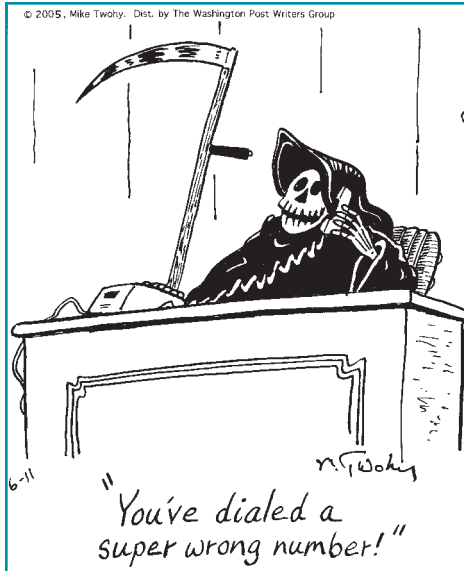


1

Main Ideas

WHAT IS THE MAIN IDEA?



“What’s the point?” You’ve probably heard these words before. It’s a question people ask when they want to know the main idea that someone is trying to express. The same question can guide you as you read. Recognizing the **main idea**, or point, is the most important key to good comprehension. Sometimes a main idea is immediately clear, as in the above cartoon. The point—that the caller has dialed the worst possible number—is vividly supported by the figure of the Grim Reaper, Death, answering the phone. To find a point in a reading selection, ask yourself, “What’s the main point the author is trying to make?”

For instance, read the paragraph on the following page, asking yourself as you do, “What is the author’s point?”

¹Social psychologists have found that almost everyone gossips. ²Male or female, young or old, blue-collar or professional, humans love to talk about one another. ³All too often, such gossip is viewed as a frivolous waste of time. ⁴However, it actually serves several important functions in the human community. ⁵For one thing, gossip is a form of networking. ⁶Talking with our friends and coworkers about each other is our most effective means of keeping track of the ever-changing social dynamic. ⁷It tells us who is in, who is out, and who can help us climb the social or professional ladder. ⁸A second function of gossip is the building of influence. ⁹When we engage in gossip, we are able to shape people's opinions of ourselves. ¹⁰We tell stories that show ourselves in a good light—wise, compassionate, insightful, clever. ¹¹And when we listen sympathetically to the gossip of other people, they perceive us as warm and likable. ¹²A final and very powerful function of gossip is the creating of social alliances. ¹³There are few quicker ways to form a bond with another person than to share private information with him or her. ¹⁴The words “I wouldn't tell most people this, but . . .” instantly interest and flatter the listener. ¹⁵To talk about a third party, especially in a critical way, creates a bond with our listener and gives a feeling of shared superiority.

A good way to find an author's point, or main idea, is to look for a general statement. Then decide if that statement is supported by most of the other material in the paragraph. If it is, you have found the main idea.

Following are four statements from the passage. Pick out the general statement that is supported by the other material in the passage. Write the letter of that statement in the space provided. Then read the explanation that follows.

Four statements from the passage:

- A. Social psychologists have found that almost everyone gossips.
- B. However, it [gossip] actually serves several important functions in the human community.
- C. For one thing, gossip is a form of networking.
- D. There are few quicker ways to form a bond with another person than to share private information with him or her.

The general statement that expresses the main idea of the passage is _____.

Explanation:

Sentence A: Only the second sentence supports the idea that everyone gossips—not the entire paragraph. While sentence A cannot be the main idea, it does introduce the topic of the paragraph: gossip.

- Sentence B:* The statement “However, it [gossip] actually serves several important functions in the human community,” is a general one. And the rest of the passage goes on to describe three important functions of gossip. Sentence B, then, is the sentence that expresses the main idea of the passage.
- Sentence C:* This sentence refers only to the first function of gossip. It is not general enough to include the other two functions that are cited in the paragraph.
- Sentence D:* This sentence simply provides a detail that supports the third function of gossip. It does not cover the other material in the paragraph.

The Main Idea as an “Umbrella” Idea

Think of the main idea as an “umbrella” idea. The main idea is the author’s general point; under it fits all the other material of the paragraph. That other material is made up of supporting details—specific evidence such as examples, causes, reasons, or facts. The diagram below shows the relationship.



The explanations and activities on the following pages will deepen your understanding of the main idea.

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE A MAIN IDEA?

