

3

Main Ideas

THIS CHAPTER IN A NUTSHELL

- Recognizing an author’s main idea, or point, is the most important reading skill.
- Learn to think as you read by asking yourself, “What is the author’s point?”
- The main idea is a general idea supported by specific ideas and details.
- It may help to find the topic or general subject of a selection and to then ask yourself, “What point is the author making about the topic?”
- Certain “clue words” such as *several reasons* or *a number of causes* or *three factors* often signal a main idea.
- Certain other words such as *first of all*, *second*, *also*, and *finally* often follow a main idea.

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. To find it in a reading selection, ask yourself, “What’s the main point the author is trying to make?”

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

¹Poor grades in school can have various causes. ²For one thing, students may have financial problems. ³If they need to work long hours to make money, they will have little study time. ⁴Another cause of poor grades may be trouble with relationships. ⁵A student may be unhappy over family problems or a lack of friends. ⁶That unhappiness can harm schoolwork. ⁷A final cause of poor grades may be bad study habits. ⁸Some students have never learned how to take good notes in class, how to manage their time effectively, or how to study a textbook. ⁹Without such study skills, their grades are likely to suffer.

Here is a good two-step way to find an author's point, or main idea:

- 1 Look for a general statement.
- 2 Decide if that statement is supported by most of the other material in the paragraph. If it is, you have found the main idea.

Below are four statements from the passage about poor grades. 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. Poor grades in school can have various causes.
- B. For one thing, students may have financial problems.
- C. A final cause of poor grades may be bad study habits.
- D. Some students have never learned how to take good notes in class, how to manage their time effectively, or how to study a textbook.

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

Explanation:

Sentence A: The phrase “various causes” in sentence A is a general one. It is broad enough to include all of the specific causes mentioned in the other sentences—financial problems, trouble with relationships, and bad study habits. Sentence A, then, is the sentence that expresses the main idea of the passage.

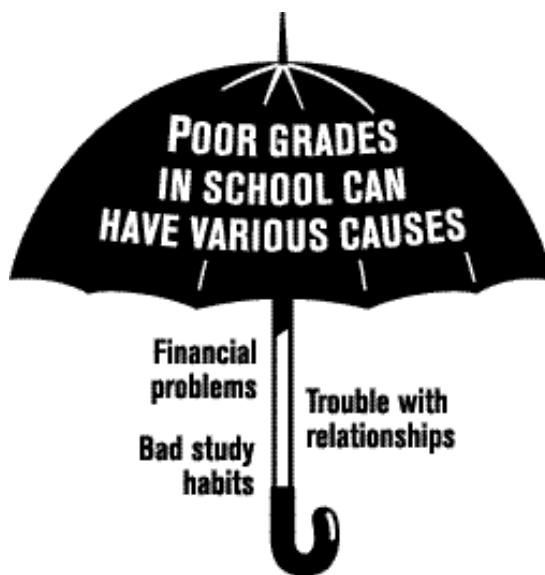
Sentence B: This sentence is about only one type of problem, financial problems. “Financial problems” is not general enough to include the other two listed causes of poor grades: trouble with relationships and bad study habits.

Sentence C: This sentence also mentions only one specific cause: bad study habits. “Bad study habits” is not general enough to include the other two causes presented in the paragraph.

Sentence D: This sentence lists three specific study problems. 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 or most of the other material of the paragraph. That other material is made up of specific supporting details—evidence such as examples, 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?

To recognize the main idea of a passage, you must **become an active reader**. Active readers *think* as they read. Instead of merely taking in words, an active reader constantly asks, “What’s the point?” In addition, active readers use a variety of other strategies to determine an author’s main idea. Below are three active reading strategies you can use to help find the main idea in a passage.

- 1 Look for general versus specific ideas.
- 2 Use the topic to lead you to the main idea.
- 3 Use clue 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 the causes of poor grades that the main idea is a *general* idea that is supported by *specific* ideas. To improve your skill at finding main ideas, then, it will be helpful to practice separating general from specific ideas.

Check Your Understanding

See if you can do the following brief exercises. Then read the explanations that follow.

1. You often use general and specific ideas without even realizing it. Consider the following:

- *Animal* is a general term. Write the names of three specific animals:

- *Vegetables* is a general term. Write the names of three specific vegetables:

- *Emotion* is a general term. Write the names of three specific emotions:

Explanation:

In answering the above items, you might have chosen such specific animals as a dog, raccoon, or bear; such specific vegetables as carrots, onions, or celery; such specific emotions as anger, sadness, or happiness.

