

## **Topic Sentence Coaching: Keys to Unlock Intricacy of Academic Writing**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Academic writing is at the centre of teaching in higher education, fulfilling a variety of functions, including asking students to produce paragraphs, essays, or sit written exams. This paper argues that the current writing provision in most departments of English in the Arab world should be viewed as offering more practical support in the writing process. To that end, 100 argumentative essays were collected, from English-writing classes at the Department of English at Al-Zaytoonah University in Jordan, to study the role of the topic sentence and the thesis statement in ensuring paragraph unity, topic unity, and text organisation. A detailed qualitative data analysis was undertaken, supported by quantitative analysis to account for the frequencies of the writing breakdowns. The results showed that most of the students failed to write effective topic sentences or thesis statements that relate directly to the posed question. They also failed to introduce ideas for the subsequent discussion. Additionally, most of them introduced undeniable and broad opening sentences that were globally related to the text; consequently, they failed in sustaining topic unity, paragraph unity, and text organisation. The paper suggests that academic staff should be more involved in practical writing courses to help students handle the specificity of academic writing requirements. It is expected that the study will inspire re-designing the writing syllabuses.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Writing is fundamental to students of English in institutions of higher education. It constitutes “the dominant form of social action in the academy”, and a major form

of assessment (Henderson & Hirst, 2007, p. 25). Therefore, students' ability to respond to the requirements of writing is of vital importance for their academic progress, and essential to the completion of their degrees (Wingate, 2012). In other words, students' inability to write academic texts that meet the expectations of their teachers, and the requirements of the course, put them in danger of failing or being dropped from their programmes (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Viewed from this standpoint, academic writing is considered a 'high-stake' activity (Hyland, 2002, p. 220).

For Arab EFL learners, academic writing is perceived by most, if not all, as a set of difficult skills to learn. A considerable number of studies have presented the common problems encountered by Arab learners when they write in English (see Amin & Alamin, 2012; Clark, 2012; Johnstone, 1991; Kaplan, 1972; Ostler, 1987; Connor, 1996). Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) noted that students find difficulty in complying with fundamental writing conventions, like outlining, summarising, and paraphrasing, which are necessary to complete their written tasks successfully. Other problems are related to the essential constituents of writing, including forming, developing, and organising ideas (Amin & Alamin, 2012). Additionally, learners failed to form a thesis statement, write convincing supporting sentences, or, finally, edit their writing (Alsamdani, 2010).

Studies attributed these difficulties to the ecology of the text structures between the two languages—Arabic and English—

because written Arabic sentences are characterised by a high degree of parallelism and coordination, whereas English is measured by the degree of subordination. According to Clark (2012), "the fashion in English prose has been to favour subordination over coordination. However, in Arabic, the stylistic preference is for elaborate coordination" (p. 326). Confirming this, Elachachi (2015) states that the essays of Arab students are "biased towards the use of some rhetorical and syntactic patterns specific to Arabic, such as preference of coordination over subordination ... as a means of structural linkage" (p. 133).

Generally speaking, the challenges of English writing for Arabic speakers can also be related to the fact that the two languages have two completely different writing systems, different grammatical systems, and cultural differences. In addition, the Arabic alphabet is completely different from the English Alphabet, because words are written from right to left, and do not have upper- and lower-case letters. This makes Arab learners mix big and small letters within sentences and not use enough full stops.

As a teacher of academic writing for many years, this researcher has continuously tried to get students to write effective and coherent paragraphs. Although students are taught effective writing techniques, they have not mastered the basics of writing conventions, including the role of the topic sentence in creating coherent and organised paragraphs, or the role of the thesis statement in creating effective essays.

As such, this study tries to demonstrate the role of the topic sentence and thesis statement in creating coherent paragraphs, maintaining topic unity, and, consequently, creating effective academic essays. In that sense, the topic sentence is usually the first sentence of the paragraph and includes the topic and the controlling idea. This controlling idea will be supported in the body sentences. Meanwhile, in the essay format, the thesis statement is expected to be introduced at the end of the introductory paragraph. It includes the writer's main line of discussion and focus of this paper. The body paragraphs follow, each starting with a topic sentence, which includes a topic and a controlling idea derived from the thesis statement. This introduces the subject of the paragraph and relates the discussion to the previous section. The thesis statement is a road map which establishes the topic discussion that guides the reader towards what is coming next.

In this paper, topic unity is considered a macro feature, allowing the macrostructure to systematise the propositions of the microstructure hierarchically (Kintsch, 1998). The discussion is related to the role of the thesis statement in ensuring the global coherence of the text, and the way the meaning is constructed to maintain the overall unity of the topic. It is worth mentioning that coherence is specific to genres, and texts of any "genre have their unique rhetorical structures" (Zarza, Tan, Chan, & Ali, 2015, pp. 173-174). Therefore, "to help writers cope with the challenges

of writing might be to sensitise them to the communicative purpose of a text type and how a particular genre is constructed" (p. 173).

