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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. 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?”

¹Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. ²However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways. ³One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. ⁴They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns. ⁵In addition, that same study showed that heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than non-TV watchers. ⁶It seems that the constant violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. ⁷Another study, of a group of children, found that TV violence increases aggressive behavior. ⁸Children who watched violent shows were more willing to hurt another child in games where they were given a choice between helping and hurting. ⁹They were also more likely to select toy weapons over other kinds of playthings.

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.

On the next page 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. Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment.
- B. However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.
- C. One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others.
- D. They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns.

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

Explanation:

Sentence A: The paragraph does not support the idea that TV violence is harmless, so sentence A cannot be the main idea. However, it does introduce the topic of the paragraph: TV violence.

Sentence B: The statement “TV violence does affect people in negative ways” is a general one. And the rest of the passage goes on to describe three negative ways that TV violence affects people. Sentence B, then, is the sentence that expresses the main idea of the passage.

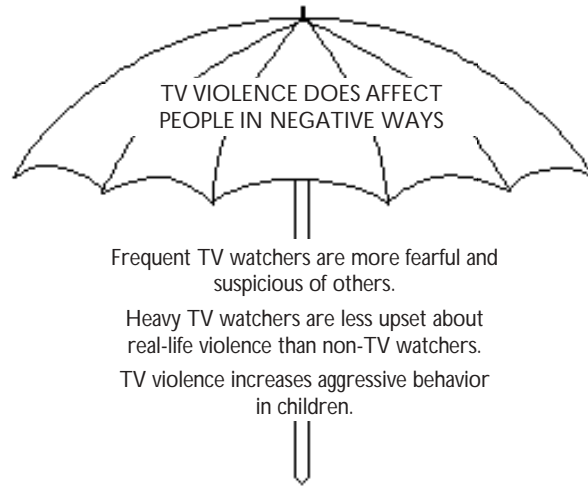
Sentence C: This sentence is about only one study. It is not general enough to include the other studies that are also cited in the paragraph. It is the first supporting idea for the main idea.

Sentence D: This sentence provides detailed evidence for the first supporting idea, which is that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. 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 on the next page 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 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 TV violence 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

Each group of words below has 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

1. S dishonesty
S greed
G vices
S selfishness

(*Vices* is the general idea which includes three specific types of vices: dishonesty, greed, and selfishness.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ___ lobster
 ___ seafood
 ___ clams
 ___ oysters 2. ___ appearance
 ___ handsome
 ___ well-dressed
 ___ shabby 3. ___ heavy traffic
 ___ bus not on time
 ___ alarm didn't go off
 ___ excuses for being late 4. ___ paper cuts
 ___ broken nails
 ___ minor problems
 ___ wrong numbers 5. ___ giggling
 ___ childish behavior
 ___ tantrums
 ___ playing peek-a-boo | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. ___ poor pay
 ___ undesirable job
 ___ mean boss
 ___ very dull work 7. ___ try to be kinder
 ___ eat healthier foods
 ___ go to bed earlier
 ___ resolutions 8. ___ take stairs instead of elevator
 ___ ride bike instead of driving
 ___ exercise opportunities
 ___ walk instead of riding bus 9. ___ skip breakfast
 ___ grab a donut mid-morning
 ___ poor eating habits
 ___ order supersize portions 10. ___ different goals
 ___ no common interests
 ___ dislike each other's friends
 ___ reasons for breaking up |
|--|---|

➤ **Practice 2**

Write out the answers to each question on the spaces provided. For each question, the answers are specific details that illustrate the general idea, which is underlined.

1. There are probably many places in the world you'd like to visit. If you were offered an all-expense-paid vacation anywhere in the world, what are three specific locations you would consider?

2. If you were suddenly wealthy, you could hire other people to do tasks that you dislike. What are three specific chores that you'd hand over to somebody else?

3. There have been many technological improvements over the last century that you would not like to do without. What are three of the inventions you would most hate to give up?

4. Most of us enjoy a good movie, but we have different ideas of what makes a film "good." What are three specific qualities that a movie needs in order for you to really like it?