2. Let's say that a new year is starting, and you decide to make some New Year's resolutions. Your general idea might be as follows:

General idea: There are changes I want to make in my life for the new year.

- Now write three *specific* ideas—three resolutions that you might make:

Explanation:

Three examples of specific resolutions might be to get to bed earlier, to eat less junk food, and to spend at least a half hour reading each day.

3. In thinking about your teachers, you might decide that one of your high-school English teachers was your best teacher. Your general idea might be as follows:

General idea: _____ is the best teacher I ever had.

- Now write three *specific* reasons you thought so highly of this teacher:

Explanation:

You might, for instance, have liked a given teacher because he or she gave clear explanations of ideas, had a friendly manner, and spent individual time with each student.

4. Finally, suppose you have found a good part-time job. Your general idea might be as follows:

General idea: _____ has been a good part-time job for me.

- Now write three *specific* supporting reasons for liking the job:

Explanation:

Three particular reasons for liking a job might include pay of ten dollars an hour, convenient work hours after school each day, and a short travel time of only fifteen minutes to the job.

Now do the practices that follow, which will give you more experience in telling the difference between general and specific ideas.

➤ Practice 1

Each cluster of words below consists of one general idea and three specific ideas. The general idea includes all the specific ideas. Identify each general idea with a **G** and the specific ideas with an **S**. Look first at the example.

Example

 S frying

 S baking

 G cooking

 S steaming

(*Cooking* is the general idea which includes three specific types of cooking: frying, baking, and steaming.)

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1. ___ soup | 6. ___ rock |
| ___ water | ___ classical |
| ___ liquid | ___ country |
| ___ coffee | ___ music |
| 2. ___ potato chips | 7. ___ necklace |
| ___ pretzels | ___ jewelry |
| ___ salted nuts | ___ ring |
| ___ snacks | ___ bracelet |
| 3. ___ cotton | 8. ___ fish |
| ___ fabric | ___ tuna |
| ___ silk | ___ salmon |
| ___ polyester | ___ flounder |
| 4. ___ entertainment | 9. ___ cough |
| ___ movies | ___ sneeze |
| ___ concerts | ___ symptom |
| ___ card games | ___ sore throat |
| 5. ___ cans | 10. ___ speaking |
| ___ boxes | ___ listening |
| ___ bags | ___ writing |
| ___ containers | ___ communicating |

➤ Practice 2

In each item below, one idea is general and the others are specific. The general idea includes the specific ideas. In the spaces provided, write two more specific ideas that are covered by the general idea.

Example *General:* school subjects
 Specific: biology, Spanish, history, math
 (*School subjects* is the general idea; *biology* and *Spanish* are specific subjects, as are *history* and *math*.)

1. *General:* beverages
 Specific: iced tea, water, _____, _____
2. *General:* sport
 Specific: baseball, soccer, _____, _____
3. *General:* footwear
 Specific: sandals, slippers, _____, _____
4. *General:* sandwich
 Specific: ham, grilled cheese, _____, _____
5. *General:* reading material
 Specific: textbook, comic book, _____, _____
6. *General:* seafood
 Specific: clams, lobster, _____, _____
7. *General:* tone of voice
 Specific: excited, surprised, _____, _____
8. *General:* negative personal quality
 Specific: greed, cowardice, _____, _____
9. *General:* positive personal quality
 Specific: reliability, determination, _____, _____
10. *General:* greeting
 Specific: "How are you," "Hello," _____, _____

 **Practice 3**

In the following groups, one statement is the general point (and main idea), and the other statements are specific support for the point. Identify each point with a **P** and each statement of support with an **S**.

1. ___ A. A mosquito can find you in the dark.
___ B. A mosquito can keep you awake all night.
___ C. Though a mosquito is small, it has power.
___ D. A mosquito can make you scratch yourself until you bleed.

2. ___ A. The bread the waiter brought us is stale.
___ B. We've been waiting for our main course for over an hour.
___ C. The people next to us are awfully loud.
___ D. It is time to speak to the restaurant manager.

3. ___ A. The apartment has some real drawbacks.
___ B. The kitchen is so small only one person can be there.
___ C. Each morning the apartment fills with exhaust fumes from a nearby bus station.
___ D. The apartment has no closets.

4. ___ A. Certain harmless snakes eat poisonous ones.
___ B. Snakes help control the rodent population by eating mice and rats.
___ C. Medicines for humans have been developed from snake venom.
___ D. Despite their poor public image, snakes have their good points.

