What Is the Main Idea?

“W”hat’s the point?” You’ve probably heard these words before. It’s a question people ask when they want to know the main idea that someone is trying to express. The same question can guide you as you read. Recognizing the main idea, or point, is the most important key to good comprehension. Sometimes a main idea is immediately clear, as in the above cartoon. The point—that the marriage has problems—is well supported by the three differences between the couple.

To find the main idea of a reading selection, ask yourself, “What’s the point the author is trying to make?” For instance, read the paragraph on the following page, asking yourself as you do, “What is the author’s point?”
School bullies have been around as long as there have been schools. Studies reveal several reasons why some children become bullies. Research shows that a certain combination of size and personality may be one factor. Bigger, more aggressive children are more likely to try to dominate their smaller, quieter peers. Another factor linked to bullying is overexposure to violent TV programs. By the time the average American child is ten years old, he or she has watched thousands of acts of violence, including assault and murder. Such exposure can lead to aggression and violence. Finally, exposure to real violence is a factor in bullying. Studies indicate that victims of bullies often turn into bullies themselves. Whether abused by family members or tormented by other kids, bullies typically learn their behavior from others. Look closely into the eyes of a bully, and you may be looking into the eyes of a former victim.

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

Following are four statements from the passage. Pick out the one that is both a general statement and 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. School bullies have been around as long as there have been schools.

B. Studies reveal several reasons why some children become bullies.

C. Research shows that a certain combination of size and personality may be one factor.

D. Studies indicate that victims of bullies often turn into bullies themselves.

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

**Explanation**

*Sentence A:* While this is a general statement, the paragraph does not go on to show how bullying has been a problem from when schools first began to the present day. Sentence A, then, is not the main idea.

*Sentence B:* The phrase “several reasons” is a general one. And in fact the rest of the passage goes on to describe a series of three supporting reasons why some children become bullies. Sentence B, then, is the sentence that expresses the main idea of the passage.

*Sentence C:* This sentence is about only one reason. It is not general enough to include the other reasons for bullying.
Sentence D: This sentence provides detailed support for the third reason for bullying—“exposure to real violence.” 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; all the other material of the paragraph fits under it. That other material is made up of supporting details—specific evidence such as examples, causes, reasons, or facts. The diagram below shows the relationship.

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

Recognizing a Main Idea

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

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

Each strategy is explained on the following pages.
1 Look for General versus Specific Ideas

You saw with the bullying paragraph 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**

\[\begin{align*}
S & \quad \text{dogs} \\
S & \quad \text{goldfish} \\
S & \quad \text{hamsters} \\
G & \quad \text{pets}
\end{align*}\]

(*Pets* is the general idea which includes three specific types of pets: dogs, goldfish, and hamsters.)

1. ___ home cooking  
   ___ take-out  
   ___ ways to eat dinner  
   ___ frozen foods

2. ___ hot and humid  
   ___ cold and rainy  
   ___ cloudy with scattered showers  
   ___ weather forecasts

3. ___ oversleeping  
   ___ bad habits  
   ___ overeating  
   ___ smoking

4. ___ traffic delays  
   ___ head cold  
   ___ bad coffee  
   ___ minor problems

5. ___ deadbolt locks  
   ___ alarm system  
   ___ barking dog  
   ___ kinds of security

6. ___ divorce  
   ___ failing grades  
   ___ major problems  
   ___ eviction

7. ___ not taking notes in class  
   ___ poor study habits  
   ___ missing classes  
   ___ cramming for exams

8. ___ surprised  
   ___ tone of voice  
   ___ enthusiastic  
   ___ bored

*To the Instructor:* 
You might want to ask questions such as the following:

- **Item 1:** Which of the ideas are ways to eat dinner?
- **Item 2:** Which of the ideas are weather forecasts?
- **Item 3:** Which of the ideas are bad habits?
- **Item 4:** Which of the ideas are minor problems?

Similar questions can be asked for items 5 through 10.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9. ___ communicating</th>
<th>10. ___ hurry up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>___ writing</td>
<td>___ get to bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ reading</td>
<td>___ commands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ speaking</td>
<td>___ clean up this mess</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PRACTICE 2**

1. Let’s say you are describing a good friend. That he or she is a good friend is a general idea. List three *specific* reasons why he or she is a good friend.

   ___________________   ___________________   ___________________

2. All of us have certain valued material possessions in our lives. What are three *specific* objects that are very important to you?

   ___________________   ___________________   ___________________

3. Everyone has goals. What are three of the *specific* goals in your life?

   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________

4. Most students have had teachers whom they admire. Name one such teacher and three *specific* qualities or behaviors that made you like or respect that teacher.

   Name of teacher: __________________________________________________

   Specific qualities or behaviors: _______________________________________
   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________

5. At one time or another you had to do a really unpleasant chore or job. Write three *specific* reasons why that chore or job was so unpleasant.

   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________
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. ___ My family has real problems.
   ___ My mother has cancer.
   ___ My sister is pregnant.
   ___ I lost my job.

2. ___ Iris has a great smile.
   ___ Iris asks you questions about yourself.
   ___ Iris is a pleasure to be around.
   ___ Iris really listens when you talk.

3. ___ I feel short of breath.
   ___ I’m getting dizzy and sweating.
   ___ There is a pain in my chest.
   ___ I may be having a heart attack.

4. ___ My boss is hard to work for.
   ___ He lacks a sense of humor.
   ___ He never gives praise.
   ___ He times all our breaks to the second.

5. ___ We had different political beliefs.
   ___ The date was a nightmare.
   ___ We were dressed completely differently.
   ___ Both of us were too nervous to say much.
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. Last night we could hear and smell a large animal prowling outside our tent.  
   ___ B. Green flies with stinging bites are in abundance around our campsite.  
   ___ C. The time has come to find a new campsite.  
   ___ D. Nearby we came upon a nest of baby rattlesnakes.

2. ___ A. Children are at risk at the school.  
   ___ B. There are two active gangs in the school.  
   ___ C. Knives and guns have been found in lockers.  
   ___ D. Drug busts have been made at the school.

3. ___ A. Cats are clean and do not require much attention.  
   ___ B. There are definite advantages to having a cat as a pet.  
   ___ C. Cats like living indoors and are safe to have around children.  
   ___ D. Cats are inexpensive to feed and easy to keep healthy.

4. ___ A. Communicating with family and friends using computer e-mail takes very little effort or time.  
   ___ B. Finding information is as easy as typing several key words.  
   ___ C. Shopping can be quickly handled online with a few clicks of the mouse and the use of a credit card.  
   ___ D. Computers make everyday matters much easier.

