

# Features of Paragraph-initial Sentences in L1 and L2 Student Writing

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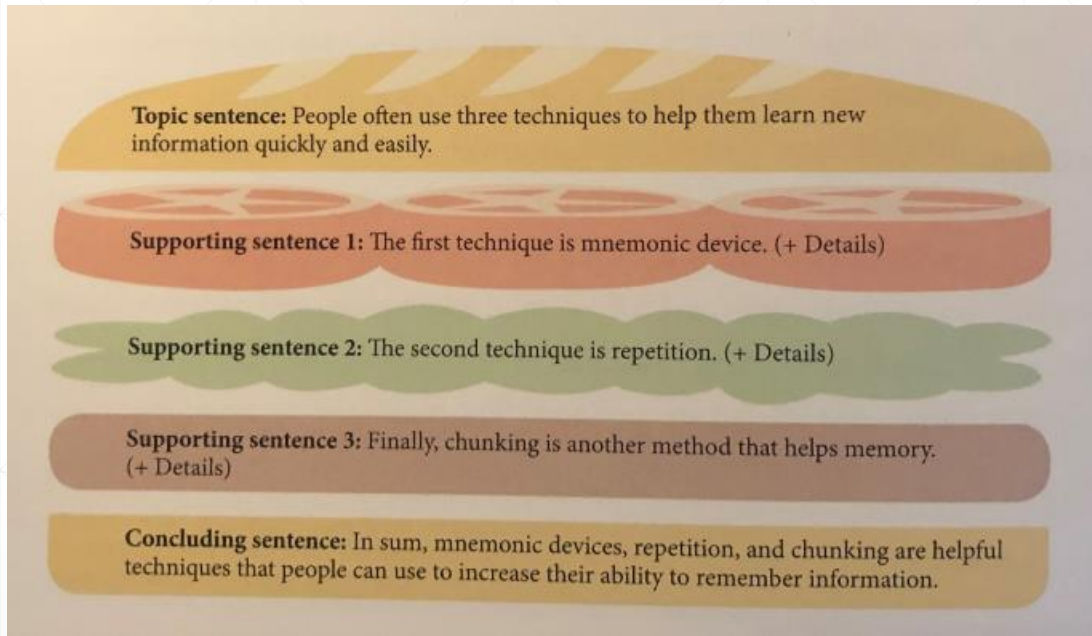
# Features of Paragraph-initial Sentences in L1 and L2 Student Writing

- Paragraphs and Topic Sentences in Student Essay Writing
- Research on Topic Sentences in Student Writing
- Present Study
- Corpora and Procedure

# Paragraphs in Student Essay Writing

- Teaching the paragraph is an essential part of academic writing instruction
- Pedagogy tends to be prescriptive
- Different models of the student essay emphasize the topic sentence
- “All paragraphs have a **topic sentence** and supporting sentences” (Oshima, Houge 2014, p. 5)
- PEEL / TEEL / MEAL
  - P = Point
  - T = Topic sentence
  - M = Main idea

# Topic sentence



The paragraph sandwich  
(Bauer et al. 2016, p. 22)

## Topic sentence

- is often the first sentence of a paragraph
- introduces the paragraph's main idea to the reader
- has the topic ('What is this paragraph about?') and the controlling idea ('What part of the topic will this paragraph focus on?')
- is the most general sentence in the paragraph
- is neither too specific nor too general

# Research on Topic Sentences

- “only 13% of the expository paragraphs of contemporary professional writers begin with a topic sentence” (Braddock 1974, p. 301)
- “95% of all discourse block units contained an explicit topic idea, and approximately two-thirds of the time those ideas were at the beginning of the discourse block” (Smith 2008, p. 86)
- “topic sentences are non-essential elements of paragraphs, though more commonly occurring in some genres than others”(McGee 2017, p. 385)
- “topic sentences are not necessary; that when they are present, they can be found anywhere in paragraphs ... some topic sentences require several paragraphs for development” (McKnight 2020, p. 12)