As you read through a passage, you must **think as you read**. If you merely take in words, you will come to the end of the passage without understanding much of what you have read. Reading is an active process, as opposed to watching television, which is passive. You must actively engage your mind, and, as you read, keep asking yourself, “What’s the point?”

Here are three strategies that will help you find the main idea.

- 1 Look for general versus specific ideas.
- 2 Use the topic to lead you to the main idea.
- 3 Use key words to lead you to the main idea.

Each strategy is explained on the following pages.

1 Look for General versus Specific Ideas

You saw in the paragraph on gossip that the main idea is a *general* idea supported by *specific* ideas. The following practices will improve your skill at separating general from specific ideas. Learning how to tell the difference between general and specific ideas will help you locate the main idea.

➤ Practice 1

In each of the following groups—many based on textbook selections—one statement is the general point, and the other statements are specific support for the point. Identify each point with a P and each statement of support with an S.

Example

- ___ Women are less likely than men to become full professors.
- ___ Women who become professors are generally paid less than their male counterparts.
- ___ Women often face discrimination in the field of education.
- ___ Female professors are not given an equal number of important committee assignments.

(The third statement is the general idea. It is supported by three examples of discrimination against women.)

1. A. Lottery winners have been known to use their winnings to feed their addictions to gambling and/or drugs.
 B. Other lottery winners report squandering their money to help out a never-ending stream of “hard luck” relatives and friends.
 C. Some lottery winners invest large sums on business ventures they know nothing about and wind up losing all they have invested.
 D. Winning the lottery can create as many problems as it solves.

2. A. People like to interact with other people as they shop.
 B. People like to see, touch, try on, and sometimes even smell the items they intend to buy.
 C. Many people still use shopping as simply an excuse to get out of the house.
 D. Despite its growing popularity, Internet shopping will never entirely replace shopping in stores.

3. A. For much of the twentieth century, people regarded cancer as a death sentence.
 B. Attitudes toward cancer used to be very different from those of today.
 C. Few people with cancer were willing to speak openly about battling the disease.
 D. Many people thought that having cancer was contagious.

4. A. Instead of simply offering printed material on loan, modern libraries now allow patrons to borrow CDs, videos, and DVDs.
 B. Even very small libraries now feature access to computers, where patrons may “surf” the Internet.
 C. Libraries have changed drastically in the past decade to keep up with the demands of an ever-changing society.
 D. Some libraries even feature refreshment stands that sell beverages and snacks.

5. A. By age 14, 81 percent of young people have tried drinking.
 B. By the time they graduate from high school, more than 43 percent of teenagers have experimented with illegal drugs.
 C. In the United States, teenage drug and alcohol use is especially common.
 D. About one-third of teenagers who have tried illegal drugs have also tried at least one highly addictive and toxic substance, such as cocaine or heroin.

6. ___ A. Franklin's discoveries relating to electricity and lightning led him to invent lightning rods, which could safely conduct strokes of lightning into the ground.
- ___ B. Benjamin Franklin regularly used scientific principles in inventing useful items.
- ___ C. Franklin employed contemporary scientific principles to develop his "Pennsylvania Fireplace"—a design for a more efficient stove.
- ___ D. Franklin's study of optics led him to invent bifocals.
7. ___ A. Many infant girls are given up to Westerners for adoption.
- ___ B. The traditional Chinese preference for boys, coupled with that country's "one child" policy, has led to some disturbing consequences.
- ___ C. Other infant girls are not given adequate medical care.
- ___ D. The development of ultrasound technology to determine a child's gender prior to birth has led to the death by abortion of hundreds of thousands of unborn Chinese girls.
8. ___ A. A butcher by the name of Phillip Armour opened a meat market in California gold rush territory and then channeled his profits into creating one of the nation's largest meat processing plants in Chicago.
- ___ B. Henry Wells and William Fargo offered many miners secure, honest banking, which led their company, Wells Fargo, to become a giant in the banking industry.
- ___ C. Many people used their wits, not their shovels, to find a fortune during the California gold rush of 1848–1849.
- ___ D. A merchant by the name of Levi Strauss made large profits by selling clothing and other necessities to miners.
9. ___ A. The number of Category 4 and Category 5 hurricanes has nearly doubled in the past three decades, fulfilling some scientists' predictions that global warming will lead to more severe weather.
- ___ B. There is growing evidence that global warming is real.
- ___ C. In the past 100-plus years of record-keeping, eight of the ten hottest years have occurred since 1996.
- ___ D. According to scientists who study the movement of fields of ice, the ice surrounding the North Pole has entered a state of accelerating, long-term decline.