5. ___ A. Instead of working full-time, many of today’s employees work part-time with little job security and few benefits.  
   ___ B. Job security and our ideas about work have changed dramatically in recent years.  
   ___ C. Unlike in years past, most people entering the workforce today will change jobs several times during their careers.  
   ___ D. Rather than work for someone else, many of today’s workers hope to start their own businesses.
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, which is often at the beginning of a selection. 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 is to decide on the topic of a given selection.

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. Paying close attention to the topic of a selection can lead you to the main idea.

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

Aggression: Hurting Others (a 38-page chapter)

And here are the subtopics:

- Theories of Aggression (a 12-page section)
- Influences on Aggression (a 20-page section)
- Reducing Aggression (a 6-page section)

If you were studying the above chapter, you could use the topics to help find the main ideas. (Pages 17–18 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:

School bullies have been around as long as there have been schools. Studies reveal several reasons why some children become bullies.

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

Topic: __________________________________________________________

You probably answered that the topic is “Bullies.” As you read the paragraph again, you saw that, in fact, every sentence in it is about bullying.

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 that is made about bullying is that “Studies reveal several reasons why some children become bullies.”
Check Your Understanding

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

1. Though fun to watch, chimpanzees should not be kept as pets. 2. They are dangerously stronger than any NFL lineman. 3. Adult chimps weigh only 100 to 160 pounds, but have been measured pulling six to nine times their own weight—with one hand. 4. Thus, to match the strength of an average chimp, a human being would have to be able to register a two-handed pull of about a ton; it takes a very strong man to pull a quarter of that. 5. Combined with this strength is the fact that a chimp is capable of losing its temper—for reasons known only to the chimp. 6. Chimps signal their feelings with subtle cues of behavior that aren’t apparent to most humans. 7. It’s quite possible for a chimp to be on the verge of violence while its owner sits unaware or even unknowingly continues to provoke it. 8. Furthermore, it’s not wise to keep a cute young chimp and release it into the wild when it becomes dangerous. 9. Wild-raised chimps will routinely gang up on and kill those raised in captivity.

1. What is the topic of the paragraph? In other words, what is the paragraph about? ____________________________________________  
   
   Hint: It often helps to look for (and even circle) a word 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 “chimpanzees.” Reading the paragraph, you see that, in fact, everything in it is about chimpanzees. And the main idea is clearly that “chimpanzees should not be kept as pets.” 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: Chimpanzees

Main idea: Chimpanzees should not be kept as pets.

Supporting details:
1. Dangerously strong
2. Capable of losing temper
3. Liable to be attacked if released in the wild
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 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. The creakings of a house settling may sound like a monster coming out of a grave.

_____ B. Gusts of wind rattling a bedroom window can sound like invaders about to break in.

_____ C. Nighttime noises can be frightening to children.

_____ D. Noises at night.

**Explanation**

All of the statements in Group 1 are about noises at night, so item D must be the topic. Statements A and B each describe specific nighttime noises. Statement C, however, presents the general idea that nighttime noises can be frightening to children. It is the main idea about the topic “noises at night,” and statements A and B are supporting details that illustrate that main idea.

**Group 2**

_____ A. People vary in the amount of daydreaming they do.

_____ B. Around 2 to 4 percent of the population spend at least half their free time fantasizing.

_____ C. Almost everyone daydreams about 10 percent of the time.

_____ D. Daydreaming.
Group 3

_____ A. Global warming.
_____ B. Melting ice caps will raise ocean water levels and flood coastal areas.
_____ C. A warmer atmosphere may cause droughts that will turn farmlands to deserts.
_____ D. Global warming may cause destructive changes to life on Earth.

Group 4

_____ A. There are ways to remain healthy in old age.
_____ B. One way for people to remain healthy as they age is to continue to find mental challenges.
_____ C. Sticking to a balanced, low-cholesterol diet and a reasonable exercise program helps keep people in good shape throughout their lives.
_____ D. Health in old age.

Group 5

_____ A. Love at first sight is a poor basis for a happy marriage, according to a study of one thousand married and divorced couples.
_____ B. Couples who knew each other only slightly but fell instantly in love found that their feelings for each other grew weaker instead of stronger.
_____ C. Love at first sight.
_____ D. The couples who considered themselves happily married reported that they were not powerfully attracted to their partners when they first met, but that they gradually found each other more attractive as they grew to know and understand each other.
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 is the writer’s main point 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 sentence by asking, “Is this statement supported by all or 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.

For example, in Group 1 on page 66, the topic is “noises at night.” “Noises” would be too broad, since there are many other types of noises that are not mentioned. “The creakings of a house” would be too narrow, since this is only one type of nighttime noise mentioned.

Paragraph 1

Stories have the magic to focus our attention and maintain our interest. The politician or preacher who says, “That reminds me of a story . . . ” has an audience’s attention immediately. Consider the success of television’s 60 Minutes, the longest-running and most profitable prime-time show in the history of television. The person behind its success, producer Don Hewitt, says, “The secret of our show is so simple I can’t believe the formula hasn’t been followed by others. It’s four words that every kid knows: ‘Tell me a story.’ I look at things in screening rooms and I say, ‘That’s an interesting guy and those are some great scenes you’ve got, but what’s the story?’ Without the “story,” Hewitt knows the audience is leaving.

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 this topic? In other words, what is the main idea of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea. (Remember that the main idea will be supported by the other material in the paragraph.)
Paragraph 2

"Extrasensory perception, or ESP, is an area that fascinates people. However, ESP is not documented by any convincing evidence. For instance, it would seem that ESP would be an excellent way of winning at games of chance, such as those played at gambling casinos. But casino owners in Las Vegas and Atlantic City report no problem with "psychics" winning great sums of money. Also, although great publicity is generated when a psychic seems to help police solve a crime, the value of such help has never been scientifically proven. Tips from psychics are usually worthless, and almost all cases are solved through traditional police work. And while audiences may be amazed at the feats of "mind readers," the fact is that mind readers use simple psychological tricks to exploit their audiences' willingness to believe.

1. What is the topic of the paragraph? ________________________________

_____ 2. What point is the writer making about this topic? In other words, what is the main idea of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 3

"Hospices are a special type of health-care institution. Hospices differ from hospitals and nursing homes in several ways. First of all, they treat patients suffering from incurable diseases who are not expected to live for more than a year. Hospitals, however, aim to help patients recover from disease, and nursing homes provide long-term care for the disabled and elderly. Also, the hospice's purpose is to help the dying and their families. In contrast, hospitals and nursing homes have limited resources for helping patients' families.