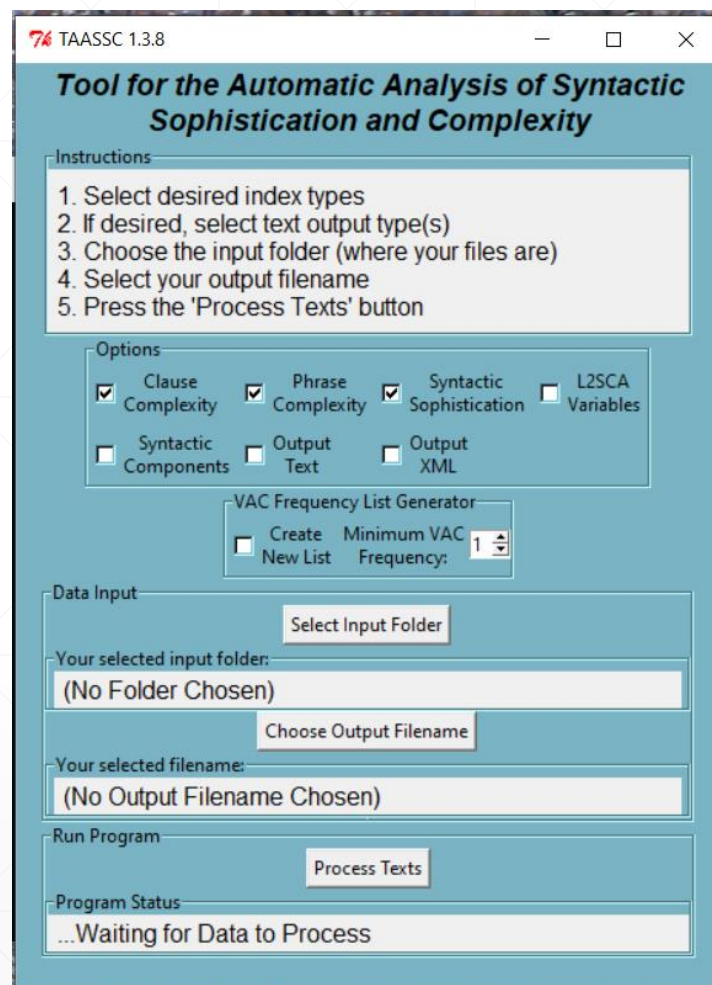
# Present Study

- L2 students are instructed to utilize topic sentences in the initial position of in the body paragraphs of their essays
- Do these paragraph-initial sentences share any linguistic features that differentiate them from the other sentences in the body paragraphs?

# Corpora and Procedure

- LOCNESS: The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (Granger 1998)
  - A selection of 65 timed L1 student essays written at two American universities
- Wordsmith 8
- TAASC 1.3.8: Tool for the Automatic analysis of Syntactic Sophistication and Complexity (Lu 2010; Kyle 2016)