10. ___ A. The separation stage involves the removal of the individual from his or her former status.
- ___ B. The third stage is the rite of aggregation, which is the readmission of the individual into society in the newly acquired status.
- ___ C. Rites of passage, which mark the transition of an individual from one stage of life to another, involve three crucial stages.
- ___ D. The rite of marginality is a period of transition involving specific rituals and often suspension from normal social contact.

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

You already know that to find the main idea of a selection, you look first for a general statement. You then check to see if that statement is supported by most of the other material in the paragraph. If it is, you've found the main idea. Another approach that can help you find the main idea of a selection is to find its topic.

The **topic** is the general subject of a selection. It can often be expressed in one or more words. Knowing the topic can help you find a writer's main point about that topic.

Textbook authors use the title of each chapter to state the overall topic of that chapter. They also provide many topics and subtopics in boldface headings within the chapter. For example, here is the title of a chapter in a sociology textbook, followed by a topic within the chapter and subtopics under that topic:

Socialization (29 pages)
Agents of Socialization
The Family
The Neighborhood
Religion
Day Care
The School
Peer Groups

If you were studying the above chapter, you could use the headings to help find the main ideas—one of which is that there are six different agents of socialization.

But there are many times when you are not given topics—with standardized reading tests, for example, or with individual paragraphs in articles or textbooks. To find the topic of a selection when the topic is not given, ask this simple question:

Who or what is the selection about?

For example, look again at the beginning of the paragraph that started this chapter:

¹Social psychologists have found that almost everyone gossips. ²Male or female, young or old, blue-collar or professional, humans love to talk about one another. ³All too often, such gossip is viewed as a frivolous waste of time.

What, in a phrase, is the above paragraph about? On the line below, write what you think is the topic.

Topic: _____

You probably answered that the topic is “gossip.” As you reread the paragraph, you saw that, in fact, every sentence in it is about gossip.

The next step after finding the topic is to decide what main point the author is making about the topic. Authors often present their main idea in a single sentence. (This sentence is also known as the **main idea sentence** or the **topic sentence**.) As we have already seen, the main point about gossip is “it actually serves several important functions in the human community.”

Check Your Understanding

Let’s look now at another paragraph. Read it and then see if you can answer the questions that follow.

¹Since 1883, most American schools have used the A–F grading system. ²But many experts believe that the current letter grading system is bad for students. ³One problem is that letter grades are too simplistic. ⁴A student who gets feedback in the form of a letter may not understand how to improve. ⁵An “A” doesn’t tell a student what she did right, nor does an “F” tell a student what she did wrong. ⁶Another flaw is that schools and teachers are inconsistent in their use of letter grades. ⁷An “A” might be easy to get at one school and very difficult to get at another school. ⁸It is not fair to give students the same grade for different amounts of work. ⁹Finally, grades may be inaccurate, with some teachers giving good marks because they don’t want to hurt their students’ feelings or because they want to help students improve their self-esteem. ¹⁰This sends a confusing message to students who don’t do their work. ¹¹It is also unfair to the students who actually try hard to earn good grades.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? In other words, what is the paragraph about? (It often helps as you read to look for and even circle a word, term, or idea that is repeated in the paragraph.)

2. What is the *main idea* of the paragraph? In other words, what point is the author making about the topic? (Remember that the main idea will be supported by the other material in the paragraph.)

Explanation:

As the first sentence of the paragraph suggests, the topic is “the A–F grading system.” Continuing to read the paragraph, you see that, in fact, everything in it is about this grading system. And the main idea is clearly that “the current letter grading system is bad for students.” This idea is a general one that sums up what the entire paragraph is about. It is an “umbrella” statement under which all the other material in the paragraph fits. The parts of the paragraph could be shown as follows:

Topic: A–F grading system

Main idea: The current letter grading system is bad for students.

Supporting details:

1. Too simplistic.
2. Used inconsistently.
3. Inaccurate.

➤ **Practice 2**

The following practice will sharpen your sense of the difference between a topic, the point about the topic (the main idea), and supporting details.

