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A theme phrase is the most important sentence in a paragraph. Sometimes referred to as a key phrase, the theme phrase helps to organize the paragraph by summarizing the information in the paragraph. In formal writing, the theme phrase is usually the first sentence in a paragraph (although it does not have to be). A topic phrase essentially tells readers about what the rest of the paragraph is about. All sentences after her have to give more information about this sentence, prove it by offering facts about it, or describe it in more detail. For example, if the theme phrase concerns the types of threatened species that live in the ocean, then each sentence after that needs to be exposed on this subject. The theme phrases also need to relate to the thesis of writing. The thesis statement is like a script that will tell the reader or listener where you are going with this information or how you are treating it. Each topic phrase will have a theme and a controlling idea. The control idea shows the direction the paragraph will take. Here are some examples: Topic Phrase: There are many reasons why pollution in the city of ABC is the worst in the world. The theme is pollution in the city of ABC is the worst in the world and the controlling idea is many reasons. Topic phrase: Being an effective CEO requires certain characteristics. The theme is to be an effective CEO and the controlling idea are certain characteristics. Theme phrase: There are many possible contributing factors to global warming. The theme is global warming and the controlling idea are contributing factors. Topic phrase: Fortune hunters encounter many difficulties when exploring a shipwreck. The theme is to explore a shipwreck and the controlling idea is many difficulties. Topic phrase: Dogs make wonderful pets because they help you live longer. The theme is dogs make wonderful pets and the controlling idea is because they help you live longer. Theme phrase: Crime in poverty-stricken areas occurs as a result of systemic discrimination. The issue is crime in areas affected by poverty and the controlling idea is systemic discrimination. Topic phrase: Teenage pregnancy can be prevented by improved education. The theme is teenage pregnancy can be prevented and the controlling idea is improved education. Topic phrase: Cooking requires a number of different skills. The theme is cooking and the controlling idea are many different skills. Topic phrase: It's important to be ready before buying a house. The theme is to buy a house and the idea of control is that it is important to be ready. Topic phrase: High school graduation is important for many different reasons. The theme is to graduate from high school and the controlling idea are many different reasons. Topic phrase: Having a first child is difficult because of significant adjustments in your life. The theme is to have a first child and the controlling idea are significant adjustments in your life. Topic Remodeling a kitchen successfully requires research and a good eye. The theme is to remodel a kitchen and the idea of control is requires research and a good eye. A carefully thought-out theme phrase has two functions. First, it helps you, the author, stay focused. Second, a clearly stated topic and an idea of control will give readers the tools they need to clearly understand what you have to say. Remember that topic phrases set the tone of the paragraph and should relate back to the thesis or the main idea of the article. House model on money stack as examples of topic phrases Topic phrases and signboards make the claims of an essay clear to a reader. Good trials contain both. Theme phrases reveal the main point of a paragraph. They show the relationship of each paragraph to the essay thesis, telegraph the point of a paragraph and tell your reader what to expect in the following paragraph. The theme phrases also establish their relevance immediately, making it clear why the points they are making are important to the main ideas of the essay. They argue instead of reporting. The signs, as the name suggests, prepare the reader for a change in the direction of the argument. They show how much the argument of the essay has progressed in relation to the claims of the thesis. Topic phrases and signage cards occupy a middle ground in the writing process. They are not even the first thing a writer needs to address (thesis and the broad traces of the structure of an essay are); nor are they the last (that's when you attend the editing and polishing at the sentence level). Topic phrases and signs provide the structure and meaning of an essay for a reader, so they are useful diagnostic tools for the writer—they let you know if your thesis is debatable—and essential guides for the reader Topic Phrase Shapes Sometimes topic phrases are actually two or even three sentences long. If the first makes a claim, the second can reflect on that statement, explaining it further. Think of these phrases as asking and answering two critical questions: How does the phenomenon you're discussing work? Why does it work how it works? There is no formula defined for writing a topic phrase. Instead, you should work to vary the way your topic phrases take. Repeated many times, any method becomes tiring. Here are some approaches. Complex sentences. Topic phrases at the beginning of a paragraph often match a transition from the previous paragraph. This can be done by writing a sentence that contains subordinate and independent clauses, as in the example below. Although The Young Woman With A Jug of Water portrays an unknown middle-class woman in a common task, the image is more than realistic; the painter [Vermeer] imposed his own order upon him to strengthen it. This phrase a useful principle of transitions: always move from old to new information. The subordinate clause (from although to task) recapitulates information from previous paragraphs; the independent independent (starting with the image and the painter) introduces the new information — an affirmation about how the image works (more than Realistic) and why it works as it works (Vermeer strengthens the image in imposing order). Questions. Questions, sometimes in pairs, also make good topic phrases (and signs). Consider this: Does the promise of stability justify this immutable hierarchy? We can assume that the following paragraph or section will answer the question. Questions are, by definition, a form of research and therefore require an answer. Good rehearsals strive for that momentum. Bridge sentences. As questions, bridge phrases (the term is by John Trimble) make an excellent substitute for more formal topic phrases. Bridge phrases indicate both what came before and what comes next (they bridge paragraphs) without the formal pitfalls of multiple clauses: But there is a clue to this puzzle. Pivots. Topic phrases do not always appear at the beginning of a paragraph. When they come in the middle, they indicate that the paragraph will change direction, or pivot. This strategy is particularly useful for dealing with counter-evidence: a paragraph begins to admit a point or affirm a fact (Psychologist Sharon Hymer uses the term anaarcisist friendship to describe the early stage of a friendship like that between Celie and Shug); after accompanying this initial statement with evidence, she then reverses direction and establishes a claim (Still... this narcissistic phase of Celie and Shug's relationship is merely transitory. Hymer admits...). The pivot always needs a sign, a word as but, still, or nevertheless, or a longer sentence or phrase that indicates an overface. It often takes more than one sentence to stay in your point of view. Signaling Signs Signage functions as topic phrases for entire sections in an essay. (In longer runs, sections typically contain more than a single paragraph.) They inform the reader that the essay is taking a turn in their argument: diving into a related theme, as a counter-argument, intensifying their claims with a complication, or pausing to give an essential historical or academic background. By revealing the architecture of the essay itself, the plates remind readers of what the test's bets are: what it is and what it is being written for. Flagging can be performed in one or two sentences at the beginning of a paragraph or in entire paragraphs that serve as transitions between one part of the argument and the other. The following example comes from an essay that examines how a painting by Monet, The Gare Saint-Lazare: Arrival of a Train, challenges Zola's statements about Impressionist art. The student writer wonders if Monet's impressionism is really as dedicated to avoiding ideas in favor of direct-sense impressions as Zola's statements seem to suggest. This is the beginning of the third section of the essay: It is evident painting that Monet found Gare Saint-Lazare fascinating motif at the most fundamental level of the light game, as well as the highest level of social relevance. The arrival of a train explores both extremes of expression. At the fundamental extreme, Monet satisfies the impressionist goal of capturing the effects of the full spectrum of light in a scene. The writer signs this section in the first sentence, reminding readers of the bets of the essay itself with simultaneous references to the impression of meaning (game of light) and intellectual content (social relevance). The second sentence follows this idea, while the third serves as a theme phrase for the paragraph. The paragraph thereafter begins with a theme phrase about the cultural message of the painting, something that the signphrase provides not only reminding readers of the essay stakes, but also, and clearly, indicating what the section itself will contain. Copyright 2000, Elizabeth Abrams, for harvard university writing center

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