# TAASC





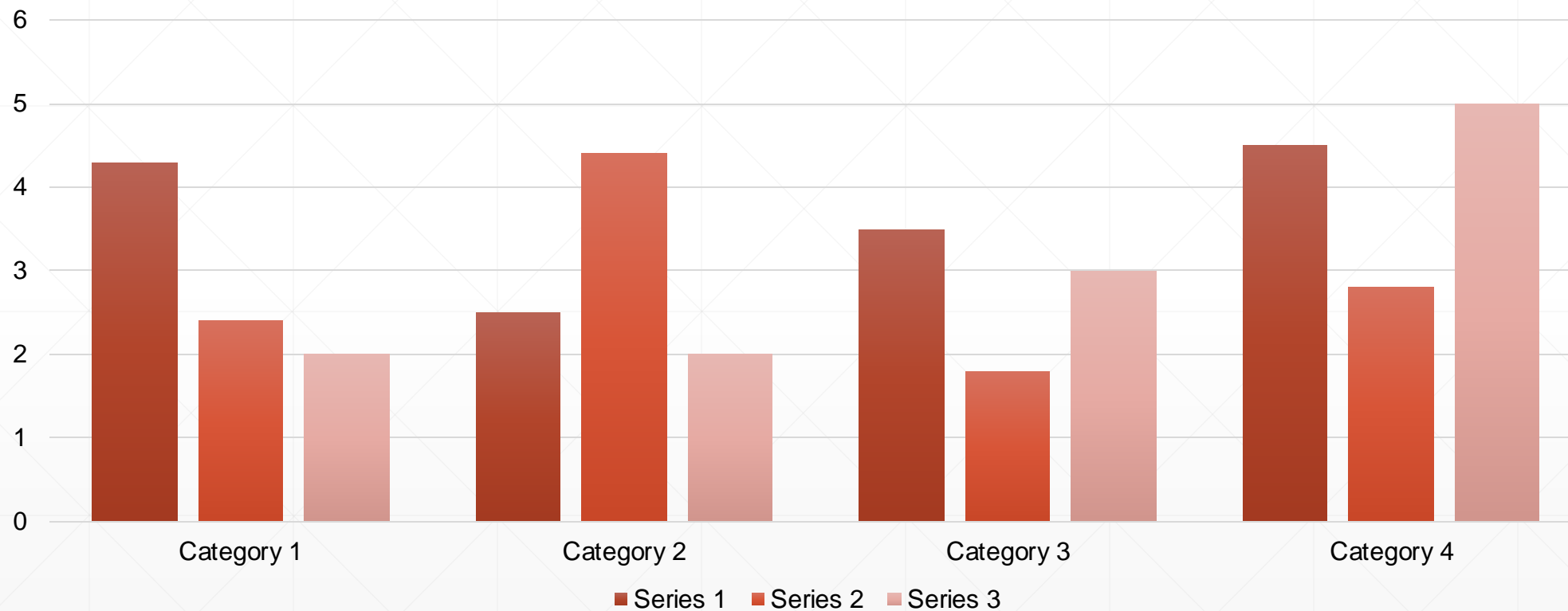
# Syntactic complexity

Index Name	Index Type	Description	Numerator	Denominator
1 av_sent_len	Unit Length	mean length of sentence	number of words in text	number of sentences in text
2 av_t_unit_len	Unit Length	mean length of T-unit	number of words in text	number of T-units in text
3 av_clause_len	Unit Length	mean length of clause	number of words in text	number of clauses in text
4 av_clause_sent	Clausal	clauses per sentence	number of clauses in text	number of sentences in text
5 av_verb_phrase_tunit	Clausal	verb phrases per T-unit	number of verb phrases in text	number of T-units in text
5 av_clause_tunit	Clausal	clauses per T-unit	number of clauses in text	number of T-units in text
7 perc_dep_clause	Clausal	dependent clauses per clause	number of dependent clauses in text	number of clauses in text
3 dep_clause_tunit	Clausal	dependent clauses per T-unit	number of dependent clauses in text	number of T-units in text
3 av_tunits_sent	Clausal	T-units per sentence	number of T-units in text	number of sentences in text
3 perc_complex_tunits	Clausal	complex T-unit ratio	number of complex T-units in text	number of T-units in text
1 av_coordinate_phrase_tunit	Clausal	coordinate phrases per T-unit	number of coordinate phrases	number of T-units in text
2 av_coordinate_phrase_clause	Clausal	coordinate phrases per clause	number of coordinate phrases	number of clauses in text
3 av_complex_nominal_tunit	Clausal	complex nominals per T-unit	number of complex nominals	number of T-units in text
4 av_complex_nominal_clause	Clausal	complex nominals per clause	number of complex nominals	number of clauses in text

# Syntactic complexity

- Are paragraph-initial sentences on average shorter than the other sentences in body paragraphs?
- Are they less syntactically complex?
- Do they contain more general nouns?
- How does L1 writing compare to L2 in this respect?
- How does timed writing compare to untimed writing?

# Title and content layout with chart



# Title and content layout with SmartArt



**Add a Slide Title - 1**

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# Add a Slide Title - 3



**Add a Slide Title - 4**

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**Add a Slide Title - 5**

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