For the explicit genre, this study examines the specific requirements of a coherent text. To be coherent, students' essays should consist of three or more paragraphs, and should meet the requirements of the specific academic structure they study. Thus, this study looks at three essential elements in paragraph writing, namely the topic sentence, the thesis statement, and the topic unity, and offers a general method for constructing them. Analysing written samples collected from essay-classes at Al-Zaytoonah University shows the types of problems students' writing suffers from in relation to the topic sentence, thesis statement, and how the impact on paragraph unity, topic unity, and text organisation.

## **THEORETICAL OVERVIEW**

Writing is perceived by most learners as a set of difficult skills to learn (Al Murshidi, 2014; Bacha, 2012; Chou, 2011). Confirming this, Al-Fadda, (2012) conducted a study on the English writing of Arab students and found that learning to write in English was a challenging task for university students. Students failed to apply the English punctuation marks and capital letters correctly. They also faced problems in choosing suitable words and phrases, and in combining sentences in their writing. Students made mistakes with "subject-verb agreement [and] using pronouns" (p. 127).

To be able to write well requires conscious effort and practice in grouping, composing, and developing ideas through systematic learning. It also means acquiring a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments, like the involvement of the writer's knowledge of the topic, language proficiency, and expectations of the readers. This skill must be learned rather than acquired, and not everyone becomes literate, even if s/he knows how to listen or speak a language. Confirming this, Rafik-Galea, Arumugam, and de Mello (2012) examined the perceptions and thoughts of tertiary students in co-constructing knowledge about academic writing. They found that "[t]ertiary ESL students find writing academic term-paper a complex process as they grapple with issues about academic writing conventions and ethics" (p. 1229).

A considerable body of research has been conducted to address the problems of coherence, and the process and product of writing in the EFL and ESL context (Ibnian, 2017; Rijlaarsdam, and Sanders, 2009; Smith, 2003; Steinman, 2009; Weijen, Huub van den Bergh, Wikborg, 1990) claims that writing in English for academic purposes is a challenge for non-native speakers of English because they not have only "to deal with the obvious linguistic and technical issues such as syntax, vocabulary, and format, but they must also become familiar with Western notions of academic rhetoric" (p. 80). Ibnian (2017) has studied papers written by EFL university Jordanian students. The results of his study reveal that

students face difficulties in generating ideas, using correct vocabulary and grammar, and teachers not giving enough "assessment and help" (p. 791).

To facilitate the written course, learners should consider the purpose of the writing, the intended audience, select proper vocabulary to form sentences, organise the sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into unified essays using suitable organisational patterns. Such challenges can overwhelm the EFL or ESL learners and affect their written product. To overcome writing difficulties, learners transfer patterns and strategies from L1 into L2 discourse. Krapels (1990) highlights L1 transference into L2 discourse and argues that challenges occur in adapting results from L1 findings to solving problems in an L2 context. Among his findings, he mentions that poor performance in L2 writing relates to composing competency, and not to linguistic proficiency. He adds that "learners transfer L1 writing strategies to their L2 writing process for 'facilitative functions'" (Krapels, 1990, p. 48). Thus, students who write in L2 do not have to master the linguistic proficiency in the use of the English language only, but also the techniques, skills, and writing strategies. They must follow the instructions of their language instructors and faculty members to get beyond their language problems in the process of evaluating their work. Confirming Krapels' findings, Friedlander (1990) adds that translation is considered an effective writing strategy used by learners to solve writing problems and bridge a gap

in their written products.

The findings of these studies have been reconfirmed in a recent study by Gee-Whai, Tee-Wei, and Kee-Man (2013), who conclude that “students usually think in their mother tongue and find it difficult to express their thoughts in English as they lack English proficiency” (p. 92). Similarly, Nurhayati and Kurniasih (2016) stated that Malay and students from other nationalities at SMK Kanowit, converse “in Iban language among themselves and with their teachers even during English language classes. Due to this, students are unable to perform well in the English language classes. They have difficulty constructing simple sentences and this is clearly a major problem” (p. 1642).

The discussion so far accentuates the demanding and laborious nature of academic writing in English. This could be related to different syntactic or rhetorical factors, but also arises from the fact that “writing includes discovering a thesis, developing support for it, organising, revising, and finally editing it to ensure an effective, error-free piece of writing” (Alsamdani, 2010, p. 53).

