

3. The Wolf and the Web of Life

Wolves are vitally important to the ecosystems in which they live. Opportunistic hunters, wolves assess their prey in ways scientists do not fully understand. They seem to be able to distinguish the weak from the strong; the sick from the healthy; the young, the vulnerable and the slow-moving from the confident and the swift. As agents of natural selection, wolves contribute to the genetic health and strength of their prey species by leaving the stronger and healthier animals to breed and produce offspring. Wolves may also decrease the incidence of disease and parasite transmission among ungulates (hoofed animals such as deer, moose and elk), by removing sick animals from the herds.

By keeping ungulate populations in check, wolves also contribute to the biodiversity (species variety) and natural processes of the ecosystem. Studies have shown that when wolves are removed from an ecosystem where they have long been present, deer and elk populations, for example, increase to the point where they are overgrazing the landscape and killing off the vegetation. As a result, natural vegetation is killed off, causing erosion and interfering with the regeneration of the forest. Protective cover and nesting places for birds and small mammals are lost and, with little left to graze on, the deer and moose starve to death.

Wolves contribute to biodiversity in other ways as well. The carcasses of animals killed by wolves provide food for bears, ravens, eagles and other scavengers. Wolves also help control coyote populations. When too many coyotes are present in an ecosystem, they out-compete smaller predators, such as foxes, bobcats, pine martens and hawks for the available rodents and other small prey animals. Wolves generally eat prey that is too big for coyotes to kill, leaving the smaller prey for the smaller predators.

The presence of wolves has economic benefits as well. Every summer thousands of tourists visit Canada's Algonquin Provincial Park to attend organized "wolf howls" during which the wolves are heard but seldom seen. The chance of seeing or hearing a wild wolf has also significantly boosted tourism in the Yellowstone National Park area since wolves were reintroduced there in 1995. Reintroduction efforts in the southern Rockies, the Northeast, the Southeast and the natural dispersion of existing wolf populations have the potential to bring millions of tourist dollars to those areas.

Check Your Reading Skills
The Wolf and the Web of Life
Can you read and make an outline?

What is the topic sentence in this article?

This topic sentence could also be considered a **thesis statement** since, technically, the statement that “wolves are vitally important to the ecosystems in which they live” is an opinion. This is, however, one of those opinion statements that has been so thoroughly supported by research and fact that it is hardly arguable. So now we have our topic/thesis:

Wolves are vitally important to the ecosystems in which they live.

Traditional Outline

List the **reasons** followed by the **explanations** and **examples** given for the reasons. Use the Roman numerals (I, II, III and so forth) for the reasons. Use uppercase letters (A, B, C) for the explanations and examples. Your teacher will demonstrate and help you if this is your first experience with outlining.

Do a web outline if that works better.