Read each paragraph below and do the following:

- 1 Ask yourself, “What seems to be the topic of the paragraph?” (It often helps to look for and even circle a word or idea that is repeated in the paragraph.)
- 2 Next, ask yourself, “What point is the writer making about this topic?” This will be the main idea. It is stated in one of the sentences in the paragraph.
- 3 Then test what you think is the main idea by asking, “Is this statement supported by most of the other material in the paragraph?”

Hint: When looking for the topic, make sure you do not pick one that is either **too broad** (covering a great deal more than is in the selection) or **too narrow** (covering only part of the selection). The topic and the main idea of a selection must include everything in that selection—no more and no less.

Paragraph 1

¹Halloween is often associated with ancient, pagan festivals or with the Catholic observance of All Saint’s Day. ²But the truth is that Halloween as we celebrate it today is mostly an American invention. ³The Irish and Scottish, who may have first observed the holiday, didn’t even carve pumpkins before coming to the United States. ⁴Because the pumpkin is an American fruit, they carved their jack-o’-lanterns only out of turnips and potatoes. ⁵So it wasn’t until immigrants brought the holiday to the United States around 1840 that scary, glowing orange faces became a regular sight on Halloween. ⁶Observers of Halloween didn’t dress up in scary costumes, either, until the holiday had been American for over sixty years. ⁷That practice originated around 1900, when communities started organizing costume parties to prevent children from taking part in the vandalism that was then the tradition. ⁸Before 1900, people were more likely to see children tipping over outhouses than walking around in costumes on Halloween. ⁹Finally, even “trick-or-treating” was an American invention. ¹⁰It was the Boy Scouts of America who popularized the practice in the 1930s, as an even more appealing alternative to getting into mischief. ¹¹Many Americans might be surprised to learn that their own grandparents were some of the first people in history to go door-to-door asking for candy on Halloween.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? In other words, what (in one or more words) is the paragraph about? _____
- _____ 2. What *point* is the writer making about the topic? In other words, which sentence states the *main idea* of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 2

¹The American criminal justice system is often unjust. ²Many of the poor spend months awaiting trial, while those with money are able to use bonds to secure their release. ³Defense attorneys encourage plea bargaining or pleading guilty (whether or not one committed the crime) in return for being charged with a lesser offense. ⁴Judges dislike “unnecessary trials,” and they impose harsher sentences on those who insist on going to trial. ⁵Judges also have biases which influence their sentencing. ⁶Factors that have nothing to do with the offense, but which affect sentencing, include age, employment, and the number of previous arrests. ⁷Even when the offense is the same, older defendants receive more lenient sentences, as do those with higher-status jobs and those with a better employment history.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? _____

- _____ 2. What *point* is the writer making about the topic? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 3

¹The ability to empathize seems to exist in a rudimentary form in even the youngest children. ²Research sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health revealed what many parents know from experience: Virtually from birth, infants become visibly upset when they hear another baby crying, and children who are a few months old cry when they observe another child in tears. ³Young children have trouble distinguishing others' distress from their own. ⁴If, for example, one child hurts his finger, another baby might put her own finger into her mouth as if she were feeling pain. ⁵Researchers report cases in which children who see their parents in tears wipe their own eyes, even though they might not be crying.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? _____
- _____ 2. What *point* is the writer making about the topic? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 4

¹Popular during the 1950s, the drive-in movie disappeared for a number of reasons. ²The most important was land value. ³Drive-ins were built on undeveloped edges of cities and towns. ⁴When these areas expanded in the 1960s and 1970s, it didn't make sense for a business used only after dark and mostly in warm weather to take up valuable space. ⁵Drive-ins were replaced by industrial parks, tract housing, and shopping malls with indoor theaters. ⁶Another reason was daylight savings time, which became standardized in most areas by the late 1960s. ⁷Theaters had to synchronize their first show with the setting sun. ⁸In the summer, they couldn't get started until nine o'clock, too late for families that had to get up early. ⁹Also, moviegoers began to expect more sophisticated projection and sound than those offered by drive-ins. ¹⁰Furthermore, people lost interest in drive-ins for family entertainment as movies became more violent and sexually explicit. ¹¹The last of the drive-ins vanished when cable television and VCRs came on the scene. ¹²People could now see recent movies without leaving their homes.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? _____
- _____ 2. What *point* is the writer making about the topic? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Sometimes authors make it fairly easy to find their main idea. They announce it by using **key words** that are easy to recognize. First to note are **list words**, which tell you a list of items is to follow. For example, the main idea in the paragraph about gossip was stated like this: “However, it actually serves several important functions in the human community.” The expression *several important functions* helps you zero in on your target: the main idea. You realize that the paragraph will be about specific functions of gossip.