 **Practice 4**

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

1. ___ A. Couples committed to each other gain strength from their mutual support.
___ B. Committed couples are financially more successful than singles.
___ C. Committed relationships offer many benefits.
___ D. Happily married adults live longer and have fewer emotional problems.

2. ___ A. Worldwide, one in seven people continually lacks adequate food.
___ B. The hungry people of poor, developing countries number about 800 million.
___ C. Ten million of the world's hungry people live in wealthy, industrialized countries.
___ D. Hunger is a global problem.
3. ___ A. Finding safety in numbers, bats live in large colonies numbering from several thousand to a million or more.
___ B. Bats are creatures with a strong instinct to protect their own kind.
___ C. Mother bats, who usually have one offspring per year, leave their young only to get food.
___ D. When colonies containing mother bats are disturbed, the mothers will try to move their young to a safer location.
4. ___ A. In 17th century Europe, people went through a lot of trouble to wear makeup.
___ B. To wear makeup at that time, men and women had to put an unpleasant mixture of lead, egg whites, and vinegar on their faces.
___ C. Once a person's makeup was applied, he or she had to be careful not to laugh, or the new "face" would crack.
___ D. The lead in the makeup caused scars and blemishes, which had to be covered with patches of cloth.

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 section in a psychology textbook:

Why We Communicate

And here are the subtopics:

Physical Needs

Identity Needs

Social Needs

Practical Goals

If you were studying the above chapter, you could use the topics to help find the main ideas. (Pages 5–9 explain just how to do so, as well as providing other textbook study tips.)

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:

Poor grades in school can have various causes.

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

Topic: _____

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

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 poor grades is “Poor grades in school can have various causes.”

Check Your Understanding

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

¹Phobias are continuing fears of things that are not likely to be harmful. ²For example, some people have a phobia about elevators. ³They worry that if they enter an elevator, the cable will break and they will fall

hundreds of feet to their death. ⁴While such an accident can happen, it is extremely rare. ⁵Another instance of a phobia is a fear of medical needles. ⁶Some people will refuse to receive an injection, even if they are seriously ill. ⁷They may faint if given a needle; so great is their fear they are about to die. ⁸Perhaps the most common phobia is fear of public speaking. ⁹Some people will not go to school or take jobs if they have to speak before a group. ¹⁰Their fear—that they will embarrass themselves and that people will pity or reject them—has little basis in reality. ¹¹These and other phobias can usually be overcome, often fairly quickly, with the right direction and treatment.

- _____ 1. Write the letter of the *topic* of the paragraph. To find the topic, ask yourself what the paragraph is about. (It often helps as you read to look for and even circle a word, term, or idea that is repeated in the paragraph.)
- A. dangers
 - B. phobias
 - C. worry about elevators
- _____ 2. Write the number of the sentence that states 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 “phobias.” Continuing to read the paragraph, you see that, in fact, everything in it is about phobias. And the main idea is clearly sentence 1: “Phobias are fears that are out of proportion to the actual dangers in given situations.” 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: Phobias

Main idea: Phobias are fears that are out of proportion to the actual dangers in given situations.

Supporting details:

1. Fear that an elevator ride will end in a fall to death.
2. Fear that an injection will cause death.
3. Fear that speaking in public will lead to pity or rejection.

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

 **Practice 5**

Below are groups of four items. In each case, one item is the topic, one is the main idea, and two are details that support and develop the main idea. Label each item with one of the following:

T — for the **topic** of the paragraph

MI — for the **main idea**

SD — for the **supporting details**

Note that an explanation is provided for the first group; reading it will help you do this practice.

Group 1

- _____ A. One pitcher smoothes the dirt on the pitcher's mound before he throws each pitch.
- _____ B. One infielder sits in the same spot on the dugout bench during every game.
- _____ C. Some baseball players think that certain superstitious habits help them win games.
- _____ D. Superstitious baseball players.

Explanation:

All of the statements in Group 1 involve superstitious baseball players, so item D must be the topic. (A topic is expressed in a single word or short phrase and is not a complete sentence.) Statements A and B each describe specific superstitious habits of individual baseball players. Statement C, however, is more general—it states that some players think certain superstitious habits help them win games. Statement C thus gives the main idea, and statements A and B are supporting details that explain that main idea.

Group 2

- _____ A. Houdini learned to pop his shoulder out of its socket in order to escape from straight jackets.
- _____ B. Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist, worked hard at his career.
- _____ C. Harry Houdini.
- _____ D. Houdini trained to hold his breath for over five minutes in order to pull off under water escapes.

Group 3

- _____ A. Some body fat is essential.
- _____ B. Body fat.
- _____ C. Body fat insulates against the cold.
- _____ D. Body fat protects organs from injury.