5. We all know people whom we find difficult. Think of a person that you find hard to get along with. Name three specific reasons you find this person difficult.

 **Practice 3**

In the following groups, 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**.

1. ___ The children often start fights at school.
___ The children are poorly behaved.
___ The kids walk into neighbors' houses uninvited.
___ The children use foul language.
2. ___ Some vegetables in the salad were moldy.
___ The chicken was hard to chew.
___ The rolls were rock-hard.
___ The meal was very unpleasant.
3. ___ The man doesn't use his turn signals.
___ The man drives too fast down narrow residential streets.
___ The man is an unsafe driver.
___ The man doesn't come to a complete stop at stop signs.
4. ___ This has been a difficult year for Rita's family.
___ In January, Rita's grandmother died.
___ Last summer, Rita's dad was laid off from work.
___ Rita's younger brother developed severe asthma in September.
5. ___ Students stay in touch with friends by e-mail.
___ Students often shop over the Internet.
___ Students do all their research online.
___ Students have practical uses for computers.

 **Practice 4**

In each of the following groups, 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**.

1. ___ A. When answering the phone, some people's first words are "Who's this?"
___ B. Some people never bother to identify themselves when calling someone.
___ C. Some people have terrible telephone manners.
___ D. Some people hang up without even saying goodbye.

2. ___ A. High-heeled shoes can cause foot and back pain.
___ B. Some women's clothing is impractical.
___ C. Tight skirts make it difficult to move quickly.
___ D. Pantyhose are constantly getting snags and runs.
3. ___ A. The plates of food that emerge from the kitchens of pricey restaurants often look more like abstract art than supper.
___ B. The tiny portions served in many upscale restaurants wouldn't curb the hunger of a small child, let alone a large adult.
___ C. Some expensive restaurants use trendy ingredients with names that most diners can neither recognize nor pronounce.
___ D. At many expensive restaurants, dining has more to do with style than nourishment.
4. ___ A. Federal law should prohibit banks from giving credit cards to college students.
___ B. Credit-card debt is the leading cause of bankruptcy for young Americans.
___ C. Taking advantage of the fact that many parents will pay their children's credit-card debts, banks extend excessive credit to students.
___ D. When they receive their monthly credit-card bills, many students can pay only the minimum required and so have hefty interest charges on large unpaid amounts.
5. ___ A. Bats are so rarely rabid that a person has a better chance of catching rabies from a cow than from a bat.
___ B. Bats, in spite of their bad reputation, are not a danger to human beings.
___ C. Bats are afraid of humans and do their best to stay away from them.
___ D. Unlike movie vampires, bats do not bite people unless frightened or under attack.

➤ Practice 5

In each of the following groups—all 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**.

1. ___ A. Disagreeing parties can accept the status quo, agreeing to just live with the situation as it stands.
___ B. When faced with a disagreement, the parties involved have several ways to proceed.
___ C. One party may use physical, social, or economic force to impose a solution on the others.
___ D. Negotiation, or reaching a mutually acceptable solution, is a means of dealing with conflict.

2. ___ A. With bribes, Prohibition-era bootleggers persuaded politicians, police, and other public officials to ignore the illegal sale of alcoholic beverages.
- ___ B. Prohibition glamorized drinking and made it fashionable for people to drink and break the law.
- ___ C. Prohibition encouraged the formation of organized-crime empires that illegally manufactured, transported, and sold liquor.
- ___ D. Prohibition, which banned alcoholic beverages in the United States from 1920 to 1933, resulted in much illegal activity.
3. ___ A. Our social roles—whether we’re students, employees, visitors, etc.—dictate what emotions are acceptable for us to express.
- ___ B. Given the widespread habit of suppressing our emotions, many of us have trouble recognizing what we’re really feeling.
- ___ C. Most of us rarely express our deepest emotions because of a number of factors.
- ___ D. We often hide our emotions rather than display them so as not to seem weak or needy to others.
4. ___ A. Our state of health significantly affects how we experience the world.
- ___ B. A variety of influences determine how people take in and interpret information.
- ___ C. Older people view the world differently than younger ones because they’ve had more experiences.
- ___ D. Whether we are hungry or have recently eaten will affect how we feel about the world.
5. ___ A. When doing business in Latin America or Arab countries, Americans must become accustomed to standing very close to their colleagues.
- ___ B. The Chevy Nova did very poorly in Latin American countries because “No va” means “It doesn’t go” in Spanish.
- ___ C. In order to do business successfully in other countries, it is necessary to understand those countries’ languages and culture.
- ___ D. When a Japanese businessman hands you his card, it is considered very rude to put it away without studying it first.