### **PARAGRAPH UNITY AND TOPIC UNITY**

Teaching writing is no less hard and difficult than studying it. Teachers must provide effective writing instructions and techniques that identify and address academic roadblocks. One of these techniques is to help students organise their writing in a paragraph format. The paragraph

usually supports a single focus or idea that helps establish the purpose and the overall argument of the paragraph. As such, paragraphs should be focused around the main ideas presented in the topic sentence or the thesis statement, and they should clearly relate to the posed question or the topic of the discussion. This main idea is presented in the topic sentence which usually comes as a first or second sentence, or in the thesis statement located at the end of the first paragraph. The importance of paragraphing has been highlighted by different linguists (Abu Rass, 2015; Björk, 1985; Ostler, 1987; Christensen, 1975; McCrimmon, 1976; Wikborg, 1990). Björk (1985) investigated the low-level writing quality of Swedish students. The results of his study indicate that one of the means of creating coherence in the text is paragraphing. He argues that paragraph structure is an aspect of coherence that can be taught. Central to his discussion is that he considers the paragraph as “a unit of thought” which “consists of a series of sentences unified by one controlling idea or topic” (p. 34) and argues that this topic is usually “explicitly expressed in a topic sentence ... [which is] very often the first sentence of the paragraph” (p. 34). The following sentences develop the idea(s) stated in the topic sentence and orient the reader to what will happen next.

Paragraph unity is also highlighted by writers like McCrimmon (1976), Nesteby (1982), and Bander (1983). A recent study has been conducted by Abu Rass (2015), who investigated the problems of the English writing of Arabic-speaking students. The

findings of her study indicate that students fail to produce well-written paragraphs for various reasons. They could not write good topic or concluding sentences, nor could they write effective supporting sentences. Students transferred patterns from their L1 Arabic into the English text.

Topic unity is another important aspect that should be considered in academic writing. It is sometimes referred to in the literature as text organisation. The importance of introducing clear and related thesis statements to the assigned discussion is highlighted in numerous studies, including Scarcella (1984). She argues that one of the reasons behind academic failure in US universities is the inability of students to write effective introductions to essay examinations. The study concludes that to orient readers in expository essays, students should state the thesis clearly and “maintain topic consistency by establishing the relevance of the thesis to the assigned and ongoing text” (p. 685). The role of the thesis statement has also been highlighted in recent studies. According to Owusu and Adade-Yeboah (2014) the thesis statement “is an essential component of the introductory section of every essay” (p. 55) that determines the purpose of the essay and limits its scope. It presents “the topic and the controlling idea of the entire essay” (Savage & Mayer, 2006, p.17), and indicates its organisation. Usually, a thesis is an arguable statement, and not just a set of facts or statements, which appears at the end of the first paragraph, followed by supporting paragraphs. Therefore, the introductory

paragraph builds a set of hierarchal relations to achieve coherence when it moves from the “general-to-particular order, then the topic idea is restated” (McCrimmon, 1976, p. 89) in the concluding paragraph.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of the topic sentence and the thesis statement in creating paragraph unity, essay unity, and sustaining text organisation. To explore this aim, written samples were collected and analysed following a mainly qualitative method analysis. A quantitative analysis preceded this, to give certain definiteness about the findings. According to Creswell and Clark (2007), qualitative analysis typically follows the route of aggregating the words into “categories of information and presenting the diversity of ideas gathered during data collection” (p. 6), whereas the quantitative analysis gives more precise results, and makes it possible for conclusions to be drawn to a specifiable level of probability (Davies, 2007, p. 11).

### **Context of The Study and Data Collection**

The data has been collected from Jordanian university students studying in the English Department at Al-Zaytoonah university. The data comprises a corpus of 100 essays written by third and fourth year students during the essay classes (Writing 2), and at home. The student age range is between 20-26 years old. The prerequisite course to Essay Writing is Paragraph Writing (Writing



1). Usually, students study 60-69 hours of English specialised courses before they take this course. This includes studying language skills, grammar, syntax, reading and listening comprehension, translation, and literature courses, among others. The academic demands of these courses require students to write in a paragraph format and use several types of sentences.

In general, students can communicate effectively with their tutors during the teaching process, and consult them during the office hours, or work in pairs. Theoretically, this means that students have the chance to get corrected drafts of their writings. Despite this, the written product of most of the students at the Department of English suffers from syntactic, structural, and coherence problems. Though important, syntactic problems fall beyond the scope of this study, therefore the discussion will be limited to text-structural deviations.