Group 4

- _____ A. At dinnertime, instead of cooking many people simply go to a fast-food restaurant or order take-out.
- _____ B. More and more families bring home prepared meals from the frozen-foods section or the “deli” counter.
- _____ C. Home cooking is becoming a lost art.
- _____ D. Home cooking.

➤ Practice 6

Following are four paragraphs. Read each paragraph and write the letter of the item you think is the topic of the paragraph. Then write the number of the sentence you think states the main idea of the paragraph.

Here is how to proceed:

- 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.)

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.

- 2 Next, ask yourself, “What point is the writer making about this topic?” This will be the main idea. In this practice, 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?”

Paragraph 1

¹The influence of sports reaches far and wide. ²Most of us have had some experiences with athletics, either as players or as spectators. ³Schools, from kindergarten to college, provide many chances to participate in sports.

⁴Newspapers carry more news about sports than about politics, crime, or the economy. ⁵Radio and television newscasts seldom go on the air without a sports report. ⁶Football, basketball, baseball, and other games are often broadcast in full, even in place of regular programming. ⁷Sports have so much influence on our lives that our everyday speech is full of sports imagery: “struck out,” “touch base,” “ballpark figure,” “game plan,” “teamwork,” “cheap shot,” and so on.

- _____ 1. The topic of the paragraph is
- A. athletics.
 - B. influence of sports.
 - C. sports imagery.
- _____ 2. Write the number of the sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph.

Paragraph 2

¹The female black widow spider is not as terrible a killer as is generally believed. ²While the creature is certainly poisonous, she is also very shy and will bite humans only when she feels cornered. ³Also, the idea that the black widow always kills the male after mating is untrue. ⁴The male is often spared—if he remembers to tap out a special signal as he ventures onto his mate’s web. ⁵The vibrations on the web let her know he is one of her own kind, not an insect to be rushed at and killed.

- _____ 3. The topic of the paragraph is
- A. the female black widow spider.
 - B. poisonous spiders.
 - C. the unlucky male black widow spider.
- _____ 4. Write the number of the sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph.

Paragraph 3

¹Potato chips got their start because of a hard-to-please restaurant customer in 1853. ²In that year, George Crum was working as a chef at an elegant resort in Saratoga Springs, New York. ³He prepared thick-cut French-fried potatoes for diners there. ⁴But one diner kept sending his potatoes back to the kitchen, complaining that they were too thick for his taste. ⁵Crum cut the potatoes thinner and thinner and finally, very annoyed, made a serving of potatoes too thin and crisp to eat with a fork. ⁶To his surprise, the guest loved them. ⁷Other guests demanded a taste. ⁸Soon “Saratoga Chips” were the most popular item on the menu.

- _____ 5. The topic of the paragraph is
- A. a hard-to-please customer.
 - B. the origins of foods.
 - C. potato chips.
- _____ 6. Write the number of the sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph.

Paragraph 4

¹People have always loved bike riding. ²Biking, however, can be a dangerous activity. ³One danger is “getting doored”—having a car driver open his or her door directly into the path of an oncoming bike. ⁴Another risk is aggressive drivers who feel they have more right to the roads than bikes do. ⁵Such drivers will scream, honk, or gesture wildly. ⁶They may block off bikers without a signal or a look, giving the biker no time to avoid running off the road or into the car. ⁷An added source of danger for bikers is poor road design, which in many cases allows just enough room for a car on either side of the road, but no extra room for a biker to be on the same road. ⁸Recently, the U.S. Department of Transportation noted that bicycling is now more dangerous than flying in planes or riding in buses, boats, or trains.

- _____ 7. The topic of the paragraph is
- A. biking.
 - B. transportation.
 - C. getting “doored.”
- _____ 8. Write the number of the sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph.

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

Sometimes authors make it fairly easy to find their main idea. They announce it using clue words or phrases that are easy to recognize. One type of clue word is a **list word** or words, which tell you a list of items is to follow. For example, the main idea in the paragraph about poor grades was stated like this: *Poor grades in school can have various causes.* The expression *various causes* helps you zero in on the main idea. You realize that the paragraph will be about the causes of poor grades. As you read on and see the series of causes, you know your guess about the main idea was correct.

On the next page are some common words that often announce a main idea. Note that all of them end in **s**—a plural that suggests the supporting details will be a list of items.

List Words

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

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 clue words will be followed by a list of major supporting details.

 **Check Your Understanding: List Words**

Underline the list words in the following sentences.

Hint: Remember that list words usually end in *s*.