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 psychology textbook:

Theories of Human Development (26 pages)

And here are the subtopics:

Psychoanalytic Theories (an 8-page section)

Learning Theories (a 9-page section)

Cognitive Theories (a 9-page section)

If you were studying the above chapter, you could use the topics to help find the main ideas. (Pages 10–11 explain just how to do so, as well as 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:

Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment.
However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.

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 “TV violence.” As you reread the paragraph, you saw that, in fact, every sentence in it is about TV violence.

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 TV violence is “we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.”

Check Your Understanding

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

¹Recently a family of four were found dead in their suburban home in New Jersey—victims of carbon monoxide. ²Such cases are tragically common. ³Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons. ⁴To begin with, it is created in the most ordinary of ways—by the burning of wood, coal, or petroleum products. ⁵Once created, this gas is impossible to detect without instruments: it is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. ⁶Also, carbon monoxide mingles with and remains in the air rather than rising and being carried away by the wind. ⁷Then, when people unsuspectingly breathe it in, it chokes them, taking the place of the oxygen in their blood. ⁸Furthermore, it can do its lethal work in very small quantities: anyone exposed to air that is just 1 percent carbon monoxide for even a few minutes will almost certainly die.

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 “carbon monoxide.” Continuing to read the paragraph, you see that, in fact, everything in it is about carbon monoxide. And the main idea is clearly that “Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons.” 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: Carbon monoxide

Main idea: Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons.

Supporting details:

1. Is easily created.
 2. Is difficult to detect.
 3. Remains in the air.
 4. Chokes by taking the place of oxygen in the blood.
 5. Works in small quantities.
-

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

➤ Practice 6

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 bite from a piranha’s triangular-shaped teeth can sever a person’s finger or toe.
- _____ B. The piranha.
- _____ C. The piranha—only eight to twelve inches long—is an extremely dangerous fish.
- _____ D. A school of piranha can strip a four-hundred-pound hog down to a skeleton in just a few minutes.

Explanation:

All of the statements in Group 1 are about piranhas, so item B must be the topic. (Topics are easy to spot because they are short phrases, not complete sentences.) Statements A and D are specific examples of the damage that piranhas can do. Statement C, on the other hand, presents the general idea that piranhas can be extremely dangerous. It is the main idea about the topic of “the piranha,” and statements A and D are supporting details that illustrate that main idea.

Group 2

- _____ A. Joint custody of a divorced couple’s children has become more common.
- _____ B. The number of men with sole custody of children has also grown.
- _____ C. Alternatives to giving the mother sole child custody have increased in recent years.
- _____ D. Alternative child-custody arrangements.

Group 3

- _____ A. Benjamin Franklin discovered that lightning is an electrical charge.
- _____ B. In addition to being a statesman, Franklin was a scientist.
- _____ C. Benjamin Franklin's work.
- _____ D. Franklin invented bifocals, the Franklin stove, and an electric storage battery.

Group 4

- _____ A. Bureaucracies are divided into departments and subdivisions.
- _____ B. Bureaucracies.
- _____ C. Through a division of labor, individuals specialize in performing one task.
- _____ D. Bureaucracies have certain characteristics in common.

Group 5

- _____ A. Scientists used to think of the brain as the center of an electrical communication system.
- _____ B. The way scientists view the brain's role has changed greatly.
- _____ C. Today it is known that "the brain is a bag of hormones," as one scientist puts it.
- _____ D. How scientists think about the role of the brain.