1. What is the topic of the paragraph? ________________________________

_____ 2. What point is the writer making about this topic? In other words, what is the main idea of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.
Paragraph 4

1 Some people persist in believing that they can drink and be alert drivers. 2 Yet alcohol is estimated to be a factor in at least half of all fatal highway accidents. 3 Another poor attitude about driving is the refusal to wear seat belts. 4 Statistics show that the chances of being seriously hurt or dying in a car accident are greater when a seat belt is not worn. 5 Also potentially deadly is the view that the best driving is fast driving. 6 Again, statistics contradict this attitude—fast driving is more likely to be deadly driving. 7 After speed limits are lowered, traffic fatalities fall significantly. 8 A final mistaken attitude is that speaking on a cell phone will not detract from a driver’s attention and response time to unexpected traffic conditions. 9 Studies prove otherwise, with the result that many have called for a ban on cell phones while driving. 10 There is simply no question that poor attitudes about driving contribute to the high rate of traffic accidents and their brutal effects.

1. What is the topic of the paragraph? _____________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

   2. What point is the writer making about this topic? In other words, what is the main idea of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 5

1 In some ways, dark chocolate is a health food. 2 Rich in iron, magnesium, and fiber, it’s also loaded with flavonoids, compounds known to reduce cell damage. 3 Medical journals report that regularly eating a moderate amount of dark chocolate (about 3 ounces a day) reduces blood pressure both in healthy people and in patients with high blood pressure. 4 Lower blood pressure means less risk of irregular heartbeat, heart attack, and heart failure. 5 Continuous moderate consumption of dark chocolate also lowers bad cholesterol (the type that clogs arteries) and raises good cholesterol (the type that counters clogging). 6 In addition, dark chocolate helps prevent blood clots and arterial plaque, and so protects against stroke. 7 Dark chocolate even boosts the body’s ability to metabolize sugar, thereby reducing the risk of diabetes.

1. What is the topic of the paragraph? _____________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

   2. What point is the writer making about this topic? In other words, what is the main idea of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.
Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Sometimes authors make it fairly easy to find their main idea. They announce it by using key words—verbal clues that are easy to recognize. First to note are list words, which tell you a list of items is to follow. For example, the main idea in the paragraph about bullies was stated like this: “Studies reveal several reasons why some children become bullies.” The expression several reasons helps you zero in on your target: the main idea. You realize that the paragraph is going to be about specific reasons why some children become bullies.

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

**List Words**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>several kinds (or ways) of</th>
<th>several causes of</th>
<th>some factors in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>three advantages of</td>
<td>five steps</td>
<td>among the results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>various reasons for</td>
<td>a number of effects</td>
<td>a series of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**  Certain kinds of behavior can quickly get you fired from a job.

1. American workers can be said to earn several types of income.
2. Water pollution takes two forms.
3. The purchase price of a house is only one of various costs that buyers must consider.
4. Problem solving usually involves a series of four steps.
5. The increasing flow of women into the labor force was caused by a number of economic factors.
**Explanation**

You should have underlined the following groups of words: *several types of, two forms, various costs, a series of four steps, and a number of economic factors*. Each of these phrases tells you that a list of details will follow.

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

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

**Addition Words**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>one</th>
<th>to begin with</th>
<th>also</th>
<th>further</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first (of all)</td>
<td>for one thing</td>
<td>in addition</td>
<td>furthermore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second(ly)</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>next</td>
<td>last (of all)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third(ly)</td>
<td>another</td>
<td>moreover</td>
<td>final(ly)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Check Your Understanding**

Reread the paragraph about bullies, underlining the addition words that alert you to supporting details.

1. School bullies have been around as long as there have been schools.
2. Studies reveal several reasons why some children become bullies.  
3. Research shows that a certain combination of size and personality may be one factor.  
4. Bigger, more aggressive children are more likely to try to dominate their smaller, quieter peers.  
5. Another factor linked to bullying is overexposure to violent TV programs.  
6. By the time the average American child is ten years old, he or she has watched thousands of acts of violence, including assault and murder.  
7. Such exposure can lead to aggression and violence.  
8. Finally, exposure to real violence is a factor in bullying.  
9. Studies indicate that victims of bullies often turn into bullies themselves.  
10. Whether abused by family members or tormented by other kids, bullies typically learn their behavior from others.  
11. Look closely into the eyes of a bully, and you may be looking into the eyes of a former victim.
**Explanation**

The words that introduce each new supporting detail for the main idea are *one*, *Another*, and *Finally*. These addition words introduce each of the three reasons for bullying.

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

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

**Locations of the Main Idea**

Now you know how to recognize a main idea by 1) distinguishing between the general and the specific, 2) identifying the topic of a passage, and 3) using key 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 paragraph on the following page.
Spanking is a poor way to shape a child’s behavior. For one thing, spanking will result in feelings of anger and frustration. The child, then, will not learn anything positive from the punishment. In addition, spanking may actually lead to more bad behavior. Having learned that hitting is okay, the child may attack smaller children. Finally, spanking teaches children to hide certain actions from their parents. Once out of their parents’ sight, however, children may feel they can get away with the bad behavior.

In this paragraph, the main idea is in the first sentence. All the following sentences in the paragraph provide details about the negative effects of spanking.

Check Your Understanding

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

Tailgating—following too closely behind another vehicle—is a common cause of accidents. Yet tailgating accidents could be avoided if drivers followed some clear-cut guidelines. Any car that is less than two seconds behind the one ahead is definitely too close. Two car lengths is a safe following distance to maintain in local driving. Two-car accidents often become chain-reaction pileups when a number of drivers are all tailgating in a line. At freeway speeds, or in snowy, icy or foggy conditions, people should increase following distance well beyond what is normally safe. Finally, drivers who are impatient or aggressive need to develop the self-control not to express those feelings through dangerous behaviors like tailgating.

Explanation

In the preceding paragraph, the main idea is stated in the second sentence. The first sentence introduces the topic, but it is the idea in the second sentence—tailgating can be avoided by following clear-cut guidelines—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. Very often, a contrast word like yet, but, or however signals the main idea, as in the paragraph you have just read:

Tailgating—following too closely behind another vehicle—is a common cause of accidents. Yet tailgating accidents could be avoided if drivers followed some clear-cut guidelines.
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.

1 Many of us are annoyed by telemarketers who call us day and night, trying to sell us everything from magazine subscriptions to vacation homes. 2 These electronic intruders don't seem to care how much they are inconveniencing us and refuse to take “no” for an answer. 3 However, nuisance callers can be stopped if we take charge of the conversation. 4 As soon as one of them asks if we are Mr. or Ms. X, we should respond, “Yes, and are you a telephone solicitor?” 5 This technique puts them on the defensive. 6 We then have an opening to say that we don’t accept solicitations over the phone, only through the mail. 7 This puts a quick end to the conversation.