### The Written Task

The students were asked to respond to the following questions and statements:

*In no more than 250 words, write an argumentative essay about one of the following topics:*

- 1- *It is often said that we have progressed a good deal today. What, in your opinion, is the essence of progress?*
- 2- *Write an essay comparing and contrasting your parents' attitude*

*towards something with your attitude to the same thing.*

- 3- *Material success rarely brings happiness. Discuss.*
- 4- *A young person of sixteen years and over should be left free to make his/her own decisions. Discuss.*

The topics have been discussed in the classroom before the written task to unpack their difficulties, and to help students generate ideas. In the textbook material (Savage & Mayer, 2006), students study the rhetorical focus, and the format of different types of essays including argumentative essays. For the specific genre they write, and based on the textbook material, students are expected to write a three or four paragraph essay. In the introductory paragraph, they start with a hook that introduces a controversial issue, then “the thesis statement at the end presents the writer’s point of view” (p. 85). The body paragraph(s) starts with a topic sentence that has a controlling idea in support of “the writer’s main argument in the thesis” (p. 85) followed by the counter argument and the refutation. The concluding paragraph “restates the writer’s opinion ... It may offer a warning or prediction, or other type of comment that reinforces the writer’s viewpoint” (p. 85).

After collecting the data, every script was marked twice by the researcher and a colleague specialised in academic writing following the constructed marking rubric below.

Table 1  
A marking rubric

Aspects to consider	Marks	Specific Details
Essay structure and Text organisation	5	Introductory paragraph: It must have a clear thesis statement relevant to the discussed topic and aligned to the body of the essay.
	5	Body of essay: It starts with a topic sentence that has a controlling idea in support of the main line of the argument in the thesis. It is followed by the counter-argument and the writer's refutation. It must be well structured, have cohesion and coherence.
	5	Conclusion: It should link to the thesis topic and presents the writer's opinion or summarises the main idea. Many options are acceptable.
Content	25	Answers the posed question: Ideas must be consistently related to the essay question and well presented.
Writing Quality: Grammar and overall structure	10	Sentence structure is clear and error free.
Coherence	10	The flow of the ideas should be maintained. Students must use connectors to show support and opposition as taught in the essay class.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After marking the papers, and considering the types of mistakes the students made, the researcher was able to label the writing problems. In general, the results of the data analysis indicate that students' writing suffered from the following problems:

### Type 1

**Failure to include effective topic sentences or thesis statements.** The biggest proportion of students (70%) have failed to include in their introductions effective topic sentences or thesis statements that map their paragraphs. Students do not always link the thesis statements to the posed questions. They tend to employ broad or unrelated openings, use undeniable introductions which, in most cases, are only globally related to the topic, and introduce ideas that

do not serve the subsequent discussion. The following example represents an ineffective topic sentence, or thesis statement:

#### Text 35

S1) In our life, we are facing many problems, and we try to work some of it with our parents. S2) Therefore, we find in such big fight, two or three different opinions. S3) These opinions mostly different about many things. S4) Because everyone sees the situation from his point of view.

*S5) And sometimes, we come to a conflict, or some harsh words. S6) But, endly there is a respect relationship between parents and their sons. S7) So until we come to a persuasive conclusion. S8) For my parents, they think that studying is everything, and if you have no certificate, you are nothing,*



*and to do what you like is very wrong, you have to leave everything till you graduate. have to listen to your parents, who want your interest; as well as your happiness and you want.* S9) *And then you can do something you want.*

Table 2  
Failure to include effective topic sentences or thesis statements

The essay question ———	Write an essay comparing and contrasting your parents' attitude towards something with your attitude to the same thing
Pa1 Connection to question: main themes:  <i>Parents, opinion, problems= [no direct connection]</i>	<u>Pa 1</u> <i>S1) In our life, we are facing many problems, and we try to work some of it with our parents. S2) Therefore, we find in such argue big fight, two or three different opinions. S3) These opinions mostly different about many things. S4) Because everyone sees the situation from his point of view.</i>
Pa 2: Connection to question: <i>Parents, sons, = [no connection]</i> Other connections= not available	<u>Pa 2</u> <i>S5) And sometimes, we come to a conflict, or some bad words. S6) But, endly there is a respect relationship between parents and their sons. S7) So until we come to a persuasive conclusion. S8) For my parents, they think that studying is everything, and if you have no certificate, you are nothing, and to do what you like is very wrong, you must listen to your parents, who want your interest; as well as your happiness and you must leave everything till you graduate. S9) And then you can do something you want.</i>

The introductory two paragraphs fail to maintain topic unity because the thesis statement fails to commit the topic to a certain discussion or relate the next paragraph to it. It is expected that the thesis statement in the first paragraph will state a generalisation about the discussed topic, and then specific details will be given to unfold the discussion. The second paragraph starts with a topic sentence that is derived from the thesis statement. However, T35 relates indirectly to the posed question, and the student fails to introduce a general statement which indicates what the topic is all about and what points will be discussed in later sections. Therefore, this example falls short of fulfilling the requirements of

essay writing or creating an informational relationship that guides the reader through the text.