➤ Practice 7

Following are five paragraphs. Read each paragraph 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

¹Blood, as it circulates through the body, performs many functions. ²It carries nutrients and oxygen to all the cells of the body. ³It brings hormones from the hormone-secreting glands to the appropriate cells. ⁴Blood also carries waste products to the organs that will dispose of them. ⁵When there is an infection, blood brings white cells from the immune system to attack it. ⁶Blood forms clots that help close wounds. ⁷It helps regulate bodily temperature and acidity. ⁸Unfortunately, blood has another function as well: when the body has developed a cancer, blood may carry malignant cells from the original tumor to new sites, causing the cancer to spread.

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 Great Wall of China is a truly remarkable creation. ²At 4500 miles long, taller than five men, and wide enough to allow at least six horses to gallop side by side atop it, the Great Wall is so huge it can be seen from space. ³The Wall is constructed of four-inch blocks made of compressed earth, stone, willow twigs, and the remains of laborers who died among the millions who worked on its construction. ⁴The Great Wall follows mountain slopes and has inclines as great as seventy degrees. ⁵The paths on the Wall are even more difficult to travel because the steps are of uneven depth, width, and height. ⁶Through much of its 2500-year history, armies marched and camped on the Wall, keeping lookout for invaders and repelling trespassers who dared to pitch ladders to try to mount it. ⁷Today the Great Wall is a tourist attraction that brings many visitors to China. ⁸Tourists are eager to make the strenuous hike over precarious paths to take in the greatness of its size and history.

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 3

¹Barbecue is a popular dish in many parts of America, but it can be a different dish depending on where you eat it. ²When people who live west of the Mississippi serve barbecue, it's usually beef that has been cooked over an open fire. ³East of the Mississippi, pork is more common, and it's often cooked in an iron smoking oven. ⁴In some parts of the South, barbecue is typically served in a wet sauce that contains tomatoes, vinegar, and chili peppers. ⁵But in other southern towns, the barbecue meat is rubbed with seasonings before cooking and then served dry, with no sauce at all. ⁶In Hawaii, barbecue often refers to a whole pig that's been wrapped in leaves and cooked in a pit dug into the ground. ⁷To make matters even more confusing, a barbecue dinner in the northeastern states or California might feature fish or chicken cooked on a charcoal grill.

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 4

¹Busing was implemented in 1971 to achieve racial balance in schools. ²Studies indicate that it has had positive effects, such as better performance of black children on standardized tests when they attend white-majority schools. ³However, busing has its negative effects, too. ⁴For one thing, busing has contributed to whites' departure from public schools. ⁵In Boston, for example, fewer than 20 percent of public school children today are white—compared with more than 50 percent when busing began there in 1974. ⁶In addition, busing has fragmented neighborhoods. ⁷Children do not necessarily go to the school their friends and relatives attend. ⁸Another negative effect is that busing has forced children into long bus rides to and from school. ⁹Black and white students both experience what has come to be called “busing fatigue.”

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 5

¹Cardiovascular disease—disease of the heart or blood vessels—is the leading cause of death in the United States, killing about 1 million people a year. ²Cardiovascular disease is actually a group of disorders. ³This group includes high blood pressure, or hypertension, which significantly increases the risk of other diseases in the group. ⁴Atherosclerosis, or coronary artery disease, is another member of the group. ⁵In this cardiovascular disorder, a fatty deposit, plaque, builds up on the walls of the arteries, restricting the flow of blood and causing strain to the heart, which must work harder to pump blood through the narrowed arteries. ⁶Sometimes an aneurysm occurs: the artery ruptures. ⁷Heart attack—technically, myocardial infarction—is also in this group. ⁸It happens when plaque builds up so much that blood flow to the heart is cut off and some heart muscle dies. ⁹Congestive heart failure, a chronic disease, is part of the group as well. ¹⁰In this disorder the heart has been weakened and can no longer pump enough blood. ¹¹Stroke, too, is a cardiovascular disease: it occurs when blood flow to the brain is restricted or cut off.

