# Agriculture

## Using topic sentences

### Content and alignment

Learners are often expected to learn course content through reading.  This is often in the form of workbooks, webpages, PowerPoints, posters or tutor notes.  Feedback from Agriculture tutors has indicated that many learners struggle to remember and apply what they have read.  It is often assumed that learners are able to read to learn, and have strategies to do this, or that this will happen naturally.  Unfortunately, many learners struggle to read to learn, as they have little in the way of reading strategies, except to read and re-read.  The good news is that reading strategies can be taught and learned within the context of the Agriculture content.

### Intent

The intent of this resource is to provide learners with an additional reading strategy which they can continue to use independently throughout their lives.  Additionally, tutors can use this approach to design a range of reading and thinking activities.

This resource is designed to develop learners' independent reading skills by teaching them to use topic sentences as a quick and effective method to get an overview of a text.

#### *The nature of topic sentences*

A well-written paragraph in a workbook often has a predictable structure.  The first sentence is usually (but not always) a **topic sentence**.  This sentence states the **main idea** of the paragraph.  The remaining sentences provide supporting details and additional information in support of the main idea.  As such, before reading for detail, learners can read the first sentence of each paragraph to gain an overview of the text.  This will help them:

- skim the text
- set goals for reading
- generate a list of questions they have regarding the content
- predict what information may be in the text
- get the big picture to organise the details.

### Sequence

There are three parts to this sequence.  Learners will:

1. understand that paragraphs have topic sentences
2. read topic sentences and generate questions
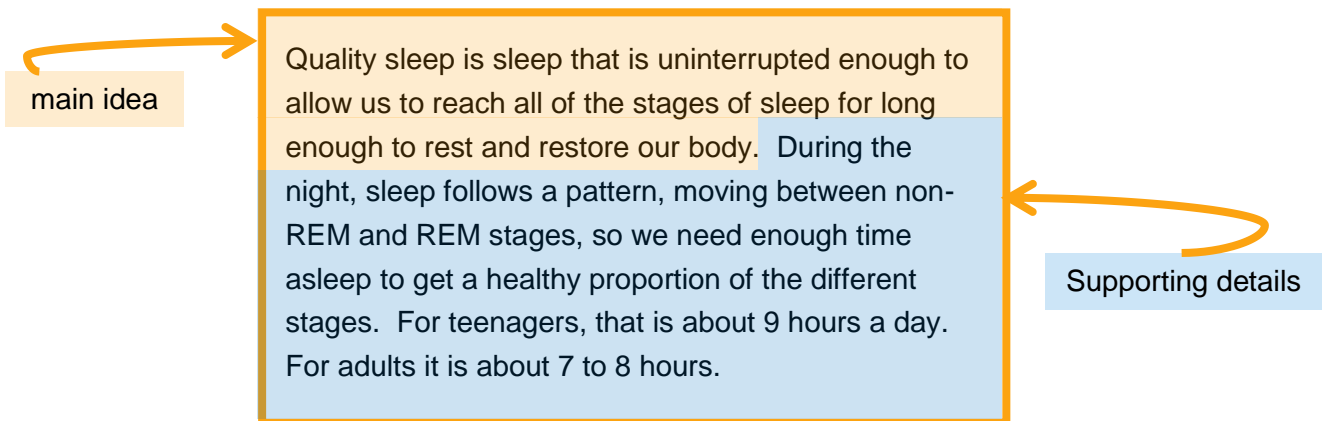3. predict content based on topic sentences.

## 1. *Understand that paragraphs have topic sentences*

Many learners will be unaware that paragraphs have a main idea and that the content of the paragraph can be summarised into a main idea.  In this step you introduce them to the concept of a main idea.

**Step one**: Select a paragraph from a course workbook and ensure all learners have the paragraph in front of them or project it on the whiteboard.

Ask learners to read the paragraph and discuss with others what the main idea is.

For example, this paragraph taken from a workbook on 'sleep' has a main idea and some supporting details:

main idea

Quality sleep is sleep that is uninterrupted enough to allow us to reach all of the stages of sleep for long enough to rest and restore our body.  During the night, sleep follows a pattern, moving between non-REM and REM stages, so we need enough time asleep to get a healthy proportion of the different stages.  For teenagers, that is about 9 hours a day. For adults it is about 7 to 8 hours.