**Opening paragraphs do not relate directly to the posed question.** A considerable number of students (24%) used openings that do not relate directly to the essay question, as in the example below where one student writes in response to the second question:

Text 62

*Pa 1) Mankind had respected music since the ancient age in the Greek and Roman civilisations, to the extent that Greek people*

*considered the golden-hair- and-harp “Apollo” --the god of music—as the most mighty god in their mythology.*

*Pa 2) I always listened to music and paid a lot to get music tapes and to go to parties. At school I liked to play music and the school always gave me this chance. I do believe that music is the food of the soul (see Appendix A).*

According to the theoretical review, a unified topic must acknowledge the assigned question and specify subjects for discussion.

As the analysis in the table below shows, the sample paragraph fails to meet this requirement because the student does not link her/his paragraph directly to the assigned topic. The first two paragraphs do not address the posed question or introduce titles for discussion. The discussion in the two paragraphs is about the value of *music* in people’s lives, in general, and the student’s, in particular. Therefore, it is fair to say that the paragraph falls short of committing the discussion to the question posed in the topic title, or even guiding the reader as to what to expect next.

Table 3  
An opening paragraph that does not relate directly to the posed question

The essay question ———	Write an essay comparing and contrasting your parents’ attitude towards something with your attitude to the same thing
Pa1 Connection to question: main themes: <i>Parents, attitude, compare, contrast = [no connection]</i>	<u><b>Pa 1</b></u> <i>Mankind had respected music since the ancient age in the Greek and Roman civilisations, to the extent that Greek people considered the golden-hair- and-harp “Apollo” --the god of music—as the most mighty god in their mythology.</i>
Pa 2: Connection to question: <i>Parents, attitude, compare, contrast = [no connection]</i>	<u><b>Pa 2</b></u> <i>I always listened to music and paid a lot to get music tapes and to go to parties. At school I liked to play music and the school always gave me this chance. S3 I do believe that music is the food of the soul.</i>
Other connections= not available	

Analysis of the rest of the samples indicates that 12% of the students tend to repeat one word from the question title, trying to

convince the reader that they are discussing the question, as in the following example:

Text 3

Pa 1

*S1) Life is a mixture of contrasts, it is a philosophical statement behind which, we*

*can find many hidden meanings. S2) The contrasts can distinguish human beings from other beings because contrast is based and built on argument is a main aspect for humanity (see Appendix A).*

Table 4

*An opening paragraph that gives a false impression of relating to the posed question*

The essay question	Write an essay comparing and contrasting your parents' attitude towards something with your attitude to the same thing
Connection to question: main theme <i>Contrasting = [contrasts]</i>	<b><u>Pa 1</u></b> <i>S1) Life is a mixture of contrasts, it is a philosophical statement behind which, we can find many hidden meanings. S2) The contrasts can distinguish human beings from other beings because contrast is based and built on argument is a main aspect for humanity.</i>
Other connections=not available.	

In the above paragraph, the student selects one word from the question 'contrasts' and overlooks the rest. Despite the presence of the word 'contrast', the paragraph does not respond to the posed question. The topic of the paragraph is too general to meet its purpose or the criteria set forth to maintain topic unity. The paragraph, on the one hand, does not directly acknowledge the answered question, and on the other, it does not guide the reader towards any possible argument relevant to it. In fact, the introductory paragraph does not make sense or initiate any coherent idea that a reader could rely on to construct his/her scenario of the coming argument, nor can s/he discriminate easily between a specification of a point just made, and an assertion of a new one coming.

**Type 2**

**Broad and unrelated openings.** The second type of writing problem is the production of broad and unrelated openings that do not relate directly to the main line of the argument and fail to orient the reader to the coming discussion. The results of the analysis reveal that 19% of the students fail to commit the thesis statement to the posed question, and the main line of the argument as in the following example:

Text 42

Pa.1

*S1) Everyone and every person and every human deals with this life as he likes, and the way he likes but there many subjects and different issues and diverse ideas everyone has own attitude towards it ... (see Appendix A).*

Table 5  
*A text that demonstrates a broad and unrelated opening*

The essay question	Write an essay comparing and contrasting your parents' attitude towards something with your attitude to the same thing
Introducing ideas for the coming discussion=not available.	Pa 1 <i>SI) Everyone and every person and every human deals with this life as he likes, and the way he likes but there many subjects and different issues and diverse ideas everyone has own attitude towards it ...</i>

This introductory paragraph relates indirectly to the assigned question, and it falls short of committing the text to any discussion. The student picks up one word to indicate that s/he is tackling the same question, but in the actual process, this short paragraph discusses very broad details that are not directly relevant to the discussion. Such a paragraph causes incoherence at the topic unity level. The tendency to produce broad and general openings echoes the findings of other studies, like Gee-Whai et al. (2013), Elachachi (2015), Abu Rass (2015), Qaddumi (1995), and Fakhri (2004), among others.