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.

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**, which tells you a list of items is to follow. For example, the main idea in the paragraph about TV violence was stated like this: *However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.* The expression *negative ways* helps you zero in on your target: the main idea. You realize that the paragraph may be about specific ways that TV violence affects people. As you read on and see the series of negative effects, you know your guess about the main idea was correct.

Here 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) 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 clue 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 end in s.

Example Emotional decisions can be divided into two main types.

1. At least five job trends deserve watching in today's world.
2. Pathologists identify four different stages of cancer in the body.
3. Several steps can be effective in helping people deal with prejudice.
4. Winners of presidential elections share various traits in common.
5. Giving birth to and raising a child requires a number of adjustments in the parents' lives.

Explanation:

You should have underlined the following groups of words: *five job trends*; *four different stages*; *several steps*; *various traits*; and *a number of adjustments*. Each of these phrases tells you that a list of 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. When you see this type of clue, you can assume that the detail it introduces fits under the umbrella of a main idea.

Here 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	finally
for one thing	also	furthermore	

 **Check Your Understanding**

Reread the paragraph about TV violence and underline the addition words that alert you to supporting details. Also, see if you can underline the list words that suggest the main idea.

¹Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. ²However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways. ³One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. ⁴They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns. ⁵In addition, that same study showed that heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than non-TV watchers. ⁶It seems that the constant violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. ⁷Another study, of a group of children, found that TV violence increases aggressive behavior. ⁸Children who watched violent shows were more willing to hurt another child in games where they were given a choice between helping and hurting. ⁹They were also more likely to select toy weapons over other kinds of playthings.

Explanation:

The words that introduce each new supporting detail for the main idea are *One*, *In addition*, and *Another*. When you see these addition words, you realize the studies are all being cited in support of an idea—in this case, that TV violence affects people in negative ways.

That main idea includes the list words “negative ways,” which suggest that the supporting details will be a list of negative ways TV violence affects people. In this and many paragraphs, list words and addition words often work hand in hand.

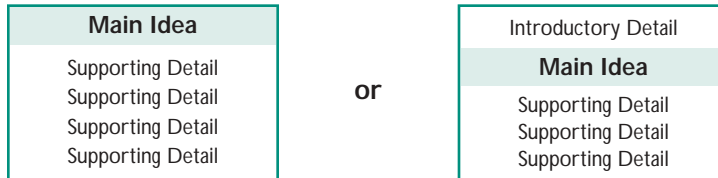
The following chapter, “Supporting Details,” includes further practice in the words and phrases that alert you to the main idea and the details that support them. But what you have already learned here will help you find main ideas.

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 clue words. 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.

¹People tend to cling to their first impressions, even if they are wrong. ²Suppose you mention the name of your new neighbor to a friend. ³“Oh, I know him,” your friend replies. ⁴“He seems nice at first, but it’s all an act.” ⁵Perhaps this appraisal is off-base. ⁶The neighbor may have changed since your friend knew him, or perhaps your friend’s judgment is simply unfair. ⁷Whether the judgment is accurate or not, once you accept your friend’s evaluation, it will probably influence the way you respond to the neighbor. ⁸You’ll look for examples of the insincerity you’ve heard about, and you’ll probably find them. ⁹Even if this neighbor were a saint, you would be likely to interpret his behavior in ways that fit your expectations.

In this paragraph, the main idea is in the *first* sentence. All the following sentences in the paragraph provide a detailed example of how we cling to first impressions.

