrase the Topic.

- Write a single word or phrase.
- Strike a balance

The general topic: re-entry students.

The specific topic can be stated in more than one way.

Examples: the effects of re-entry students  
re-entry students’ effects on others

Flemming, Loraine. *Reading for Results*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. (See pages 165-178)

McWhorter, Kathleen T. *Reading Across the Disciplines: College Reading and Beyond*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. San Francisco: Pearson Education, 2012. (See pages 71-76)

Flemming, Loraine. *Reading for Results*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. (See pages 91-)