**Type 3**

**Openings do not introduce ideas for the subsequent discussion.** Students with an average of 27% failed to write topic sentences that enable the readers to anticipate any discussion in what follows. The text below displays this type of problem:

Text 53

Pa 1

*SI) When one loves something I think that, with all the difficulties he will face, he will be able to achieve it especially if this thing was like a dream and he knows that it is good for him as my dream of travelling abroad (see Appendix A).*

Table 6  
*An opening paragraph that does not introduce ideas for the subsequent discussion*

The essay question	Write an essay comparing and contrasting your parents' attitude towards something with your attitude to the same thing
Pa 1: connection to question: <i>Parents, attitude, compare, contrast = [no connection]</i>	<u>Pa 1</u> <i>SI When one loves something I think that, with all the difficulties he will face, he will be able to achieve it, especially if this thing was like a dream and he knows that it is good for him as my dream of travelling abroad.</i>
Introducing ideas to be discussed later = not available.	

In the introductory paragraph, consisting of one sentence, the student discusses the power of love and its ability to help people achieve their dreams. S/he fails at any stage to produce an effective thesis statement or ideas that could guide the readers in the coming discussion and enable them to construct their own scenario of the text. Following the theoretical discussion of this study, it can be said that this paragraph does not meet its main aim or sustain topic unity as it falls short of meeting the requirements of proficient writing. In fact, the paragraph fails to look backward or forward, or present specific information to orient the reader to the coming discussion. The findings echo Elachachi's (2015), who states that some of the learners "have trouble sticking to a thesis, narrowing a thesis sufficiently, or proving a thesis concretely"(p. 133)

**Type 4**

**Undeniable opening sentences.** The fourth type of problem relates to the production of undeniable opening statements, and lack of a thesis statement. Students with an average of 18% use religious or scientific statements which no one can oppose, such as in Text 34. The example below demonstrates the first part of a run-on sentence that forms a paragraph. It offers an undeniable religious statement.

Text 34

*S1) God created the people, this is true, no doubt, but did he did not make them in the same of thinking or the same the manner toward something and in many ways (see Appendix A).*

Table 7  
*An undeniable opening sentence*

The essay question	Write an essay comparing and contrasting your parents' attitude towards something with your attitude to the same thing
<i>Connection to question = no connection</i>	<i>P1) God created the people, this is true, no doubt, but did he did not make them in the same of thinking or the same the manner toward something and in many ways....</i>
<i>Connection to the discussion = no connection</i>	

Undeniable opening sentences leave the reader begging for information from the next sentence to build the scenario of the text. The tendency to use undeniable openings is pointed out in this study and in the findings of other studies, including Abu Rass (2015), Elachachi (2015), Koch (1983), and Ostler (1987). For example, Elachachi (2015)

reported that her informants have the tendency to "start with universal statements, and end with some type of formulaic or proverbial statements ... This may create a real obstacle for Arab students because what an English native speaker considers logical in an academic paper may not be logical in another culture" (p. 133).

## CONCLUSION

This paper reported the types of problems students of English at Al-Zaytoonah University face in academic writing. The analysis of the data reveals that most students have difficulty in sustaining topic unity, and, hence, paragraph unity for several reasons. Firstly, a considerable number of students fail to relate their introductions to the topic question, indicating they are unaware of the coherent power that the introductory paragraph creates when it is related to the assigned question. Secondly, some students fail to present ideas in the introductory paragraphs to map the coming discussion. This shows that they have difficulty in grasping the role of the thesis topic as an organising principle. Thirdly, some students write broad and unrelated openings that fail, in most cases, to orient the readers. This confirms, again, that they are unaware of the importance of including specific and decisive details that relate directly to the discussion. Fourthly, several students employ undeniable openings that do not advance a discussion, so they leave the reader begging for information from the coming discourse.

This paper also argues that academic writing is a high-stakes activity and the hallmark of success for students in English departments. The basic rules of writing require “paragraph unity”, “topic unity”, “coherence”, “clarity”, “briefness”, and “simplicity”; these can affect writing positively when they are followed with other writing rules. Writing must be considered in relation to the ways of presenting it

within a specific writing domain or specific construction of knowledge. Academic staff should engage their students in more practical writing classes to help them handle the complexity of the course. It is expected that the findings of the study will inspire a re-design of the writing syllabuses to equip students with the essential writing skills necessary to successfully achieve their academic tasks.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the data analysis show that students have problems organising and developing their paragraphs or sustaining topic unity; therefore, it is very important to teach them the importance of writing paragraphs whose meanings are specification, explication, or exemplification of the first paragraph. Presenting examples to show students how a paragraph can maintain one focus while it is being developed is a useful strategy. Equally useful would be to ask them at earlier stages to replicate sample paragraphs on different topics.