Example Being a middle child in a large family has several drawbacks.

1. The rising rate of diabetes among young people seems to have three causes.
2. Several symptoms may indicate that a person is having a heart attack.
3. The Pilgrims faced a number of challenges during their first winter in America.
4. Community colleges have some real advantages over four-year colleges.
5. Students offer a variety of excuses for their homework being late.

Explanation:

In the first sentence, you should have underlined the phrase *three causes*. Those words suggest that a list of the three causes of the rising rate of diabetes among young people may follow. In sentences 2–5, you should have underlined these groups of words: *several symptoms*, *a number of challenges*, *some real advantages*, and *a variety of excuses*. Each of those phrases also tells you that a list of supporting details may follow.

There is another type of clue word that can alert you to the main idea. This type of clue word, called an **addition word**, is generally used right before a supporting detail. Below is a box of words that often introduce major supporting details and help you discover the main idea.

Addition Words

one	to begin with	in addition	last
first	another	next	last of all
first of all	second	moreover	final
for one thing	also	furthermore	finally

Check Your Understanding: Addition Words

Reread the paragraph about causes of poor grades and underline the addition words that alert you to supporting details. Also, see if you can circle the list words that suggest the main idea.

¹Poor grades in school can have various causes. ²For one thing, students may have financial problems. ³If they need to work long hours to make money, they will have little study time. ⁴Another cause of poor grades may be trouble with relationships. ⁵A student may be unhappy over family problems or a lack of friends. ⁶That unhappiness can harm schoolwork. ⁷A final cause of poor grades may be bad study habits. ⁸Some students have never learned how to take good notes in class, how to manage their time effectively, or how to study a textbook. ⁹Without such study skills, their grades are likely to suffer.

Explanation:

The words that introduce each new supporting detail for the main idea are *for one thing*, *another*, and *final*. These addition words help you realize that all the details in the paragraph are supporting the idea that poor grades in school can have various causes. You should have underlined these three words.

Since *various causes* are list words, you should have circled them. Even before you saw the addition words, those list words could have suggested to you that the paragraph may list the different causes of poor grades. As you can see, in this paragraph (as in many others), list words and addition words work hand in hand.

 **Practice 7**

The chapters that follow will offer a good deal of practice in clue words. For now, do the activity below.

A. Underline the list words in each of the following sentences.

1. Living alone has a number of advantages.
2. Physical punishment can be harmful to a child in several ways.
3. The Industrial Revolution came about quickly because of three major inventions.
4. A series of mistakes led to the arrest and imprisonment of the wrong person.
5. To memorize materials effectively, there are two important steps to follow.
6. The National Board of Medical Examiners has released some alarming facts about doctors.

B. (7–10.) Underline the four addition words or phrases in the following passage.

¹Women don't hold more political power in the United States for several reasons. ²First of all, women are still a minority in law and business. ³Those are the fields from which most politicians come. ⁴In addition, political careers usually require a great deal of time spent away from home, and such hours don't tie in well with motherhood. ⁵Also, women are less likely to have a supportive spouse at home, ready to help out with child care, housework, and the like. ⁶Finally, men have not been eager to open up the "boys' club" of political power to women. ⁷They tend to support and encourage upcoming male candidates, not female ones.

A Note on the Central Point

Just as a paragraph has a main idea, a longer selection has a **central point**, also known as a **central idea** or **thesis**. The longer selection might be an essay, an article, or even 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.

The following chapter, "Supporting Details," provides more information about (and practice in) the list and addition words that help signal main ideas and the details that support them.

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; 3) use clue words to lead you to the main idea.

The next chapter—Chapter 4—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.”

► Review Test 1

To review what you’ve learned in this chapter, answer each of the following questions by filling in the blank or writing the letter of the correct answer.

1. The umbrella statement that covers all of the material in a paragraph is the (*topic or main idea?*) _____.
2. The supporting details are always more (*general or specific?*) _____ than the main idea.
3. To help yourself find the (*topic or main idea?*) _____ of a paragraph, ask yourself, “Who or what is this paragraph about?”
4. To help you decide if a certain sentence is the main idea of a paragraph, ask yourself, “Is this sentence _____ by all or most of the other material in the paragraph?”
5. One way to help find the main idea is to look for **addition words** like *first*, *second*, *also*, and *finally*. Such words often introduce the supporting _____s for a main idea.

► Review Test 2

- A. Each cluster of words below consists of one general idea and three specific ideas. The general idea includes all the specific ideas. Underline the general idea in each group.

