

Prompt for Paragraph #2 | Skill or Attribute: Topic Sentence

Now that we have a broad overview of European civilization, our subsequent paragraphs focus more sharply on particular issues. We start with the Scientific Revolution, the first part of our unit #1. The skill or attribute for this paragraph is **the topic sentence**.

For this second paragraph, we approach the task through triads. A **triad** is a list of three items (people, places, ideas, or concepts) that are connected in a fundamental way in the context of the history that we are studying. The basic goal of the paragraph is to identify and explore the historical relationship(s) among the three items. Focus above all on *the connections*, rather than addressing each item in isolation: How are the items *related* to one another? In some cases the relationship will be causal (that is, one thing caused another or others to occur). In some cases, one item may be a context in which the other two things happened. In still other cases, one item may be an issue over which two people or ideologies disagreed. And so on. I myself usually have a pretty good idea about how one might put the three items together, but in virtually every case there are a number of different connections you can make, all of which are valid. Therefore, I am not seeking a “correct” answer (I doubt that such a thing exists), but rather a clear, well-argued, and convincing paragraph. For paragraph #2, consider three possible triads:

Nicolaus Copernicus Catholic Church mathematics	Claudius Ptolemy Nicolaus Copernicus sun and earth	medieval science new astronomy matter and motion
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Your first task is to choose ONE of these three triads and make it the basis for your paragraph. The choice is entirely yours, and I see none of these as intrinsically better or worse than the others. Your best bet is to choose the one that you feel the most confident about addressing. Probably, you should review the reading before making your choice, so that you can have some idea about how to proceed.

The key skill or attribute for this paragraph is **the topic sentence**. Indeed, it is almost impossible to do this exercise well *without* a topic sentence. Experience shows that the best triad-paragraphs are the ones in which the author includes all three items in the first sentence, which becomes that topic sentence (and thus the thesis or argument of the entire short essay). Everything that follows should, in one way or another, support that topic sentence (because that is what paragraphs do). The topic sentence is obviously very important for the success of the paragraph, and you should therefore spend a good deal of time formulating it. Make sure, even if you take some time to explain the individual elements of the triad, that you also address the *connections* among them. In short, writing a good topic sentence should be at the center of your attention in this exercise. My assumption is that you have already assimilated skill/attribute #1, and that your paragraph will have a good title.

Be sure also that you have considered all the available evidence (for this paragraph, that means Hirst, our reader, and lecture notes). Citations from sources are essential, but these should be short and very carefully chosen, and it is best to cite primary sources rather than secondary ones. Block quotations are definitely out, since the essay should be the product of your own analysis. Think hard about the organization of the essay and make sure that you proofread it very

carefully. Remember, I cannot read your mind; poor organization and bad grammar undermine the ability of an author to convey his or her ideas. More generally, look upon the exercise as the opportunity not only to recount what you have read, but also to *reflect* on it.

How you write your paragraph depends above all on you, but here I offer a few general ground rules and pieces of advice:

- All the points made for paragraph #1 about the essay's title apply here as well.
- Your priority should be to develop a good topic sentence, which for this exercise will be a sentence that includes all three items of the triad.
- Use the handout "Effective Paragraphs" as well as "The Paragraph Manifesto" as beneficial guides, paying close attention in particular to the rules for submission.
- On the matter of citation, simply use this system: (Hirst, 25) or (Reader, 7) or (Lecture 2/13). But in the case of the reader, be sure that the author of your reference is clear. You could write, for example: *Stewart Easton proposes that medieval thinkers postulated a "prime mover," which they understood to be God* (Reader, 3).
- Evidence from sources should take the form mostly of paraphrasing, with direct citation of a few key words and phrases. Citation from primary sources is more valuable than from secondary (those primary sources are marked with [P] in the reader). Given that you only have a paragraph at your disposal, quotations probably need to be quite short—after all, you want this to be *your* paragraph. Under no circumstances should you have a block quotation. Double- and triple-check when you quote to be sure that you have done so accurately.
- Our first paragraphs revealed that a half-page is not enough to make an effective case. Thus even as I recognize that a short paragraph *could* be very effective and successful, I will be prejudiced against those that are only a half-page in length. At the same time, my advice would be to strive to keep the paragraph on a single page.
- The word "led" (e.g. "this led to that") is very weak and usually raises more questions than it answers. So I would seek to avoid that word.
- Be sure to give yourself time to write *and then revise* the paragraph. Without revision, the paragraph will probably be no good.