If you thought the third sentence states the main idea, you were correct. The two sentences before the main idea introduce the topic: the problem of annoying telemarketers. Then the writer presents the main idea, which is that we can stop telemarketers from going on by taking charge of the conversation. The rest of the paragraph develops that idea by telling us how we can take charge of the conversation.

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. On the next page is an example of such a paragraph.
A study at one prison showed that owning a pet can change a hardened prison inmate into a more caring person. Another study discovered that senior citizens, both those living alone and those in nursing homes, became more interested in life when they were given pets to care for. Even emotionally disturbed children have been observed to smile and react with interest if there is a cuddly kitten or puppy to hold. Animals, then, can be a means of therapy for many kinds of individuals.

Main Idea at the Beginning and the 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 later in the paragraph. In such cases, the main idea is at both the beginning and the end. Such is the case in the following paragraph.

People react strongly to red. The next time you go into a bookstore, notice which books catch your eye. Those with red covers are likely to stand out. The color of blood, red puts us on the alert. Often it signals danger. Red traffic lights and stop signs tell us to halt. Red also flags problems. Errors commonly are marked in red. Debts place us “in the red.” Red is the color of negative emotion. We redden with overexertion or embarrassment. When we’re angry, we “see red.” But red also is associated with strong positive feelings. The red hearts and roses of Valentine’s Day speak of romance. Red cheeks convey health; red lips and nails, sexuality. Red can even confer a competitive advantage. When the colors worn by Olympic athletes in sports such as boxing were analyzed, researchers found that athletes who wore red tended to outperform opponents in blue. Apparently, red suggests power. Physiologically, our eyes are more sensitive to red than to blue or green. Asked to name any color, most adults respond, “Red.” Red is the one color that humans simply cannot ignore.
PRACTICE 7

The main ideas of the following paragraphs appear at different locations—in 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. Nearly every day, we all use expressions that have unusual and not commonly-known origins. For example, if you've ever said or heard that someone is the “spitting image” of someone else, here's some news: it has nothing to do with spit! The original phrase, “spirit and image,” was used by slaves hundreds of years ago to describe a child who was so similar to another family member that it was believed that the same spirit occupied both people. Over the years, the words have run together to give us “spitting image.” And everyone knows that to “live high on the hog” implies living well, but where did such a phrase come from? This expression originally referred to those who could afford the more expensive cuts of meat higher up on a hog, such as the shoulder roasts and the ribs, as opposed to the cheap “lower” parts, the pig's feet and the bacon from the belly. Finally, when we say that someone “takes the cake,” we don’t really mean that that person is going to receive a cake. However, originally, that’s exactly what it meant! In the 1800s, a dance that made fun of stuffy ballroom dancing became so popular that eventually contests were held to see who could look the most ridiculous. Over time, this dance became known as the “Cakewalk” because winners were awarded cakes. So those who really stood out in a comical and memorable way did, in fact, “take the cake.”

2. Recently while I was sitting in a small auditorium waiting for a play to begin, I saw three audience members chatting on cell phones. In fact, people converse on their cell phones while they drive, shop, walk down the street, use public transportation, eat in restaurants, or go to the bathroom. Let’s face it: in the 21st century, cell phones are everywhere. In addition to using cell phones to talk, people use them to e-mail, text-message, surf the Web, organize their day, take photos, listen to music, watch videos, play games, and, by means of the phone’s light, find something in the dark, such as a keyhole. More than 200 million Americans, including about half of those aged thirteen to sixteen, carry a cell phone. In a 2005 survey of U.S. cell-phone users, 26 percent said they would rather leave home without their wallet than without their cell phone. Almost three-fourths of U.S. households have at least one cell phone; many have three or more. In the United States, cell phones now far outnumber wired phones. Americans clearly love cell phones, right? Wrong. A survey asked U.S. adults which invention they most hate. The most frequent reply? The cell phone.
3. Caffeine is a natural ingredient in coffee, tea, colas, cocoa, and chocolate, and is added to some prescription and non-prescription drugs. Despite being “natural,” caffeine is also a powerful drug which greatly affects the body. In healthy, rested people, a dose of 100 milligrams (about one cup of coffee) increases alertness, banishes drowsiness, quickens reaction time, enhances intellectual and muscular effort, and increases heart and respiratory rates. Drinking one to two cups of coffee an hour before exercise encourages the body to preserve glycogen and burn fat—something that results in greater endurance. In addition, caffeine masks fatigue. In doses above 300 milligrams, caffeine can produce sleeplessness, nervousness, irritability, headaches, heart palpitations, and muscle twitches. Caffeine is also habit-forming, and those who try to suddenly stop after heavy use may experience such withdrawal symptoms as headaches, lethargy, irritability, and difficulty in concentrating.

4. Queen Isabella of Spain, who died in 1504, boasted that she’d had only two baths in her life—at birth and before her marriage. In colonial America, leaders frowned on bathing, because it involved nudity, which, they feared, could lead to loose morals. Indeed, laws in Virginia and Pennsylvania either limited or outright banned bathing—and for a time in Philadelphia, anyone who bathed more than once a month faced jail. Furthermore, some of the early Christian churches discouraged sudsing up because of its association with the immorality common in the Roman baths. Clearly, the notion that cleanliness is next to godliness has not always been a popular one.

5. Research has demonstrated our self-centered tendency to rate ourselves more favorably than others rate us. In one study, members of a random sample of men were asked to rank themselves on their ability to get along with others. Defying mathematical laws, all subjects—every last one—put themselves in the top half of the population. Sixty percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent of the population, and an amazing 25 percent rated themselves in the top 1 percent. In the same study, 70 percent of the men ranked their leadership in the top quarter of the population, whereas only 2 percent ranked their leadership as below average. Sixty percent said they were in the top quarter in athletic abilities, whereas only 6 percent said they were below average.
A Note on the Central Point

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

A Final Thought

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

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

In this chapter, you learned the following:

- Recognizing the main idea is the most important key to good comprehension. The main idea is a general “umbrella” idea; all the specific supporting material of the passage fits under it.

- 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 key words—verbal clues that 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.

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 2

A. 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. Executives kept fake accounting records to hide the fact that the company was losing money.
   ___ B. Employees were strongly encouraged to buy company stock, which is now worthless.
   ___ C. Top company executives made millions of dollars while the company was failing.
   ___ D. Officers of that failed energy company should be put in jail for a long time.
2. ___ A. Traditional Japanese culture emphasizes self-discipline and respect for authority.
___ B. No one in Japan, including police officers, may keep a handgun at home.
___ C. The crime rate in Tokyo is the lowest of any major city in the world for a number of reasons.
___ D. At least once a year, police officers visit every home in Japan to discuss neighborhood conditions.