Here are some common word groups that often announce a main idea. Note that each of them contains a word that ends in *s*—a plural that suggests the supporting details will be a list of items.

List Words

several kinds (or ways) of	several causes of	some factors in
three advantages of	five steps	among the results
various reasons for	a number of effects	a series of

When expressions like these appear in a sentence, look carefully to see if that sentence might be the main idea. Chances are a sentence with such list words will be followed by a list of major supporting details.

Check Your Understanding

Underline the **list words** in the following sentences.

Hint: Remember that list words usually contain a word that ends in *s*.

Example Children become unpopular for several common reasons.

1. Researchers have identified two factors that play a significant role in our dreams.
2. Several steps can help you overcome the fear of speaking and become an effective speaker.
3. Three key differences exist between the House and the Senate.
4. Money is a strong priority for people—even for those with plenty of it—for a number of reasons.
5. There are four ways that we often express our thoughts by body language rather than by speaking.

Explanation:

You should have underlined the following groups of words: *two factors*, *several steps*, *three key differences*, *a number of reasons*, and *four ways*.

In addition to list words, addition words can alert you to the main idea. **Addition words** are generally used right before a supporting detail. When you see this type of clue, you can assume that the detail it introduces fits under the umbrella of a main idea.

Here are some of the addition words that often introduce major supporting details and help you discover the main idea.

Addition Words

one	to begin with	also	further
first (of all)	for one thing	in addition	furthermore
second(ly)	other	next	last (of all)
third(ly)	another	moreover	final(ly)

✓ Check Your Understanding

Reread the paragraph about gossip and underline the **addition words** that alert you to supporting details.

¹Social psychologists have found that almost everyone gossips. ²Male or female, young or old, blue-collar or professional, humans love to talk about one another. ³All too often, such gossip is viewed as a frivolous waste of time. ⁴However, it actually serves several important functions in the human community. ⁵For one thing, gossip is a form of networking. ⁶Talking with our friends and coworkers about each other is our most effective means of keeping track of the ever-changing social dynamic. ⁷It tells us who is in, who is out, and who can help us climb the social or professional ladder. ⁸A second function of gossip is the building of influence. ⁹When we engage in gossip, we are able to shape people's opinions of ourselves. ¹⁰We tell stories that show ourselves in a good light—wise, compassionate, insightful, clever. ¹¹And when we listen sympathetically to the gossip of other people, they perceive us as warm and likable. ¹²A final and very powerful function of gossip is the creating of social alliances. ¹³There are few quicker ways to form a bond with another person than to share private information with him or her. ¹⁴The words “I wouldn't tell most people this, but . . .” instantly interest and flatter the listener. ¹⁵To talk about a third party, especially in a critical way, creates a bond with our listener and gives a feeling of shared superiority.

Explanation:

The words that introduce each new supporting detail for the main idea are *For one thing*, *second*, and *final*. These addition words introduce each of the three functions of gossip.

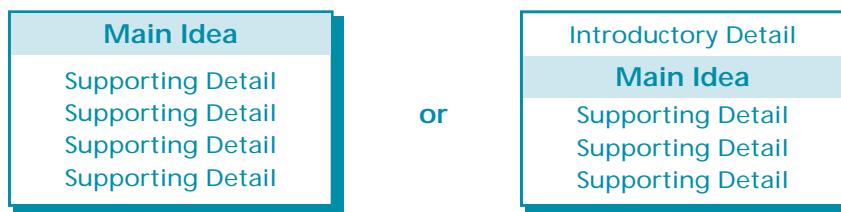
Note also that the main idea includes the list words *several important functions*, which signal that the supporting details will be a list of the functions of gossip. In this and many paragraphs, list words and addition words often work hand in hand.

The following chapter, “Supporting Details,” includes further information about words that alert you to the main idea and the details that support it. But what you have already learned here will help you find main ideas.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Now you know how to recognize a main idea by 1) distinguishing between the general and the specific, 2) identifying the topic of a passage, and 3) using verbal clues. You are ready to find the main idea no matter where it is located in a paragraph.