- | | | | |
|----------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|
| 1. kneeling | position | standing | sitting |
| 2. water | electricity | gas | utility |
| 3. housing | condominium | palace | apartment |
| 4. hearing | touch | sense | sight |
| 5. nicotine | alcohol | drug | aspirin |
| 6. flour | ingredient | yeast | eggs |
| 7. tinsel | colored lights | decoration | wreath |
| 8. car payment | credit-card bill | personal loan | debt |

- B. In each item below, one idea is general and the others are specific. The general idea includes the specific ideas. In the spaces provided, write two more specific ideas that are covered by the general idea.

- 9–10. *General:* pet
Specific: parakeet, hamster, _____, _____
- 11–12. *General:* sharp object
Specific: razor, broken glass, _____, _____
- 13–14. *General:* relative
Specific: grandfather, cousin, _____, _____
- 15–16. *General:* breakfast item
Specific: orange juice, oatmeal, _____, _____

- C. (17–20.) In the following group, one statement is the general point, and the other statements are specific support for the point. Identify the point with a **P** and each statement of support with an **S**.

- _____ A. Our daughter often points to certain letters and asks us what they are.
 _____ B. She tries to sound out words on billboards and street signs.
 _____ C. Our daughter is starting to read on her own.
 _____ D. As we read books at bedtime, she says the words that she recognizes.

► Review Test 3

- A. (1–12.) Each group of four items includes one topic, one main idea, and two supporting ideas. In the space provided, label each item with one of the following:

T — for the **topic** of the paragraph

MI — for the **main idea**

SD — for the **supporting details**

Group 1

- _____ A. The human skeleton has certain important functions.
_____ B. The skeleton gives the body support and shape.
_____ C. The skeleton protects internal organs.
_____ D. The human skeleton.

Group 2

- _____ A. Americans and exercise.
_____ B. Americans tend to ride everywhere instead of walking.
_____ C. Most Americans don't get enough exercise.
_____ D. Americans tend to watch sports instead of playing them.

Group 3

- _____ A. The Egyptian pyramids.
_____ B. More than 100,000 laborers worked to build Egypt's Great Pyramid.
_____ C. The Egyptian pyramids were built with manpower and skill, not secret engineering.
_____ D. Pyramid builders used ropes, wooden levers, and muscle power to move giant stones.

- B.** Read each paragraph below and write the letter of the item you think is the topic of the paragraph. Then write the number of the sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph.

Paragraph 1

¹The hedgehog, a spiny animal that lives in much of Europe and Africa, is a very effective snake-killer. ²First, the hedgehog sneaks up on the snake and bites its tail firmly. ³The hedgehog immediately curls up into a tight ball, still holding the snake's tail in its mouth. ⁴The snake then strikes the hedgehog again and again, but all it does is injure itself against the hedgehog's pointed spines. ⁵As the snake strikes, the hedgehog continues chewing until the snake is dead. ⁶Finally, the hedgehog uncurls and enjoys its meal.

- _____ 13. The topic is
- A. snake-killers.
 - B. the hedgehog.
 - C. the hedgehog's spines.
- _____ 14. What is the number of the sentence that states the main idea?

Paragraph 2

¹For centuries people believed that sleepwalkers were possessed by evil spirits. ²These spirits, it was thought, forced them to wander throughout the night. ³Researchers today say that other, more worldly causes are behind sleepwalking. ⁴First of all, nighttime wandering may result from stresses and frustrations built up during the day. ⁵Also, the tendency to sleepwalk can be inherited. ⁶This was illustrated by the report of a patient at a California sleep disorder clinic. ⁷He once woke up in the dining room during a family reunion and found himself surrounded by sleepwalking relatives.

- _____ 15. The topic is
- A. sleep.
 - B. sleepwalking.
 - C. an inherited tendency to sleepwalk.
- _____ 16. What is the number of the sentence that states the main idea?

C. In the space provided, write the letter of the list words in each sentence.

- _____ 17. A teenager in serious emotional trouble is likely to display certain kinds of behavior.
A. *serious emotional trouble*
B. *likely to display*
C. *certain kinds of behavior*
- _____ 18. The widespread pollution of the lakes in the region has a number of causes.
A. *widespread pollution*
B. *lakes in the region*
C. *number of causes*

D. In the space provided, write the letter of the addition word in each sentence.

- _____ 19. The best single way to become a better student is to attend every class; another important step is to take good notes in class.
A. *another*
B. *important*
C. *better*
- _____ 20. Extreme stress can lead some people to escape through drug abuse; stress may also lead to such severe depression that a person attempts suicide.
A. *stress*
B. *also*
C. *depression*

► Review Test 4

Here is a chance to apply your understanding of main ideas to a full-length reading. First read the following selection from the college textbook *Sociology, Third Edition* (Wadsworth), by Rodney Stark—it will give you a fascinating view of the type of behavior we all witness every day. Then answer the questions that follow about topics, main ideas, and the central point. There are also vocabulary questions to help you continue practicing the skill of understanding vocabulary in context.