Check Your Understanding

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

¹For shy people, simply attending class can be stressful. ²Several strategies, though, can lessen the trauma of attending class for shy people. ³Shy students should time their arrival to coincide with that of most other class members—about two minutes before the class is scheduled to begin. ⁴If they arrive too early, they may be seen sitting alone or, even worse, may actually be forced to talk with another early arrival. ⁵If they arrive late, all eyes will be upon them. ⁶Before heading to class, the shy student should dress in the least conspicuous manner possible—say, in the blue jeans, sweatshirt, and sneakers that 99.9 percent of their classmates wear. ⁷That

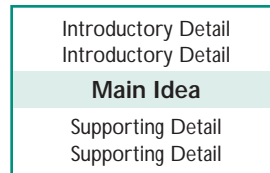
way they won't stand out from everyone else. ⁸They should take a seat near the back of the room. ⁹But they shouldn't sit at the very back, since instructors sometimes make a point of calling on students there.

Explanation:

In the above paragraph, the main idea is stated in the *second* sentence. The first sentence introduces the topic, shy people in class, but it is the idea in the second sentence—several strategies can lessen the trauma of attending class for shy people—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. 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.

¹A television ad for a new sports car showed scenes of beautiful open country that suggested freedom and adventure. ²The car never appeared in the ad at all. ³An ad for a hotel chain showed a romantic couple in bed together. ⁴They were obviously on vacation and having a leisurely, romantic, sexy morning. ⁵As these ads suggest, advertisers often try to sell products and services by associating them with positive images rather than by providing relevant details about the product or service. ⁶An ad giving the car's gas mileage, safety rating, or repair frequency would be more important to a buyer, but it might not draw the viewer's interest as much as beautiful scenery. ⁷Similarly, details on the hotel's prices and service would be more informative than images of a glamorous vacation. ⁸But the romantic couple gets people's attention and associates the hotel in viewers' minds with a good time.

If you thought the fifth sentence gives the main idea, you were correct. The first four sentences introduce the topic of advertisers and provide specific examples of the main idea. The fifth sentence then presents the writer's main idea, which is that advertisers often try to sell their products by associating them with appealing images rather than with relevant details. The rest of the paragraph continues to develop that idea.

Main Idea at the End



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.

¹Only about 1 percent of insect species are destructive to crops and property. ²Nevertheless, this small group causes several billion dollars of damage each year in the United States alone. ³Harmful insects include household pests, such as termites; crop and livestock pests, such as boll weevils; and hosts of disease-causing organisms, such as mosquitoes infected with parasitic protozoa. ⁴Many insects, on the other hand, are beneficial to human society. ⁵Some insects pollinate fruit trees, flowers, and many field crops. ⁶Bees produce honey and beeswax, silkworms form cocoons from which silk is spun, and lac insects provide the raw material for commercial shellac. ⁷Some kinds of insects are natural enemies of destructive insects. ⁸For example, the larvae of certain wasps feed on caterpillars that destroy plants. ⁹**Clearly, insects are both harmful and beneficial to human society.**

Main Idea at the Beginning and End



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.

¹An important result of medical advances is an increase in the number of conditions thought to be of medical concern. ²In the not-too-distant past, birth and death usually occurred at home. ³Family members and friends were there or close by. ⁴Now most people are born and die in a hospital, surrounded by bright lights and expensive machines. ⁵People who were addicted to alcohol or drugs were once considered sinful or lacking in willpower. ⁶Now they are considered “sick.” ⁷Problems that used to be accepted as part of life—baldness, wrinkles, small breasts, sleeplessness—are now deemed proper matters for medical attention. ⁸Some criminologists have even defined antisocial behavior as a medical problem. ⁹Lawbreakers of all kinds, from the shoplifter to the mass murderer, may potentially be labeled “sick.” **¹⁰Because of current medical knowledge, what were once thought to be problems of life or of character are now considered medical issues.**

Note that the main idea—because of medical advances, more problems are considered medical issues—is expressed in different words in the first and last sentences.

