

Topic Sentences and Transitions

Proper topic sentences and transitions make your legal writing clearer and your argument or discussion easier to follow. Below are some general points about when and how to use topic sentences and transitions, examples of each, and a list of common transition words.

1. Topic Sentences

- Start every paragraph with a topic sentence, especially in your argument or discussion section.
- Do not simply repeat your headings. Headings summarize sections and subsections; topic sentences summarize the key takeaway from each paragraph.
- A reader should be able to follow the argument in each section simply by reading the topic sentences.
- Topic sentences usually shouldn't contain citations or other specific information. Your citations should be noted in the rest of the paragraph; topic sentences should be more general statements.

Example:

No topic sentence

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. § 4321 *et seq.* (2018), requires environmental review of any major federal action that “significantly affect[s] the quality of the human environment.” *Id.* § 4332(2)(C). Agencies are required to prepare Environmental Impact Statements that consider several factors, including adverse environmental effects and alternatives to the proposed action. *Id.* Further, NEPA instructs federal agencies to review regulations, policies, and procedures for compliance with national environmental policy. *Id.* § 4333.

The above paragraph contains information about NEPA, but no clues for the reader about how this information fits into the larger discussion or argument.

With topic sentence

Federal agencies must assess the environmental impacts of major actions, as well as agency policies and procedures. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. § 4321 *et seq.* (2018), requires environmental review of any major federal action that “significantly affect[s] the quality of the human environment.” *Id.* § 4332(2)(C). Agencies are required to prepare Environmental Impact Statements that consider several factors, including adverse environmental effects and alternatives to the proposed action. *Id.* Further, NEPA instructs federal agencies to review regulations, policies, and procedures for compliance with national environmental policy. *Id.* § 4333.

Including a topic sentence helps the reader understand that this paragraph is part of a larger point about actions federal agencies must take to protect the environment.

2. Transitions

- Transition words can make a complex argument easier for the reader to follow.
- Use transition words to signal the end of one point and the beginning of the next point.
- Also use transition words to make analogies or comparisons and to indicate points of contrast, conclusions, and additional explanations.
- Try to avoid using the same transition words over and over. To help, use the list of common transition words below.

Example:

No transitions

The construction crew members were not the only witnesses to the accident. Office workers in the building across the street felt the ground shake when the crane crashed down. A bus driver on her lunch break watched the wrecking ball careen over her bus and into the bay. Passengers on a tour boat looked on in terror as the massive ball fell from the sky and landed in the water in front of them.

All the information is here, but without transitions it's more difficult for the reader to determine the relationship between this paragraph and other paragraphs in the section.

With transitions

However, the construction crew members were not the only witnesses to the accident. Office workers in the building across the street felt the ground shake when the crane crashed down. A bus driver on her lunch break watched the wrecking ball careen over her bus and into the bay. Finally, passengers on a tour boat looked on in terror as the massive ball fell from the sky and landed in the water in front of them.

With transition words, the reader can see that this paragraph is providing a contrast to the previous one (likely a claim that the construction crew workers were the only witnesses). The reader also knows that there are no more witnesses; they've all now been identified.

Common transition words:

Analogy or Comparison

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

Contrast

Despite
However
Yet
Instead
Conversely
By contrast; in contrast
Nevertheless

Conclusion Indicators

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

Additional Explanation

Indeed
Moreover
Further
In fact
By extension
In particular
In other words
In effect