A main idea may appear at any point within a paragraph. Very commonly, it shows up at the beginning, as either the first or the second sentence. However, main ideas may also appear further within a paragraph or even at the very end.

Main Idea at the Beginning

In textbooks, it is very common for the main idea to be either the first or the second sentence. See if you can underline the main idea in the following paragraph.

¹As a result of more than sixty years of election surveys, we now know a great deal about American voters. ²The wealthier and more educated they are, the more likely people are to support Republican candidates. ³Men are a bit more likely to vote for Republicans, while women slightly favor Democrats. ⁴African Americans vote for Democrats by a margin of more than four to one. ⁵For generations, Catholics voted for Democrats, and Protestants (outside the South) favored Republicans; but today, Catholics and

Protestants have similar party preferences, and Southern voters have swung from the Democrats to the Republicans. ⁶But perhaps the most significant fact has to do with the general lack of interest in politics. ⁷Most Americans say politics is not an important part of their lives. ⁸Only 42 percent of Americans bothered to vote in the 2004 presidential election.

In this paragraph, the main idea is in the first sentence. All the following sentences in the paragraph provide details about American voters.

Check Your Understanding

Now read the following paragraph and see if you can underline its main idea:

¹Today, most people in the Western world use a fork to eat. ²But before the eighteenth century, using a fork was highly discouraged. ³Most people in Europe ate with their hands. ⁴People from the upper class used three fingers, while the commoners ate with five. ⁵When an inventor from Tuscany created a miniature pitchfork for eating, Europeans thought that it was a strange utensil. ⁶Men who used a fork were often ridiculed and considered feminine. ⁷Priests called out against the fork, claiming that only human hands were worthy to touch the food God had blessed them with. ⁸One wealthy noblewoman shocked clergymen by eating with a fork she designed herself. ⁹Over dinner, they accused her of being too excessive. ¹⁰When the woman died from the plague a few days later, the priests claimed her death was a punishment from the heavens. ¹¹They warned others that using a fork could bring them the same fate.

Explanation:

In the above paragraph, the main idea is stated in the second sentence. The first sentence introduces the topic, using a fork, but it is the idea in the second sentence—that before the eighteenth century, using a fork was highly discouraged—that is supported in the rest of the paragraph. So keep in mind that the first sentence may simply introduce or lead into the main idea of a paragraph.

Hint: Very often, a contrast word like *however*, *but*, *yet*, or *though* signals the main idea, as in the paragraph you have just read.

Main Idea in the Middle



The main idea at times appears in the middle of a paragraph.

Check Your Understanding

Here is an example of a paragraph in which the main idea is somewhere in the middle. Try to find it and underline it. Then read the explanation that follows.

¹Each year, as days grow shorter and nights grow colder, animals take action to survive the winter. ²Many animals fly, swim, or walk hundreds or thousands of miles to the south in search of a warm winter home. ³Earthworms travel too slowly to make a long journey to warmer regions. ⁴But they will die if they get trapped in the frozen ground. ⁵To survive a brutal winter, earthworms practice vertical migration. ⁶They move from dirt that's close to the surface to dirt that's deeper down. ⁷Each fall, the same instinct that sends geese flying south causes earthworms to start moving downward. ⁸As little barbs that stick out of their bodies poke into the dirt, the earthworms contract their muscles. ⁹This moves them downward to a point where they're below the soil that will freeze in the winter. ¹⁰Only after winter passes and soil overhead warms up to 36 degrees or more do the earthworms tunnel back upward.

Explanation:

If you thought the fifth sentence gives the main idea, you were correct. The first four sentences introduce the topic of migrating for the winter and the challenge faced by earthworms. The fifth sentence then presents the writer's main idea, which is that they practice vertical migration. The rest of the paragraph develops that idea.

Main Idea at the End

Supporting Detail
Supporting Detail
Supporting Detail
Supporting Detail

Main Idea

Sometimes all the sentences in a paragraph will lead up to the main idea, which is presented at the end. Here is an example of such a paragraph.

¹Throughout history, a pinch of arsenic has been known as the weapon of choice for murderers who wished to discreetly do away with their victims. ²Yet, in 1910, scientists created a compound containing a microscopic amount of arsenic that became the first effective remedy for the treatment of syphilis. ³Today it remains an effective chemotherapy agent for acute forms of leukemia. ⁴Botulinum toxin is another potent poison. ⁵But in extremely diluted form, delivered as the drug Botox, it has proven effective in softening wrinkles, relieving migraine headaches, and lessening the spastic contractions caused by multiple sclerosis and cerebral palsy. ⁶These are but two examples of the medical maxim that the difference between a substance being a poison or a medicine lies in the dosage.