B. Each group of statements below includes one topic, one main idea, and two supporting details. 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. Staying in the sun too long can cause sunstroke.
_____ B. People develop skin cancer after years of “working in the sun” or after years of exposure to direct sunlight.
_____ C. Time in the sun.
_____ D. Spending time in the sun can be dangerous.

Group 2

_____ A. Rubbing one’s nose and eyes transfers viruses to the hands, which then contaminate whatever they touch, such as a doorknob, serving spoon, or telephone.
_____ B. Because the dried cold virus can live as long as three hours, you can pick it up from an object after the person with a cold is gone.
_____ C. Catching a cold.
_____ D. The most likely way to catch a cold is by touching an object that someone suffering from a cold has handled.
The main idea appears at various places in the following paragraphs. Write the number of each main idea in the space provided.

_____ 1. Two unlikely heroes, the goose and the canary, have earned their places in history as protectors of humans. In 390 B.C., the Romans placed geese (and dogs) in lookout positions on castle towers to warn of approaching enemies. A goose, the Romans knew, has remarkable powers of perceiving motion and sound, even in the middle of the night. As a result, while the dogs slept right through the approach of the fierce Gaul army, the guard geese sensed the Gallic invasion and warned the Romans well in advance with their thunderous honking and frantic wing flapping. Fifteen hundred years later, the use of canaries in coal mines saved more than a few coal miners from suffocation. Miners, who were always threatened by pockets of poisonous gases in the mines, used to carry canaries in small cages, holding them in front of them as they descended deeper and deeper into new mines. Because a canary's lungs are significantly more sensitive than a human's, the canary would show the effects of bad air long before the miners could sense it. Therefore, when the canary either appeared to be sick or (unfortunately) suddenly died, the miners were warned of the deadly air ahead, and they retreated quickly to safety.

_____ 2. Criticism is a valuable means of helping ourselves and others achieve personal growth. However, because it is often done carelessly or cruelly, criticism has a bad reputation. Here are some guidelines for offering criticism constructively. First, wait until the person asks for feedback on his or her performance or actions. Unasked-for criticism is not usually valuable. Second, describe the person's behavior as specifically as possible before you criticize it. Instead of just saying, “You were awful,” tell the person exactly what you observed. And finally, try to balance your criticism with positive statements. Look for significant points in the other person's performance that you can honestly praise.

_____ 3. In Bulgaria, one nods one's head for “no” and shakes it back and forth for “yes.” If you make the “A-OK” sign in Brazil, with the index finger and thumb making a circle, it's not only not okay, it's very impolite. To show the bottom of one's feet to a Turk is a serious insult, implying that “you are lower than the ground I walk on.” Throughout the Middle East, to offer the left hand in a handshake—or to wave it at someone—will give deep offense. The Japanese consider it polite to bow to varying levels, depending on the message one is trying
to convey. 6When a Frenchman wants to make a strong point, he waves his upraised index finger from side to side. 7In many Mediterranean cultures, men who are nonromantic friends walk hand in hand. 8And in America—especially out West—a firm handshake and a direct look in the eye are expected when men meet one another; in many cultures, this would be considered very rude. 9Clearly, body language that is perfectly normal or meaningless in one culture may mean something quite different in another.

_____ 4. 1Some Americans believe that colonials cleverly won the Revolutionary War by hiding behind rocks and trees and sniping at the British, who marched and fought in bright red rows and didn’t even aim their muskets. 2In fact, the British were worn down in the American colonies by a combination of factors. 3While the colonies never had a powerful army, they had a steady source of plentiful manpower and could easily replace their losses. 4The British regular soldiers (or German soldiers for hire), by contrast, took more time to train and generally had to be shipped across the Atlantic Ocean. 5Also, the colonies were not Britain’s only worry; a much greater concern was France, with which the British were consistently at odds. 6If too much energy had been spent holding the colonies, France might well have invaded and conquered Britain. 7France was well aware of this, so it began sending supplies to the colonials early in the war and soon sent a fleet and an army. 8The French contributions proved decisive at Yorktown in 1781, where the French and American armies held Lord Cornwallis’s army at bay in Virginia while the French fleet turned back the Royal Navy’s rescue effort.

_____ 5. 1People often think of shame as a strong form of embarrassment. 2A psychological study of 104 persons, however, suggests that shame and embarrassment are quite different experiences. 3In general, embarrassment results from a relatively minor event that occurs while others are around. 4It is more likely to cause a person to blush. 5Also, an embarrassing event is likely to include an element of surprise and to be remembered with smiles or jokes. 6Embarrassment generally does not lead to a feeling that one must correct a situation. 7Shame is felt when people reveal a personal flaw to themselves and perhaps to others. 8Unlike embarrassment, it is likely to make one feel that a situation needs repairing. 9In addition, while embarrassment is strongly related to how we believe others view us, shame is often felt when one is alone. 10And it is not generally looked upon later as humorous.
As the only freshman on his high school’s varsity wrestling team, Tod was anxious to fit in with his older teammates. One night after a match, a teammate offered him a ride home. Several other teammates also were passengers. One of them took out a bottle of tequila and started passing it around. When the bottle reached Tod, he felt he had to drink, or he would seem like a “sissy.” He took a swallow. Each time a teammate passed the bottle back to him, Tod took another swallow. After seven swallows he passed out. Terrified, his teammates carried him into his house. Tod’s mother rushed him to the hospital, where his stomach was pumped. Tod recovered, but his blood alcohol level had been so high that he was lucky not to be in a coma or dead.

Although alcohol can cause rapid poisoning, frequently leads to long-term addiction, and always threatens self-control, U.S. society encourages drinking. By their example, many parents give children like Tod the impression that alcohol is an essential ingredient of social gatherings. Peer pressure turns bachelor parties, fraternity initiations, and spring-semester beach vacations into competitions in “getting trashed.” In soap operas, glamorous characters pour Scotch whisky from crystal decanters as readily as most people turn on the

---

**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 reading by a small circle (°).

- **myth** (3): a false belief
- **irony** (11): a meaning that is the opposite of what is actually said

---

**HERE’S TO YOUR HEALTH**

*Joan Dunayer*

1. As the only freshman on his high school’s varsity wrestling team, Tod was anxious to fit in with his older teammates. One night after a match, a teammate offered him a ride home. Several other teammates also were passengers. One of them took out a bottle of tequila and started passing it around. When the bottle reached Tod, he felt he had to drink, or he would seem like a “sissy.” He took a swallow. Each time a teammate passed the bottle back to him, Tod took another swallow. After seven swallows he passed out. Terrified, his teammates carried him into his house. Tod’s mother rushed him to the hospital, where his stomach was pumped. Tod recovered, but his blood alcohol level had been so high that he was lucky not to be in a coma or dead.