Words to Watch

Below are some words in the reading that do not have strong context support. Each word is followed by the number of the paragraph in which it appears and its meaning there. These words are indicated in the selection by a small circle (°).

- conformity* (2): behavior in accordance with group ideas and customs
confirming (2): proving true
perception (3): observation
at odds (8): in disagreement
stakes (10): something to be gained or lost

GROUP PRESSURE

Rodney Stark

- 1 It is self-evident that people tend to conform to the expectations and reactions of others around them. But what are the limits of group pressure? Can group pressure cause us to deny the obvious, even physical evidence?
- 2 Over thirty-five years ago, Solomon Asch performed the most famous experimental test of the power of group pressure to produce conformity°. Since then his study has been repeated many times, with many variations confirming° his original results. Perhaps the best way to understand what Asch discovered is to pretend that you are a subject in his experiment.
- 3 You have agreed to take part in an experiment on visual perception°. Upon arriving at the laboratory, you are given the seventh in a line of eight chairs. Other students taking part in the experiment sit in each of the other chairs. At the front of the room the experimenter stands by a covered easel. He explains that he wants you to judge the length of lines in a series of comparisons. He will place two decks

of large cards upon the easel. One card will display a single vertical line. The other card will display three vertical lines, each of a different length. He wants each of you to decide which of the three lines on one card is the same length as the single line on the other card. To prepare you for the task, he displays a practice card. You see the correct line easily, for the other lines are noticeably different from the comparison line.



The experiment begins. The first comparison is just as easy as the practice comparison. One of the three lines is obviously the same length as the comparison line, while the other two are very different. Each of the eight persons answers in turn, with you answering seventh. Everyone answers

correctly. On the second pair of cards, the right answer is just as easy to spot, and again all eight subjects are correct. You begin to suspect that the experiment is going to be a big bore.

5 Then comes the third pair. The judgment is just as easy as before. But the first person somehow picks a line that is obviously wrong. You smile. Then the second person also picks the same obviously wrong line. What's going on? Then the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth subjects answer the same way. It's your turn. You know without doubt that you are right, yet six people have confidently given the wrong answer. You are no longer bored. Instead, you are a bit confused, but you go ahead and choose the line you are sure is right. Then the last person picks the same wrong line everyone else has chosen.

6 A new pair is unveiled, and the same thing happens again. All the others pick an obviously wrong line. The experimenter remains matter-of-fact, not commenting on right or wrong answers but just marking down what people pick. Should you stick it out? Should you go along? Maybe something's wrong with the light or with your angle of vision. Your difficulty lasts for eighteen pairs of cards. On twelve of them, all the others picked a line you knew was incorrect.

7 When the experiment is over, the experimenter turns to you with a smile and begins to explain. You were the only subject in the experiment. The other seven people were stooges paid by Professor Asch to answer exactly the way they did. The aim of the experiment was to see if social pressure could cause you to reject the evidence of your own eyes and conform.

8 In his first experiment, Asch tested fifty people in this situation. Almost a third of them went along with the group and gave the wrong answer at least half of the time. Another 40 percent yielded to the group some of the time, but less than half of the time. Only 25 percent refused to yield at all. Those who yielded to group pressure were more likely to do so as the experiment progressed. Nearly everyone withstood the group the first several times, but as they continued to find themselves at odds^o with the group, most subjects began to weaken. Many shifted in their chairs, trying to get a different line of vision. Some blushed. Finally, 75 percent of them began to go along at least a few times.

9 The effects of group pressure were also revealed in the behavior of those who steadfastly refused to accept the group's misjudgments. Some of these people became increasingly uneasy and apologetic. One subject began to whisper to his neighbor, "Can't help it, that's the one," and later, "I always disagree—darn it!" Other subjects who refused to yield dealt with the stress of the situation by giving each non-conforming response in a progressively louder voice and by casting challenging looks at the others. In a recent replication of the Asch study, one subject loudly insulted the other seven students whenever they made a wrong choice. One retort was "What funny farm did you turkeys grow up on, huh?"