Main Idea at the Beginning and End

Main Idea

Supporting Detail
Supporting Detail
Supporting Detail

Main Idea

At times an author may choose to state the main idea near the beginning of the paragraph and then emphasize it by restating it in other words later in the paragraph. In such cases, the main idea is both at the beginning and the end. Such is the case in the following paragraph.

¹Most birds may be small, cute, and comical, but the more closely one looks at them, the more they come to look like little dinosaurs. ²The most obvious similarity between birds and dinosaurs is the way they raise their young. ³Specifically, dinosaurs are known to have laid eggs, just as birds do. ⁴Paleontologists have discovered dinosaur eggs in over two hundred sites just

within the United States, and in Montana they have even found such eggs arranged in nests, suggesting that some dinosaurs cared for their young as they grew up, just as birds do. ⁵Another, less obvious clue that birds are related to dinosaurs is that birds have scales and feathers. ⁶Many birds have scales like a dinosaur's on their feet and ankles, and feathers themselves grow out of the same kinds of tissues that generate reptilian scales. ⁷In fact, some dinosaurs are known to have had feathers themselves. ⁸The most important similarity between birds and dinosaurs can be seen in the shape of their bones. ⁹Scientists have discovered that the skeletons of many dinosaurs, even of the ferocious Tyrannosaurus Rex, contain wishbones, porous neckbones, and disks of cartilage called "growth plates" at the ends of their long bones—features that are common in the skeletons of birds. ¹⁰It may be difficult to accept, but swallows, sparrows, and even chickens are all distant relatives of the fearsome dinosaurs of ages past.

Note that the main idea—that birds may be related to dinosaurs—is expressed in different words in the first and last sentences.

➤ Practice 3

The main ideas of the following paragraphs appear at different locations—at the beginning, somewhere in the middle, or at the end. Identify each main idea by filling in its sentence number in the space provided.

- _____ 1. ¹Everyone knows what it's like to have the "jitters" after one cup of coffee too many. ²Those shaking hands and sleepless nights have convinced many that coffee is as unhealthy as alcohol or cigarettes. ³However, the health benefits of coffee greatly outweigh its negative effects. ⁴In addition to reducing the risk of diseases like diabetes and cirrhosis of the liver, those morning cups of joe have been shown to ward off two of America's most common killers: heart disease and cancer. ⁵Coffee flushes the bloodstream of the excess fat that clogs arteries and also supplies a large dose of antioxidants, which prevent the formation of tumors. ⁶Psychologically, the stimulant effects of a daily cup have proven to reduce suicide rates. ⁷And as for the fear of a troublesome addiction to caffeine, that risk is often overstated. ⁸Physical dependence on coffee becomes a possibility only after drinking five or more cups daily, significantly more than the two or three cups a day that Americans drink on average.
- _____ 2. ¹Offering on-site child care for employees' children provides many physical and financial benefits to companies. ²Such child-care facilities ease the strain on parents. ³While they are at work, they can keep in touch with a baby or toddler and observe the care their child is

receiving. ⁴They are able to spend time with their children during breaks and lunch hours, and mothers can even nurse their babies at the center. ⁵These benefits attract and keep capable workers with the company. ⁶Surprisingly, providing child care can even reduce labor costs. ⁷When the United Bank of Monterey, California, decided to measure the cost of its daycare center, officials found that the annual turnover of employees who used the center was just one-fourth that of employees who did not use it. ⁸Users of the centers were also absent from work less often, and they took shorter maternity leaves. ⁹After subtracting the center's costs from these savings, the bank saved more than \$200,000.

