



Topic Sentences

A topic sentence signals the main idea of a particular paragraph and connects that idea to the essay’s overall argument (thesis). Thus, you should be able to complete the following statements for each of your topic sentences:

- The main focus of this paragraph is _____.
- This topic helps to prove my thesis by claiming _____.

1. Topic + Claim: While both of the topic sentences below tell us this paragraph will discuss Elizabeth Stanton’s Seneca Falls speech about women’s rights, only the second example *argues* something: namely, that her moral arguments for the equality of women were more effective than traditional legal arguments.

Elizabeth Stanton also gave a speech about women’s rights and morality at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848.

In her 1848 Seneca Falls speech, Elizabeth Stanton went beyond mere legal reasons for equality by arguing women could contribute morality and virtue to American politics.

2. Topic Sentences and the Thesis: Note how each topic sentence from this short essay points back to a key term in the thesis statement.

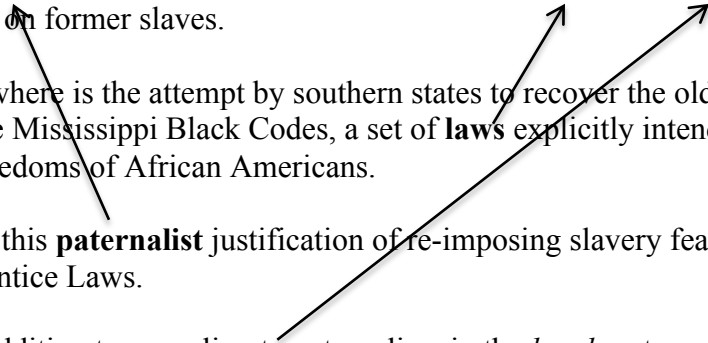
“Paternalism: A Lasting Legacy of Slavery”

Thesis: As the South struggled to recover from the devastations of the Civil War, **paternalism** became a resounding theme in both the **de jure** and **de facto** re-imposition of slavery on former slaves.

TS 1: Nowhere is the attempt by southern states to recover the old order more blatant than in the Mississippi Black Codes, a set of **laws** explicitly intended to curtail the newly-gained freedoms of African Americans.

TS 2: But this **paternalist** justification of re-imposing slavery featured more subtly under the Apprentice Laws.

TS 3: In addition to appealing to paternalism in the *legal* system, former slaveholders still believed in the **social traditions** of the paternalistic system, as a letter by former slave Jourdon Anderson to his old master demonstrates.





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3. Topic Sentences Unify Paragraphs: By stating the main idea of the paragraph, the topic sentence helps the reader follow your thinking. Therefore, it's important that you keep your promise and stay on topic. In the example below, the writer strayed from what they promised to discuss—how the Puritans were more interested in imposing their own religion than in “religious freedom.” In the revision, the writer split the paragraph in two, adding a topic sentence to signal the new idea the second paragraph presents.

ORIGINAL

The idea of “religious freedom” was a legitimate concern of Puritan New England, but the reality is that they were seeking a place to implement their *own* church. The protestant movement was just taking hold, according to the Puritans. The Church of England was allowing far too much government control in religious matters, which was clearly an issue in the eyes of the Puritans, as Cotton argued that all men were corrupt and would abuse any power that was bestowed upon him. The Puritans took firm hold of political affairs when they developed a strong oligarchical society in which the religious leaders had full ability to expel members from the community and dismiss those who were considered to be blasphemers. This is interestingly severe for a community supposedly based upon “religious freedom.” *Another interesting concept of Puritan society was the fact that they considered themselves to be a sort of beacon for the rest of the world. As they worked to create a society which exemplified what they believed to be holiness and glorifying to God, they were not only looking to change the New World, or the colonies, but also to be an example to the Anglican Church. This was apparent as Cotton not only addressed his home community through “Limitation of Government,” but also directly spoke with Lord Say and Seal about the separation of church and state. Similarly, Winthrop may have addressed the general court, but there is no doubt that he intended his message to be spread farther.*

REVISED

The idea of “religious freedom” was a legitimate concern of Puritan New England, but the reality is that they were seeking a place to implement their *own* church. The protestant movement was just taking hold, according to the Puritans. The Church of England was allowing far too much government control in religious matters, which was clearly an issue in the eyes of the Puritans, as Cotton argued that all men were corrupt and would abuse any power that was bestowed upon him. The Puritans took firm hold of church affairs when they developed a strong oligarchical society in which the religious leaders had full ability to expel members from the community and dismiss those who were considered to be blasphemers. This is interestingly severe for a community supposedly based upon “religious freedom.”

The Puritans’ effort to impose church discipline on society and politics was also motivated by their effort to impress religious adversaries overseas. *As they worked to create a society which exemplified what they believed to be holiness and glorifying to God, they were not only looking to change the New World, or the colonies, but also to be an example to the Anglican Church. This was apparent as Cotton not only addressed his home community through “Limitation of Government,” but also directly spoke with Lord Say and Seal about the separation of church and state. Similarly, Winthrop may have addressed the general court, but there is no doubt that he intended his message to spread farther.*