



Topic Sentences and Transitions

Legal writing is often criticized for being awkward or choppy. A few simple tweaks can make your writing flow more smoothly while also improving clarity.

Proper topic sentences and transitions are key to making your legal writing easy to read. Topic sentences allow a reader to instantly know what a paragraph's focus. When your writing changes focus from one issue to another, use transition words to make the process seem natural to a reader. These relatively small and simple devices greatly enhance the reader's ability to follow your argument.

Topic Sentences

- **Rule #1:** Start every paragraph with a topic sentence
 - Lack of a topic sentence makes your reader wait too long to understand what the paragraph is about
 - The longer your reader spends trying to understand what the paragraph is about, the shorter time they will spend on your substantive arguments within the paragraph
 - Lack of a topic sentence harms the paragraph-to-paragraph flow of your memo or brief
- **Rule #2:** Topic sentences always tell the reader what you are trying to prove in that paragraph
 - Topic sentences are especially important in the “Rule” and “Application” sections of your CRAC analysis

Rule: What is the legal principle you will lay out in this paragraph?

- **Example:** Under *Graham*, this court has held that there is little governmental interest in arresting a suspect for a minor offense.
- **Alternative:** Start with the primary textual source from which the rule is derived, such as a Constitutional amendment

Application: What is the outcome when you apply the rule to the facts?

- **Example:** Because the suspect was only wanted for loitering—a minor crime—there was insufficient governmental interest in his arrest.

- **Rule #3:** Topic sentences do not merely repeat point headings.
 - Repeating a point heading is redundant and not helpful to the reader
 - Topic sentences should be more specific than point headings regarding the applicable law or relevant facts
- **Rule #4:** Topic sentences are general, not specific.
 - In general, do not cite to case law or other legal sources.
 - **Exception:** mentioning an already-referenced case that lays out a legal standard (e.g., “Under the *Graham* standard, Officer used unconstitutionally excessive force because”)
 - Do not cite to the record in your topic sentence.

Transitional Words and Phrases

Why Use Transition Words?

- To tie sentences, paragraphs, and sections together
- To show when one section is ending and another is about to begin
- To make where you are in your memo/brief clear
- To make a complex argument easier to follow

When Do I Use Transition Words?

- In the last sentence of a paragraph/section (see explaining/concluding word list below)
- In the first sentence of your Application paragraph (to relate your Application back to the Rule under CRAC structure)
- When analogizing facts/law from a previous case to the facts/law of your case
 - Or when drawing contrasts between your case and a case that came out for the other side
- When bolstering your argument with further examples or sources
- **Note:** Don’t be too repetitive with your choice of transition words. If you do use the same transition word multiple times, try to space them out throughout the document.

Which Words Should I Use?

Analogy or Comparison

- Likewise
- Similarly
- As with X, Y
- By extension
- Much like X, Y
- In the same way
- Just as X, so Y

Explaining or Concluding

- Thus
- Therefore
- Accordingly
- As a result
- To that end
- Consequently
- For that reason

Drawing a Contrast

- Despite
- However
- Yet
- Instead
- Conversely
- By contrast; in contrast
- Nevertheless

To Expand on your Point

- Indeed
- Moreover
- Further
- In fact
- By extension
- In particular
- In other words
- All the more X because of Y
- In effect