- _____ 3. ¹In 1957, a team of archaeologists from the University of Pennsylvania uncovered a fabulous burial site just west of Ankara in Turkey. ²From the richness of its trappings and the remains of an ancient palace nearby, the researchers concluded that it was the tomb of the legendary King Mita, or Midas. ³Most remarkable of all was the fact that the dry climate had preserved the remains of a funeral meal that had been prepared some 2,700 years ago. ⁴The remains of this elaborate feast were packed up and preserved for another forty-some years, until techniques for analyzing food residues had advanced enough to permit the re-creation of the funeral feast. ⁵Using these archaeological findings, a chef at the University Museum created the "Midas Touch Banquet." ⁶The most golden thing about the feast was the re-creation of the liquor that had been found in crystallized form in the goblets used at Midas's funeral. ⁷It was an alcoholic beverage made from honey, barley and golden Muscat grapes. ⁸Sometimes ancient fables, like the legend of King Midas, the man who could turn everything to gold, have a basis in fact.
- _____ 4. ¹What do you think of as "cute"? ²Kittens? ³Paintings of children with big sad eyes? ⁴Little dolls? ⁵Golden retriever puppies? ⁶If none of these examples triggers a fond "awwwwww" response in you, you are truly a rare individual. ⁷Scientists who study human behavior say that we are hard-wired not only to identify certain characteristics as "cute," but to respond to them with affection and protectiveness. ⁸Simply put, *cute* (as opposed to *beautiful*) means "baby-like, vulnerable, young, helpless." ⁹And what we identify as "cute" are characteristics borrowed from our own human babies. ¹⁰Those include big round faces, forward-facing eyes set low on the face, awkward floppy arms and legs, and a clumsy, side-to-side walk. ¹¹Because human babies are so helpless for so long, it is essential for our species' survival that adults respond strongly to such "cute" signals. ¹²And indeed, nature has been so successful in this regard that we respond to collections of "cute" characteristics that are

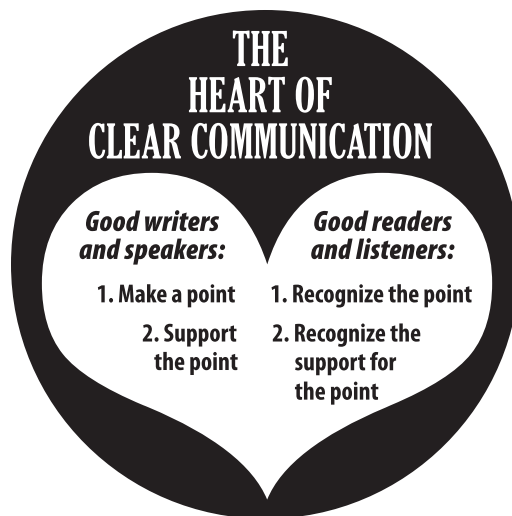
outside our own species—just witness our reaction to pandas, penguins, and puppies. ¹³We have such a deeply-rooted response to cuteness that we respond even to cute non-animals. ¹⁴It’s no mystery why designers of cars like the Beetle and the Mini Cooper made their vehicles look round-headed and smiling. ¹⁵They know that as absurd as it may be, people want to take “cute” things home and care for them.

A Note on the Central Point

Just as a paragraph may have a main idea, a longer selection may have a **central point**, also known as a **central idea** or **thesis**. The longer selection might be an essay, an article, or a section of a textbook chapter. You can find a central point in the same way that you find a main idea—by identifying the topic (which is often suggested by the title of the selection) and then looking at the supporting material. The paragraphs within the longer reading will provide supporting details for the central point. You will see, for example, that the essay that ends this chapter has a central idea.

A Final Thought

Whether we are readers, writers, listeners, or speakers, the “heart” of clear communication is the main idea, or point, and the support for the main idea. Look at the following diagram:



The diagram underscores the importance of the most important of all reading skills: the ability to identify main ideas. The diagram also shows that the ability to identify supporting details for the main idea is an almost equally important skill.

CHAPTER REVIEW

In this chapter, you learned the following:

- Recognizing the main idea is the most important key to good comprehension. The main idea is a general “umbrella” idea under which fits all the specific supporting material of the passage.
- Three strategies that will help you find the main idea are to 1) look for general versus specific ideas; 2) use the topic (the general subject of a selection) to lead you to the main idea; and 3) use verbal clues to lead you to the main idea.
- The main idea often appears at the beginning of a paragraph, though it may appear elsewhere in a paragraph.

The next chapter—Chapter 2—will sharpen your understanding of the specific details that authors use to support and develop their main ideas.



On the Web: If you are using this book in class, you can visit our website for additional practice in recognizing main ideas. Go to www.townsendpress.com and click on “Online Exercises.”

NOTE: Two review tests, a reading selection, and six mastery tests conclude this chapter as well as the other nine skills chapters in the book.