Students failed to present an effective topic sentence that acknowledges the posed question and specifies the subjects for discussion. They also failed to relate ideas in the paragraph to each other and serve the menu of the topic. Thus, teachers might like to use authentic material from previous exam papers to explain how the problem is created, and why it is a problem. Such a process may enable students to perceive paragraph coherence in a practical light.

Furthermore, the results of the data analysis show that some students failed



to acknowledge the posed question, and they write broad, undeniable, and unrelated opening paragraphs. This may be related to an L1 negative transference of this feature of writing. To avoid such problems, teachers might like to deal with the problem of transfer directly by demonstrating the differences between the structure of English and Arabic paragraphs.

Finally, the researcher suggests a paragraph layout using the following format:

1. Clearly stated topic sentence at the paragraph level, and thesis statement at the essay level, as an organising principle to facilitate the readers' integration in the subsequent written text.
2. Supporting sentences that provide extra details to explore the aims of the main thesis.
3. Encapsulating sentences which enable the reader to hold onto the meaning of the previous discussion.
4. A conclusion that restates what has been mentioned in the topic sentence at the paragraph level, and in the thesis statement at the essay level.

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## APPENDIX

### *Samples of the Data*

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#### Text 3

##### Pa. 1)

S1) Life is a mixture of contrasts, it is a philosophical statement behind which, we can find many hidden meanings. S2) The contrasts can distinguish human beings from other beings because contrast is based and built on argument is a main aspect for humanity.

##### Pa. 2)

S3) *For me, I have an experience with this subject, I am a member of a happy family consists of my parents and three children, I am the last one, for this reason they consider me as a child who must be guided by them, and this pushes them to interfere somehow with my affairs, although I had become a student in a university.*

##### Pa. 3)

S4) *One day when I was sitting in my bed room, an idea came to my mind that I must have a job besides my study then I began to count the benefits and difficulties of my decision. S5) I found that it has a positive and negative aspects, the positive aspects from my point of view that I can obtain with this the self-independence, I like to be an independent person especially in my personal affairs, this is not a kind of selfishness, and this does not mean that there is no need for my parents, I know the fact that they are more experienced than me, love me, and want my brothers to be the best, but I like through this decision to build my character, empower my personality, and to have more self-confidence. S6) Another positive aspect, I want to be financially secured.*

##### Pa. 4)

S7) *The negative aspect was that this job may turn me away from my study, it may take a big part of my time, and if I tried to make a regular system and to put a regular program for my study and my work, this is a good reason to weaken my health, because I will find a time for rest nor to sit with my family and to talk to them.*

##### Pa. 5)

S8) *On the other hand, I exposed this matter to my family and told them the reasons of this decision, they refused it and became very angry from me, then we sit down and asked me if I were short of anything, they began to convince me with their point of view saying that my reasons for my choice are not wrong and refer to a good type of thinking, it is the wrong time. S9) This doesn't mean that I am a child, but it means that every step has a time for it, and if a step come in a wrong time it will have a great effect on my future, by this I shall not obtain neither the license nor the good position in my work.*

##### Pa. 6)

S10) *It was easy for them to convince me with their point of view, because I was not really convinced with my decision, and found that working is not suitable for me now.*

##### Pa. 7)

S11) *So the contrast leads us to agreement, and to a sequence that we must walk step by step.*

#### Text 34

##### Pa. 1)

S1) *God created the people, this is true no doubt, but did he did not make them in the same of thinking or the same the manner toward something and in many ways firstly, my father usually says that the old generation, have tradition and the people in the old time were unchangeable in their decide toward any matter they faced for example, in contrast I see that this work is wrong because, the matter perhaps, it needs discussion or change in point of view.*

##### Pa. 2)

S2) *Secondly, my father sees old generation there was a good way to dressing, but nowadays, there is the ways of dressing is bad or imitation to others societies, but I see the matter is different and these ways of dressing are in the swim but what is the difference that something*

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**APPENDIX** (continue)

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Pa. 3)

S3) Thirdly, my father sees that in the new generation one cannot read the future, good things, and thinks of things and matters and problems, as well as the people in the old generation, in contrast, perhaps, I think that the people in the new generation have a broad imagination and preserving the fact of things.

Pa. 4)

S4) In conclusion, there is many people or brothers differ in the way of thinking or dressing or tradition and believe and everyone from them live with different way and land.

Text 35

Pa. 1

S1) In our life, we are facing many problems, and we try to work some of it with our parents. S2) Therefore, we find in such big fight, two or three different opinions. S3) These opinions mostly different about many things. S4) Because everyone sees the situation from his point of view.