   Although alcohol can cause rapid poisoning, frequently leads to long-term addiction, and always threatens self-control, U.S. society encourages drinking. By their example, many parents give children like Tod the impression that alcohol is an essential ingredient of social gatherings. Peer pressure turns bachelor parties, fraternity initiations, and spring-semester beach vacations into competitions in “getting trashed.” In soap operas, glamorous characters pour Scotch whisky from crystal decanters as readily as most people turn on the
faucet for tap water. In movies and music videos, trendsetters party by drinking in nightclubs and bars. The worst culprit of all is advertising. Alcohol ads appear with pounding frequency in magazines, on billboards, in newspapers, and on television. Who can recall a televised baseball or basketball game without a beer commercial? In 2005 more than 300,000 alcohol commercials appeared on U.S. television. It is no surprise that 70 percent of 21- to 25-year-olds report using alcohol in the last month, and nearly 48 percent of 21-year-olds are binge drinkers, downing five or more drinks in one session.

This nonstop promotion of alcohol in the mass media has resulted in several harmful beliefs about drinking that have spread throughout U.S. society. One alcohol myth is that liquor signals professional success. In a slick men's magazine, one full-page ad for Scotch whiskey shows two men seated in an elegant restaurant. Both are in their thirties, perfectly groomed, and wearing expensive-looking gray suits. The windows are draped with velvet, the table with spotless white linen. Each place setting consists of a long-stemmed water goblet, silver utensils, and thick silver plates. On each plate is a half-empty cocktail glass. The two men are grinning and shaking hands, as if they've just concluded a business deal. The caption reads, “The taste of success.”

Contrary to what the liquor company would have us believe, drinking is more closely related to failure than to achievement. Among students, the heaviest drinkers generally have the lowest grades. In the work force, alcoholics are frequently late or absent, tend to perform poorly, and often get fired. Although alcohol abuse occurs in all economic classes, it remains most prevalent among the poor.

Another alcohol myth that non-stop advertising supports is that drinking makes a person more sexually attractive. “Hot, hot, hot,” one commercial’s soundtrack begins, as the camera scans a crowd of college-age beachgoers. The camera then zooms in on one woman sitting amid the crowd. She is beautiful, wearing a bikini. The camera follows the shape of her leg up to her bare hip and lingers there. Carrying an ice chest, a man positions himself near the woman. He is handsome, tan, muscular. The woman doesn’t show much interest—until the man opens the chest and takes out a beer. Now she smiles at him. He raises
his eyebrows and invitingly holds up another can. The woman joins him. The advertised beer “attracts like no other,” the commercial’s song concludes.

The truth, however, is that beer doesn’t make anyone sexier. Like all alcohol, it lowers the levels of male hormones in men and of female hormones in women—even when drunk in small amounts. In substantial amounts, alcohol can cause infertility in women and impotence in men. Some alcoholic men even develop enlarged breasts.

Yet another myth is that alcohol and athletics are a good combination. One billboard features three high-action images: a sprinter running at top speed, a surfer riding a wave, and a basketball player leaping to make a dunk shot. A particular light beer, the billboard declares, “won’t slow you down.”

But “slow you down” is exactly what alcohol does. Even in small amounts, alcohol dulls the brain, reducing muscle coordination and slowing reaction time. It also interferes with the ability to focus the eyes and adjust to a sudden change in brightness, such as the flash of a car’s headlights. The leading cause of death among U.S. teenagers, drinking and driving is responsible for about 40 percent of all U.S. traffic fatalities. Drinking also results in many home and workplace accidents, such as falls, that cause injury or death. Continued alcohol abuse can physically change the brain, permanently impairing learning and memory. Long-term drinking is related to malnutrition, weakening of the bones, and ulcers. It increases the risk of liver failure, heart disease, and stomach cancer. Drinking during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage and is a major cause of birth defects such as limb deformities and brain damage.

Finally, advertising creates the myth that alcohol fosters happy relationships. In one TV commercial, an overweight man sits alone in his drab living room. He reaches into a cooler, takes out a bottle of beer, and twists off the cap. Instantly, dance music plays, and dozens of attractive young adults appear in a shower of party streamers and confetti. “Where the party begins,” a voice announces. The previously lonely man now is surrounded by male and female friends. The message: drinking solves social problems.

In reality, relationships in which alcohol plays a major role are unlikely to be happy. Heavy drinking destroys relationships and contributes to antisocial feelings and behavior. Alcoholics are about twenty-one times more likely than nonalcoholics to have antisocial personality disorder. In the United States, an estimated 30 percent of violent crimes are committed by people who had been drinking, and three-fourths of reported cases of spouse abuse involve alcohol. Parents with a drinking problem are more likely to neglect or abuse their children. Approximately 30 percent of Americans who commit suicide are alcoholics; the...
suicide rate among alcoholics is fifty times the rate among nonalcoholics. Alcohol, many would have us believe, is part of being successful, sexy, healthy, and happy. Those who have suffered from alcohol’s destructive effects know otherwise. For alcohol’s victims, “Here’s to your health” rings with a terrible irony when it is accompanied by the clink of liquor glasses.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Vocabulary in Context

_____ 1. In the excerpt below, the word *caption* (kəp’shən) means
   A. man.
   B. menu.
   C. contract that seals the business deal.
   D. words accompanying the picture.

   “In a slick men’s magazine, one full-page ad for Scotch whiskey shows two men seated in an elegant restaurant. . . . The caption reads, ‘The taste of success.’” (Paragraph 3)

_____ 2. In the sentence below, the word *prevalent* (prĕv’ə-lənt) means
   A. weak.
   B. colorful.
   C. widespread.
   D. inexpensive.

   “Although alcohol abuse occurs in all economic classes, it remains most prevalent among the poor.” (Paragraph 4)

_____ 3. In the excerpt below, the word *substantial* (səb-stən’shəl) means
   A. large.
   B. reasonable.
   C. weak.
   D. pleasing.

   “. . . beer . . . lowers the levels of male hormones in men and of female hormones in women—even when drunk in small amounts. In substantial amounts, alcohol can cause infertility in women and impotence in men.” (Paragraph 6)
4. In the sentence below, the word *impairing* (ɪm-ˈpɑr-ɪŋ) means
   A. damaging.
   B. doubling.
   C. postponing.
   D. teaching.