10 The Asch experiment shows that a high number of people will conform even in a weak group situation. They were required merely to disagree with strangers, not with their friends, and

the costs of deviance were limited to about half an hour of disapproval from people they hardly knew. Furthermore, subjects were not faced with a difficult judgment—they could easily see the

correct response. Little wonder, then, that we are inclined to go along with our friends when the stakes^o are much higher and we cannot even be certain that we are right.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Vocabulary in Context

- _____ 1. In the sentence below, the word *stooges* (stōōj's) means
- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| A. comedians. | C. true subjects in an experiment. |
| B. people who played a role. | D. educators. |
- “The other seven people were stooges paid by Professor Asch to answer exactly the way they did.” (Paragraph 7)
- _____ 2. In the sentence below, the word *withstood* (wĭth-stōōd') means
- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| A. recognized. | C. resisted. |
| B. agreed with. | D. understood. |
- “Nearly everyone withstood the group the first several times, but as they continued to find themselves at odds with the group, most subjects began to weaken.” (Paragraph 8)
- _____ 3. In the excerpt below, the word *steadfastly* (stĕd'făst'lĕ) means
- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| A. constantly. | C. helpfully. |
| B. wrongly. | D. comfortably. |
- “The effects of group pressure were also revealed in the behavior of those who steadfastly refused to accept the group’s misjudgments. Some of these people became increasingly uneasy and apologetic.” (Paragraph 9)
- _____ 4. In the excerpt below, the word *replication* (rĕp'li-kā'shən) means
- | | |
|------------|----------------|
| A. memory. | C. image. |
| B. repeat. | D. prediction. |
- “In a recent replication of the Asch study, one subject loudly insulted the other seven students . . .” (Paragraph 9)
- _____ 5. In the excerpt below, the word *retort* (rĭ-tōrt') means
- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| A. genuine question. | C. choice. |
| B. form of praise. | D. quick, sharp reply. |
- “. . . one subject loudly insulted the other seven students whenever they made a wrong choice. One retort was ‘What funny farm did you turkeys grow up on, huh?’” (Paragraph 9)

- _____ 6. In the sentence below, the word *deviance* (dē'vĕ-əns) means
- A. going along with the crowd.
 - B. an experimental test.
 - C. differing from the normal group behavior.
 - D. being a stranger.

“They were required merely to disagree with strangers, not with their friends, and the costs of deviance were limited to about half an hour of disapproval from people they hardly knew.” (Paragraph 10)

Central Point

- _____ 7. Which of the following is the topic of the whole selection?
- A. Visual perception
 - B. Solomon Asch
 - C. Asch’s experiment on group pressure
 - D. Stooges in an experiment
- _____ 8. Which sentence from the reading comes closest to expressing the central point of the whole selection?
- A. “Upon arriving at the laboratory, you are given the seventh in a line of eight chairs.”
 - B. “The experimenter remains matter-of-fact, not commenting on right or wrong answers but just marking down what people pick.”
 - C. “In his first experiment, Asch tested fifty people in this situation.”
 - D. “The Asch experiment shows that a high number of people will conform even in a weak group situation.”

Main Ideas

- _____ 9. The topic of paragraph 9 is
- A. the behavior of subjects who refused to accept the group’s misjudgments.
 - B. subjects who became uneasy and apologetic.
 - C. a duplication of the Asch study.
 - D. subjects who insulted others.
- _____ 10. The main idea of paragraph 9 is expressed in its
- A. first sentence.
 - B. second sentence.
 - C. next-to-the-last sentence.
 - D. last sentence.

Discussion Questions

1. Were you at all surprised by the results of Solomon Asch’s experiment? If you had been one of the subjects, do you think you would have stuck to your answers, or would you have gone along with the group? Why?
2. What reasons might the subjects in the Asch experiment have had for eventually giving in and accepting the group’s wrong answers?
3. Stark refers to the Asch experiment as a “weak group situation,” one in which the group is made up of strangers and the stakes are not very high. What might a “strong group situation” be? Give examples.
4. Have you ever been in a situation when you wanted to resist group pressure? What was the situation, and why did you want to resist? What could you have done to resist?

Note: Writing assignments for this selection appear on pages 571–572.

Check Your Performance

MAIN IDEAS

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Number Right</i>	<i>Points</i>	<i>Score</i>
Review Test 1 (5 items)	_____	× 2 =	_____
Review Test 2 (20 items)	_____	× 1.5 =	_____
Review Test 3 (20 items)	_____	× 1.5 =	_____
Review Test 4 (10 items)	_____	× 3 =	_____
TOTAL SCORE			= _____%

Enter your total score into the **Reading Performance Chart: Review Tests** on the inside back cover.