Pa. 2

S5) And sometimes, we come to a conflict, or some bad words. S6) But, endly there is a respect relationship between parents and their sons. S7) So until we come to a persuasive conclusion. S8) For my parents, they think that studying is everything, and if you have no certificate, you are nothing, and to do what you like is very wrong, you have to listen to your parents, who want your interest; as well as your happiness and you have to leave everything till you graduate. S9) And then you can do something you want.

Pa. 3

S10) Whereas, for me, I cannot receive the orders and do everything they want it, in spite of my great respect to him and their opinion. S11) I think that studying is not everything, in the negative, for effect and the man should to do something for him or herself. and this too S12) And I say the serayo to him but he listens to the molanlogy and I get angry. S13) And as a result of such argument we come to a conflict in talking between us, and after words every one of us calm down.

Pa. 4

S14) Thus, parents have to hear their sons, and respect their opinions, and kindly they can resolve every problem which may face them.

Pa. 5

S15) So, I wish all parents to understand their sons and argue them in a democratic atmosphere and respect their opinions. S16) They can kindly resolve the problems which they face.

Text 42

Pa. 1

S1) Every one and every person and every human deals with this life as he likes, and the way he likes but there many subjects and different issues and diverse ideas everyone has own attitude towards it between me and my parents many things or subjects my attitude about it is contrasting the attitude of my parents one of these subject the style life in the town and the village.

Pa. 2

S2) At the first my parent refer to life in the village they refer to work with agricultural and in the field, they prefer not to leave the village and the field but I refer to life with town and I want to study and I want to travel with town and then I want to travel to abroad to work in that country while attitude of my parents is contrasting to my attitude.

Pa. 3

S3) At the second my parents think that the weather and still of the countryside is better than that which are in the town but I think that existence big number of people and the car in the street is enjoyment.

Pa. 4

S4) Finally, Everyone has a special life and has own attitude and his thinking towards things in this life.

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APPENDIX (continue)

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Text 53

Pa. 1

S1) When one loves something I think that, with all the difficulties he will face, he will be able to achieve it especially if this thing was like a dream and he knows that it is good for him as my dream of travelling abroad

Pa. 2

S2) *My parents refuse I travel abroad for any reason. S3) I discuss it with them but they say women live home for marriage children and cooking. S4) But I say you had a dream and I had a dream so help my dream by travel abroad because I study how life is there and how family and nature are besides I learn how live is there but they say no. S5) They are ignorant people and they dream when I married and I dream I travel abroad.*

Pa. 3

S6) *I like my parents, so I do not repeat the thing again.*

Text 62

Pa. 1

S1) *Mankind had respected music since the ancient age in the Greek and Roman civilizations, to the extent that Greek people considered the golden-hair- and-harp "Apollo" --the god of music—as the most mighty god in their mythology.*

Pa. 2

S2) *I always listened to music and paid a lot to get music tapes and to go to parties. At school I liked to play music and the school always gave me this chance. I do believe that music is the food of the soul.*

Pa. 3

S3) *My parents believe that playing or composing music is a happy and it cannot be a job, on the very far edge stand I with my opposite attitude. S5) I am discussing this topic with both our opinions. S6) My parents are content that music – i.e. playing of composing music -- is not a source from which one can win his day-bread, and if one has attained a talent, one better keeps it as a hobby; otherwise, he would starve to death. S7) They consider playing music a waste of time and money, because one needs a teacher and instruments to learn music and these, in their turn, need money and a lot of time for training. S8) They say that it is better to spend that time and money on something more beneficial like studying. S9) And as an eastern society, musicians are looked at as unrespectable men because most of them working in night clubs and such places as my father calls them and some religious people say that God punishes people who listen to music because it is from Devil but this is false because the profit listened to the music and took his wife to watch the dance of Habashi people so how can people dance without music this is how I answer those people the question of music that is the food for their soul that they do not want.*

Pa. 4

S10) *We were created by God to live a happy life and not to win our day-bread. S11) It is not that big problem if we sleep without supper since we are happy, and if one finds his pleasure in playing music he better employs every single minute in his life to make this pleasure last, since he does not bring harm to himself or to others, but it is a problem if we like music and we do not play it. S12) Life is much shorter than we expect and money is only*

*a device to pass this short period happily. S13) For the virtue and vice, I think that the vice is there in the deepest of ourselves whether we go to vicious places or not and the virtue is there too whether we go to mosques and churches or not, and if our society looks at this slice of people as unrespectable, we can change.*

Pa. 5

S14) *Also, people in the west respect both music and musicians, but people in the east respect only music. I hope to go to the west and people could change this overlook.*

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