   “Continued alcohol abuse can physically change the brain, permanently impairing learning and memory.” (Paragraph 8)

5. In the sentence below, the word *fosters* (fōstərz) means
   A. removes.
   B. hides.
   C. produces.
   D. follows.

   “Finally, advertising creates the myth that alcohol fosters happy relationships.” (Paragraph 9)

Central Point and Main Ideas

6. The main idea of paragraph 2 is its
   A. first sentence.
   B. second sentence.
   C. third sentence.
   D. last sentence.

7. The main idea of paragraph 3 is its
   A. first sentence.
   B. second sentence.
   C. third sentence.
   D. seventh sentence.

8. The topic of paragraph 4 is drinking and
   A. grades.
   B. work.
   C. the poor.
   D. lack of success.

9. The main idea of paragraph 10 is its
   A. first sentence.
   B. second sentence.
   C. third sentence.
   D. fourth sentence.
10. Which sentence best expresses the central point of this selection?
   A. Although U.S. society encourages drinking, alcohol consumption is harmful in a number of ways.
   B. Alcohol ads appear very often in magazines, on billboards, in newspapers, and on television.
   C. Contrary to what the liquor industry wants us to believe, drinking is more closely related to failure than to achievement.
   D. Alcohol’s victims know that alcohol is not part of being successful, sexy, healthy, and happy.

Discussion Questions

1. Unfortunately, Tod’s experience with alcohol is not so rare. Do you know anyone who has had a negative experience because of drinking or because of drinking and driving? Where was that person drinking, and how much did he or she have? Explain what eventually happened.

2. If it’s true that “beer doesn’t make anyone sexier,” why do you think so many young people drink so much beer in social situations?

3. Think about a wine, beer, or liquor ad you have seen in a magazine, in a newspaper, or on television. Which alcohol myth described in “Here’s to Your Health” does that ad promote? What details of the ad contribute to that myth?

4. Cigarette advertising is no longer allowed on television. Do you think beer ads should also be outlawed on TV? In college newspapers? Explain your answers.

Note: Writing assignments for this selection appear on page 600.
MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 1

A. 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. I’m a good example of someone who has “math anxiety.”
   ___B. I feel dread every time I sit down to take our Friday math quiz.
   ___C. During the math midterm, I “froze” and didn’t even try to answer most of the questions.
   ___D. I turned down a job as a salesclerk because I would have had to figure out how much change customers should get back.

2. ___A. Hungry bears searching for food often threaten hikers.
   ___B. Hiking on that mountain trail can be very dangerous.
   ___C. Severe weather develops quickly, leaving hikers exposed to storms and cold.
   ___D. When it rains, the trail—which is very steep at some points—becomes slippery.

3. ___A. Terrorists hijacked and flew jetliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, both on the same day.
   ___B. Suicide bombers have killed themselves and thousands of others in Iraq and the Middle East.
   ___C. One hundred sixty-eight people died when an American terrorist blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City.
   ___D. Children have had to deal with the knowledge of many horrible acts of terrorism.
B. Each group of statements below includes one topic, one main idea, and two supporting details. 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. Some people knock on wood when talking about good luck.
_____ B. Everyday superstitions.
_____ C. Some people believe they should leave a house through the same door they entered.
_____ D. There are many superstitions that are practiced in everyday life.

**Group 2**

_____ A. Vegetarian diets.
_____ B. The incidence of heart disease is much lower for vegetarians than for non-vegetarians.
_____ C. People who eat vegetarian diets are generally healthier than non-vegetarians.
_____ D. Vegetarians have a lower rate of cancer than non-vegetarians.
MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 2

A. 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. Elected officials could spend more time on their jobs and less on raising money.
   ___B. There should be a limit on how much can be spent for political campaigns.
   ___C. Candidates with less money would have a fairer chance of competing.
   ___D. Elected officials would be less likely to be influenced by rich contributors to their campaigns.

2. ___A. Often you’ll wait half an hour for a Route 27 bus, and then three will show up at once.
   ___B. Sometimes Route 27 buses will roar right past you at a bus stop, even though they aren’t full.
   ___C. Route 27 seems to be assigned the oldest buses, ones that rattle and have broken seats.
   ___D. It is wise to avoid the Route 27 bus whenever possible.

3. ___A. Congress should enact a comprehensive highway program.
   ___B. Some of the numerous accidents, injuries, and fatalities on our nation’s roads are the result of poor highway design.
   ___C. There is an urgent need for bridge construction and maintenance throughout this country.
   ___D. This nation needs programs to alleviate traffic jams.
B. Each group of statements below includes one topic, one main idea, and two supporting details. 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. School officials complain that students damage school property, and parents complain their children can’t read or do math.

_____ B. Teachers complain about the low salaries they get for their difficult and important jobs.

_____ C. Problems in our schools.

_____ D. The problems within our school systems are varied and affect almost everyone involved.

**Group 2**

_____ A. Self-help groups based on the Alcoholics Anonymous model exist to serve people with a variety of problems.

_____ B. Self-help groups.

_____ C. Narcotics Anonymous sponsors meetings where drug abusers and their loved ones can get support.

_____ D. Overeaters Anonymous assists people whose eating has gotten out of control.
MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 3

The main idea may appear at any place within each of the five paragraphs that follow. Write the number of each main idea sentence in the space provided.

_____ 1. Creatures that are very sensitive to the changes in the air before a storm can “predict” a change in the weather. Birds, for example, sense the pressure change and fly lower. Low-flying birds, then, indicate that rain is coming. Similarly, houseflies detect this change and move indoors to avoid the downpour. And cats are known to groom themselves just before a storm. In doing so, they are reacting to the static electricity that enters the air before a thunderstorm. The electricity separates their fur and makes them feel dirty, so they lick themselves to make the fur smooth and “clean” again.

_____ 2. Men, we are reminded over and over, are the stronger sex. Yet men are more likely than women to have a number of health problems at every age. More males than females are miscarried, are stillborn, or die in their first year of life. In all societies, men die earlier than women do. American men are more likely than women to die from heart disease, lung disease, and cirrhosis of the liver. They are more likely to suffer from stress-related diseases, such as hypertension, ulcers, and asthma. They are hospitalized for mental illness more frequently. Women attempt suicide more often than men, but men succeed in killing themselves three times as often (largely because they use violent means—guns rather than sleeping pills).

