

## Writing-as-thinking: Topic Sentences

*“Everyone who has written at any substantial length, whether prose or poetry, knows that the process of writing itself leads to previously unthought thoughts. Or to be more precise, writing crystallizes previously half-formulated or unformulated thoughts, gives them form, and extends chains of thoughts in new directions. ... By writing, in other words, you are literally firing up your brain and therefore stirring up your conscious thoughts and something new emerges.”*

— Lynn Hunt [“How Writing Leads to Thinking”](#)

The goal of this exercise is to leverage the interdependent between writing and thinking and, ultimately, to show your students how writing is, in fact, thinking. More precisely, the goal is for students to create their own, original and arguable thought in the form of a topic sentence.

Coming up with your own, arguable thought is hard, and often we expect such thoughts to somehow spring magically from our brains. However, the easiest way to start this process is to start with what someone else has written:

### **Step One: Finding your evidence**

The student should first write about something they’ve read or watched for class. However, they should not try to write about everything at once, or develop some broad summary of the material. Instead, they should choose something very specific: a quote, a moment in a film, a particular scene in story, for example, and write that down. The student should select something that they are curious about or that resonates with them in some way. For example, here a student is quoting from an article on surveillance:

In the article “A Violin Requiem for Privacy,” Elias Aboujaoude writes about a boy named Tyler Clementi that committed suicide, due to the secret surveillance his roommate Dharun Ravi planted in their room. On the webcam, it caught Tyler having a sexual encounter with another guy, and Dharun live streamed this without Tyler’s consent. Aboujaoude suggests, “The small inviolate zone of privacy that we all need, and that is absolutely crucial to our psychological equilibrium, has now become virtually impossible to maintain.”

So, this first step is simply about having the student write down whatever they will use as “evidence”—which here means something that is not their own idea, opinion, or creation.

### **Step Two: Interpreting the evidence**

After they select their evidence, the student begins the process of interpreting it. They should focus on the language being used by the author or speaker, or exactly what is being portrayed and how if they have chosen a scene from a film, for example. In terms of this particular quote, it’s going to be crucial for the student to try to interpret the connection between privacy and psychological stability. This student does a pretty good job:

What Aboujaoude seems to be saying is that the very limited privacy we have as a human being is significant to us and is difficult to protect. With our secrets and privacy shattering down and getting discovered, our mental and psychological state is at risk.

In this step the student is still writing about someone else’s ideas, thoughts, or creation, but doing it in their words. Hopefully, this will really start to “fire up” the brain, and those “unthought thoughts” will begin to emerge. Again, though, by starting the the writing-as-thinking process with another person’s words or creation, the student finds a way to come to their own ideas without the pressure of trying to *start* with those ideas.

### **Step Three: Reacting to the evidence/interpretation**

At this point, the student should feel more ready to get to their own thoughts and ideas about whatever they have written about to this point. So, now, instead of interpreting another’s words, they are reacting with their own thoughts and ideas. This can often begin with agreeing or disagreeing, and evolve into more complex reactions. Here’s what this student does:

I agree with what Aboujaoude is saying about how our privacy is very limited and hard to control, but I would also like to add that, with surveillance starting to become a norm in the world, people tend to change how the community perceives them in order to be accepted in society. They do this by changing their appearance and personality, whether it be to dress a certain way or act differently. Surveillance tends to make people feel they must adjust and display themselves differently for the world, just so they can feel accepted. The consequences and impacts of having a surveilled world are, humanity turning towards secrecy and hiding behind bars. Individuals are not being able to show their true colors because they are afraid of being different just like how Tyler had to hide that he had interests in the same sex.

What’s crucial when doing the reaction is that the student moves “outside” the text (or film or story). This means that, although they may start writing about people in the article or movie or

story, they end by writing about people more generally. In this case, the quote the student is using is already applied to people in general—“our” psychological equilibrium does not refer to anyone specifically. However, especially when writing about a scene in a film or story, the move “outside” the text becomes more obvious. Regardless, you want to push the student to come to a more general truth that is relevant to many, if not all people; in other words, you want to push them to say something arguable. Here, the connection the student is making between surveillance, as the attempt to uncover secrets, leading to greater secrecy fits that bill.

#### **Step Four: Developing the topic sentence**

At this point, doing the topic sentence becomes evidence of a higher level of thinking: it asks the writer to take all of their thoughts thus far and “boil them down” to the one, essential idea that they think they are writing about in the paragraph(s) associated with that topic sentence. Here’s what this student came up with:

Surveillance can negatively impact individuals, by changing how people conduct themselves to fit in with the norms of society. Knowing that exposure is the outcome of surveillance, human beings mold and shape themselves to have a place of acceptance in humanity.

What we are looking for in the topic sentence is an arguable idea. In other words, the idea should not be:

1. A fact (“Surveillance is everywhere”)
2. A cliché (“Be yourself”)
3. Someone else’s idea (here the student “passes” off an idea written about in a text as their own)

One good test to judge whether or not an idea is arguable is for the student to ask themselves if anyone would disagree with what they’ve written. If they can’t readily imagine someone being able to disagree with the idea in their topic sentence, it’s probably either a fact or cliché. Again, in this case, the student’s idea that the widespread surveillance causes us to “mold” ourselves into acceptable people so as to protect ourselves from further exposure is an arguable idea, because I think many would say that the goal of surveillance is to detect criminal activity or to protect ourselves.

Hopefully, the student did not know that they “thought” this idea before they came up with it. That means writing is being used as a tool to find out what they think, rather than prove what they already believe.

So, here are the students paragraphs in full:

Surveillance can negatively impact individuals, by changing how people conduct themselves to fit in with the norms of society. Knowing that exposure is the outcome of surveillance, human beings mold and shape themselves to have a place of acceptance in humanity. For example, in the article “A Violin Requiem for Privacy,” Elias Aboujaoude writes about a boy named Tyler Clementi that committed suicide, due to the secret surveillance his roommate Dharun Ravi planted in their room. On the webcam, it caught Tyler having a sexual encounter with another guy, and Dharun live streamed this without Tyler’s consent. Aboujaoude suggests, “The small inviolate zone of privacy that we all need, and that is absolutely crucial to our psychological equilibrium, has now become virtually impossible to maintain.” What Aboujaoude seems to be saying is that the very limited privacy we have as a human being is significant to us and is difficult to protect. With our secrets and privacy shattering down and getting discovered, our mental and psychological state is at risk.

I agree with what Aboujaoude is saying about how our privacy is very limited and hard to control, but I would also like to add that, with surveillance starting to become a norm in the world, people tend to change how the community perceives them in order to be accepted in society. They do this by changing their appearance and personality, whether it be to dress a certain way or act differently. Surveillance tends to make people feel they must adjust and display themselves differently for the world, just so they can feel accepted. The consequences and impacts of having a surveilled world are, humanity turning towards secrecy and hiding behind bars. Individuals are not being able to show their true colors because they are afraid of being different just like how Tyler had to hide that he had interests in the same sex.