

4.

The Topic Sentence

How to stitch scattered
thoughts into a basic idea

MANY TIMES when writing or speaking, you'll be directed to "keep your copy short," or to "boil down what you have to say."

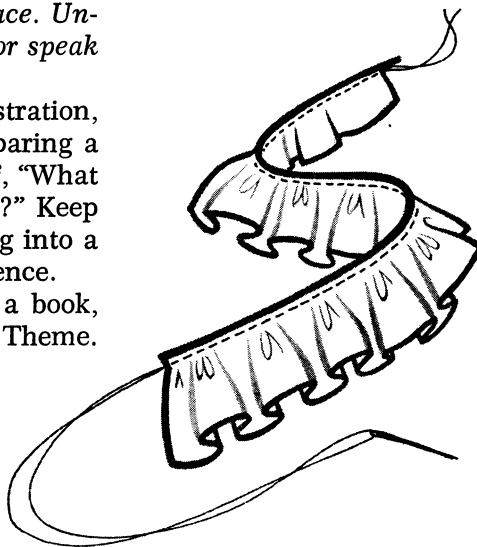
At first this may seem difficult if not impossible to do. It becomes easier when you learn to apply this fundamental rule:

In all communications — written or spoken — narrow down your thoughts to the one principal idea you want to put across, then expand that idea to fit within the limitations of time or space. Until you do this, you are not ready to write or speak at any length.

Whether you are planning a demonstration, writing an article for a magazine, or preparing a speech or a program, keep asking yourself, "What am I trying to say? What is my message?" Keep nagging at it until you distill your thinking into a single statement. There is your topic sentence.

In a sustained piece of writing, as in a book, that distilled thought is called the Central Theme. Every worth-reading book has one.

The topic sentence is the thread that gathers thoughts together and stitches them into a central idea.



**REASONING
AND SEASONING**

Good writing is a combination of reasoning and seasoning: reasoning out the one big point you want to make, then seasoning it with fresh ideas, fresh approach.

Bruce Catton, author of a number of books about the Civil War, once said, "I write about the GI — the ordinary foot soldier of that war." There, in a sentence, is the central theme that runs through his books.

In this book, "How to Write for Homemakers," the central theme is suggested in the first chapter: *Be sure that everything you write creates pictures in the minds of homemakers. Be sure that every photograph you set up — or use — says something interesting or worthwhile.* To support that theme, the other 20 chapters of the book set forth suggestions designed to help young home economists in specific writing and photographic jobs that go with home economics communications.

Applying the Principle

How does the topic-sentence-central-theme principle apply to types of home economics communications other than writing? Let's look at five home economists.

A sewing teacher declared: "If I don't do another thing this term, I'm going to teach those youngsters how to use pins in sewing." Of course she taught much more than pinning, but all of her teaching was strengthened because she had pinpointed her aim.

One dietitian planning a school lunch program said, "If through my way of writing quantity recipes I can just help the cafeteria cooks to develop judgment in their cooking, we'll have good food." She knew what was needed. She knew what she wanted to do. And she did it!

A home economist working for a utility company decided to do a demonstration featuring small pieces of equipment. In narrowing down her thinking she said, "I might show how to prepare a meal without turning on the range." Narrowing still further she decided to demonstrate how a hostess, using electric skillet, blender, toaster, cof-

Establishing a strong topic sentence does two things. It helps the writer as well as the reader to get under way quickly, and keeps her from wandering away from the main line of thought.

feemaker, and the like, could prepare supper in the living room without leaving the scene of the party even temporarily. This she did, calling her demonstration, "How to Be a Guest at Your Own Party." Needless to say a good time was had by everyone in the audience.

One homemaker, finding that the training of her children was going in all directions, took a day to herself to ponder the question, "What is the one big thing I want to instill in my children?" Her pondering led her to decide that, above all else, she wanted to teach her children not only to think for themselves, but to think about others. With this for her main objective, small details in behavior took on proper perspective.

One business home economist, looking at a food setup ready to be photographed, said, "There's something wrong here. There is no one center of interest." She then proceeded to rearrange the foods, eliminating some of the dishes, pushing others into the background.

See how it works? Once you can put a handle on your idea, you can carry it any distance.

In advertising, that distilled thought (i.e., topic sentence) forms the headline. In a magazine article it is usually the title or the lead paragraph. In a demonstration, speech, or program, the name or theme (in other words, the topic sentence) constitutes the "bait" which tempts people to come and hear what will be said.

Let us assume, then, that you have distilled your thinking into a principal idea. You are now ready to expand and develop it in more detail.

How do you do this? With paragraphs.

Paragraphs Are Important

"All writing," says one teacher, "begins with the lowly paragraph." She then goes on to say, "If you can write a well-constructed paragraph, you can write a library."

AVOID GENERALITIES

For color, variety, vigor, and clarity, be specific. In a market release, for example, avoid general statements as, "Now is the time to make jams and jellies." Instead, say (in effect), "Make strawberry jam this week (or month) while berries are at their cheapest and best."

THEME

The theme of a piece of writing should appear in the lead and be kept running like a thread throughout — though not to the point of being tiresome or obvious.

FATHER KNOWS BEST

A criticism often made of home economics writing is that it sounds "girlish." Perhaps the criticism is sound, perhaps not. But whether or not, it's well to get a man's comment on what you write. His direct way of stating facts will help you to put strength into your copy.

**QUOTABLES
FROM NOTABLES**

Why is Mark Twain widely quoted? Because he had the ability to short-cut a thought in a fresh, sharp way that made it memorable. Why do we remember lines from the poems of Emily Dickinson? For the same reason. You can apply the same technique when writing about home things.

What constitutes a well-constructed paragraph? Much depends on its containing one sentence that is all-important. In other words, every paragraph needs a "mother sentence" that is stronger than the other sentences which might be thought of as "children."

One way to test the strength of your own paragraph structures is to reread something you have written. Then, with pencil in hand, underscore the principal sentence in each paragraph. Whether it appears at the beginning of the paragraph, in the middle, or at the end is not important, just so it is there. But if those "mother sentences" are lacking, the "children sentences" are almost certain to get out of hand!

(Possible exception: In recipes and directions, sentences are usually of equal value. No one sentence dominates a paragraph.)

Once you learn the value of the central theme, the topic sentence, you will find your writing strengthened. You will be less likely to switch from one point of view to another in the same paragraph. You will not be tempted to string sentences together with those measly little words, "and" and "but." Because you have weighed your thoughts, you will substitute definitive words for empty ones.

Good writing is a mass of complexities. It is made up of themes within themes; strong paragraphs growing out of the main topic sentence of a piece of writing. Yet all writing is reducible to fundamentals. The better you understand those fundamentals, the simpler the complexities become.

Now, we (R/C) ask ourselves: What one basic idea did we hope to get across in this chapter? Just this: Narrow down your thinking to a single topic sentence, then expand it within the limits of time or space. Look upon it as the sturdy thread that can "stitch up" a piece of writing or an oral presentation, and make it hold together!