Supporting details

**Step two:** Show learners through examples that many paragraphs can be divided between the topic sentence, which contains the main idea, and the remainder, which usually holds supporting details.

**Note:** In some cases, the main idea is either in the second sentence or dispersed among the other sentences.  It is beneficial to develop learners' critical skills by asking them to identify the topic sentence, keeping in mind that it need not necessarily be the first sentence.

## 2. Read topic sentences and generate questions

**Step one:** Ask learners to read the first sentence of each of the paragraphs on a page.

---

### Quality Sleep

It's not just the number of hours in bed that's important—it's the quality of those hours of sleep. If you're giving yourself plenty of time for sleep, but you're still having trouble waking up in the morning or staying alert all day, you may not be spending enough time in the different stages of sleep.

Quality sleep is sleep that is uninterrupted enough to allow us to reach all of the stages of sleep for long enough to rest and restore our body. During the night, sleep follows a pattern, moving between non-REM and REM stages, so we need enough time asleep to get a healthy proportion of the different stages. For teenagers, that is about 9 hours a day. For adults it is about 7 to 8 hours.

Factors affecting quality of sleep are things that either support or undermine us getting a full, restorative sleep. There are many factors that can affect your quality of sleep. If it is noisy, or there are sudden noises, your sleep may become interrupted. As people age, their quality of sleep starts to decrease as they may find it more difficult to get to sleep and stay asleep. Some medications, too, can impact on sleep. Medications might cause drowsiness, wakefulness, insomnia, or nightmares.

Each stage of sleep in the sleep cycle offers benefits to the sleeper. However, deep sleep (Stages 3 and 4) and REM sleep are particularly important. A normal adult spends approximately 50% of total sleep time in Stage 2 sleep, 20% in REM sleep, and 30% in the remaining stages, including deep sleep.

The most damaging effects of a shortage of sleep or interruptions to sleep are from inadequate deep sleep. Deep sleep is a time when the body repairs itself and builds up energy for the day ahead. It plays a major role in maintaining your health, stimulating growth and development, repairing muscles and tissues, and boosting your immune system. In order to wake up energised and refreshed, getting quality deep sleep is essential.

---

**Step two**: Ask learners to discuss the text in groups and begin to generate some questions. Good prompts include:

- What do we know about the text?
- What is the main idea of the text?
- Does it raise any interesting issues?
- Do you agree or disagree with the text?

**Step three**: Begin to write their thoughts, questions and ideas on the whiteboard. Ideally, the questions will raise the learners' interest in reading the text again to find the answers. The template in Agriculture: Using topic sentences – template can be used to record their ideas.

### 3. Predict content based on topic sentences

A strategy of good readers is that they predict what will be in a text before they read it. Reading the topic sentences and then raising questions provides learners with information to guide their predictions.

**Step one**: Now that the learners have read the topic sentences and generated some questions, ask them to make predictions about the text.

A good method of doing this is to:

1. select a single paragraph
2. read the topic sentence
3. ask the learners what *they think* the supporting details will be, what content will be in the other sentences.

**For example**: Here is a topic sentence:

> Factors affecting quality of sleep are things that either support or undermine us getting a full, restorative sleep.

Now ask the learners what they think will be in the remainder of the paragraph.

Learners may say:

> It might list things that wreck your sleep.
> Maybe it will tell us how to get good sleep.
> It might talk about things you can do to improve your sleep.

**Note:** These predictions will get better as learners engage in this practice.

**Step two**: After predicting what will be in the supporting details, ask learners to read and evaluate if they were correct or not. Learners can then repeat this process with the remaining paragraphs.

See Agriculture: Using topic sentences - activities for two classroom activities.

# Summary

Learners are often told to skim and scan texts before reading.  Yet many learners are simply not sure what parts of the text to read when doing so.  Informing learners that topic sentences tend to be the first sentence of each paragraph and that they contain the main idea provides learners with a strategy that can used in a variety of ways.  By taking learners through the sequence described above learners will begin to use the strategy themselves for their own purposes.  Their ability to do this will improve and they will be better, more strategic readers.