➤ Practice 8

The main ideas of the following paragraphs appear at different locations—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. ¹Many people think of thieves as clever. ²In reality, thieves can be especially unthinking. ³One evening, a Los Angeles woman was walking her miniature poodle when a man came up behind her, pushed her to the ground, grabbed the plastic bag she was holding, and drove away. ⁴Afterward, asked about the mugging, the woman cheerfully commented, “I only wish there had been more in the bag.” ⁵The woman had used the bag when she cleaned up her dog’s messes. ⁶In Baltimore, an even dumber burglar broke into a house while the woman who lived there was home, ransacked the place, and, having found only \$11.50 in cash, demanded that the victim write him a check for \$30. ⁷When the woman asked to whom she should make the check payable, the thief gave his own name, in full. ⁸He was arrested a few hours later. ⁹But an Oklahoma thief may have been dumbest of all. ¹⁰Charged with purse-snatching, he decided to act as his own attorney. ¹¹At his trial, he cross-examined the victim: “Did you get a good look at my face when I took your purse?” ¹²Not surprisingly, he was convicted.

- _____ 2. ¹At the beginning of the twentieth century, schools treated the sexes very differently. ²First of all, boys and girls were prepared for different careers. ³Boys were expected to grow up to be political figures, company presidents, and military leaders. ⁴Girls, on the other hand, were expected to be good mothers and obedient wives. ⁵Also, boys were encouraged to study courses in math, literature, philosophy, and science. ⁶Girls' classes were focused on learning to read and learning proper manners and behaviors—so they could teach their children. ⁷A final difference in the treatment of men and women by schools concerned the issue of morality. ⁸Schools taught that women were morally superior to men—that they were to be examples of how the rest of society should act and behave.
- _____ 3. ¹For 250 million years, reptiles—which appeared on Earth long before the first mammals—have been fighting over territory. ²Today, human beings do battle over property as well. ³But the reptiles' way of fighting is generally more civilized and humane than the humans'. ⁴Lizards will take a few rushes at one another to test which one is stronger. ⁵After a few passes, the loser rolls over on his back to signal defeat. ⁶The winner allows him to leave unharmed. ⁷Rattlesnakes, similarly, will duel over territory. ⁸But they do it with their necks twined together so that they cannot injure each other with their fangs. ⁹Humans, of course, generally fight with the intent of injuring one another. ¹⁰The victor often seems to feel he hasn't really won until he's wounded and humiliated his opponent, if not killed him.
- _____ 4. ¹If asked to describe ourselves, most of us would not answer that we are mostly water, but that's exactly what we are. ²A 150-pound person is actually 100 pounds of water and only 50 pounds of everything else. ³Our blood plasma is 92% water, and our brains are 75% water. ⁴We use the expression "dry as a bone," but in fact our bones are not dry at all—they are about 20% water. ⁵Our "inner sea" is constantly in motion, flowing through us every moment, bringing food and oxygen to our cells, carrying away wastes, lubricating our joints, cushioning our brains and regulating our temperatures. ⁶If the percentage of water in our bodies drops even 1 or 2 percent, we feel thirsty. ⁷A drop of 10% is usually fatal. ⁸Every day, we lose about two and a half quarts of water. ⁹Surprisingly, we replace less than half this lost water through drinking. ¹⁰The rest we replenish with food which, just like us, is mostly water. ¹¹A tomato, for example, is over 87% water, which is released into the body when we eat it.

- _____ 5. ¹Today, as many as one and a half million children are believed to be homeschooled; twenty years ago, only 12,500 students were educated at home. ²This dramatic increase in the number of homeschooled children can be explained in part by the growth of membership in fundamentalist Christianity, whose members often choose to educate their children at home. ³While religious motivation is the reason that most families choose homeschooling, it is not the only reason. ⁴A number of reasons draw parents to homeschooling. ⁵Some parents prefer to educate their children in the security of their own homes away from the dangers of guns and violence in many urban schools today. ⁶Other parents believe that homeschooling provides their children a more intimate and nurturing learning environment. ⁷Economics can also play a role. ⁸One parent can stay home and be a home teacher, saving the high cost of childcare. ⁹Finally, motivations can even be negative: sometimes racism, anti-Semitism, or some other hateful reason can cause parents to reject public schooling for homeschooling.

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 main idea often appears at the beginning of a paragraph, though it may appear elsewhere in a paragraph.

The next chapter—Chapter 3—will sharpen your understanding of the specific details that authors use to support and develop their main ideas.

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