_____ 3. The eruption of volcanoes has caused death and misery throughout the centuries. But in parts of Italy, Iceland, Chile, and Bolivia, volcanic steam is used to run heat and power plants. Pumice, which is made from volcanic lava, is used as a grinder and polisher. Sulfur produced by volcanoes is useful to the chemical industry. Hawaiian farmers grow crops on land made rich by decayed volcanic material. Clearly, in spite of all the damage they cause, volcanoes do benefit us in various ways.
4. Adult children who move back home can avoid family conflicts by following some helpful tips. First, they should contribute what they can—and it doesn’t necessarily have to be in terms of money. Being productive family members will help them earn their keep. This can involve tutoring or coaching younger sisters or brothers, or helping Mom and Dad with household chores and errands. Second, grown children at home should not expect their parents to rescue them from difficulties. As adults, they are responsible for getting out of their own scrapes—and for trying to avoid scrapes in the first place. Last, they must respect their parents’ lifestyles and own needs for independence. It is unrealistic to expect parents’ lives to revolve around the needs of a grown child, as they may have when the child was younger.

5. Police estimate that only 1 to 2 percent of hitchhiking crimes are reported, so there are no accurate statistics on such events. But frequent horror stories indicate that hitchhiking can be dangerous to both hitchhiker and driver. There was the nineteen-year-old woman who accepted a lift from three young men in New Jersey, expecting a ride across the bridge to New York City. Instead they drove to a motel, where they repeatedly raped her. Luckily, she escaped with her life. Less fortunate was the eighteen-year-old woman student who disappeared from campus after accepting a ride with a stranger and whose decomposed body was found in a suburban sewage plant two years later. Male hitchhikers are less open to assault, but a number of incidents show that they are far from immune. Hitchhikers also face the hazards of riding with an intoxicated or stoned driver, not the least of which is an accident. They also risk assault or robbery by other hitchhikers and being stranded in out-of-the-way places. Drivers, too, are subject to assault and robbery. And they risk an accident by stopping on a busy highway, or arrest if their passengers happen to be carrying drugs. Some male drivers have picked up young girls who threatened to call the police and cry rape unless the men handed over all their money.
MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 4

The main idea may appear at any place within each of the five paragraphs that follow. Write the number of each main idea sentence in the space provided.

_____ 1. Fire extended humans’ geographical boundaries by allowing them to travel into regions that were previously too cold to explore. It also kept predators away, allowing early humans to sleep securely. Fire, in fact, has been a significant factor in human development and progress in many ways. Other obvious benefits of fire are its uses in cooking and in hunting. Probably even more important, however, is that learning to control fire allowed people to change the very rhythm of their lives. Before fire, the human daily cycle coincided with the rising and setting of the sun. With fire, though, humans gained time to think and talk about the day’s events and to prepare strategies for coping with tomorrow.

_____ 2. The stages of life, from birth to death, may seem controlled by biology. However, the way we think about life’s stages is shaped by society. During the Middle Ages, for example, children dressed—and were expected to act—just like little adults. Adolescence became a distinct stage of life only fairly recently, when a separate teenage subculture began to appear. But in the Middle Ages, young people were “children” until about age 16. Then they went to work, married, and had their own children. Today, “young adulthood” has become a new stage of life, stretching from about age 20 to 30. As life expectancy becomes longer and people spend years in active retirement, older adulthood has also become a distinct life stage.

_____ 3. New technology often creates unanticipated problems. Automobiles, for example, provide numerous benefits, but they also pollute the air and kill about fifty thousand Americans each year. It is difficult to imagine life without electricity and heat, but power plants pollute the air, cause the thermal pollution of rivers, and contribute to global warming. Insecticides and chemical fertilizers have performed miracles in agriculture but have polluted food and streams (and even “killed” some lakes). Jet planes, while helping us in many ways, cause air pollution (one jet taking off emits the same amount of hydrocarbon as the exhausts from ten thousand automobiles) and noise pollution near busy airports.

(Continues on next page)
4. By the end of the first series of Sherlock Holmes stories, the author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, had become tired of writing detective stories. So at the end of his second book of Holmes stories, he decided to have the detective die. The book ends with Holmes and his archenemy, Moriarty, plunging to their deaths from a high cliff overlooking a waterfall. After that, hundreds of letters poured in to Conan Doyle, begging him to bring Holmes back. Also, magazines offered him huge sums of money for additional Sherlock Holmes adventures. Finally, after nine years, Conan Doyle wrote a new story in which Holmes reappears and tells Dr. Watson that he did not die after all. Sometimes it is the reader, not the author, who determines how long fictional heroes will live.

5. With so many young, single people having babies, the question arises as to how happy they are being young parents. A national survey of young, single mothers and fathers reveals that most were happier before they became parents. Sixty-seven percent of the nine thousand new parents who responded to the survey said having a baby presented more problems than they envisioned. Fifty-six percent of the respondents said they had to drop out of school, despite their hopes that they could manage schoolwork while rearing a baby. A majority (73 percent) said they were forced to seek financial help from family, friends, and/or government agencies, and 37 percent said they accepted low-paying, unsatisfying jobs out of necessity. Also, 70 percent said they missed the “good times” with friends that they enjoyed before their babies were born.
MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 5

The five paragraphs that follow are all taken from college textbooks. The main idea may appear at any place within each paragraph. Write the number of each main idea sentence in the space provided.

_____ 1. ¹An author doing research for a book asked thousands of Americans what made them happy. ²Among the popular responses she received were eating ice-cream sandwiches and candy, being offered a football ticket, and visiting city parks. ³Other specific responses included eating ravioli, feeling the cool underside of a pillow, and rereading old love letters. ⁴The most frequently cited response was simply spending time with family. ⁵Almost no one gave the answer of owning flashy jewelry, showy cars, or other fancy things. ⁶The author concluded that most of the things that put a smile on our face are simple and free or inexpensive.

_____ 2. ¹To erase or not to erase? ²That is the question in many students’ minds after they’ve penciled in one of those small circles in multiple-choice tests. ³Folk wisdom has long held that when answering questions on such tests—or on any test—you should trust your first instincts. ⁴However, a research instructor has found that students who change answers they’re unsure of usually improve their scores. ⁵The instructor spent three years compiling and analyzing college students’ tests, watching for telltale erasure marks, which would indicate that the student had, indeed, revised his or her answer. ⁶What the instructor found was that revised answers were two and a half times as likely to go from wrong to right as vice-versa. ⁷This statistic held up even across such variables as sex, age, and race; the subject matter of the tests studied also proved not to be a factor.

_____ 3. ¹Finding a good way to get rid of garbage is a problem that faces many municipalities today. ²It may be of some consolation for them to know that getting rid of garbage has almost always involved problems. ³When settlements were very small, garbage was simply thrown outdoors, where it eventually decomposed. ⁴But as communities grew, pigs and other animals helped clear away garbage by eating it; of course, the animals, in turn, recycled that garbage and thus created an even less appealing waste problem. ⁵The first municipal effort to deal with garbage was begun in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin, whose solution was to have it dumped into the Delaware River. ⁶A century later, municipal incinerators, generally located in the most crowded part of town, burned garbage and produced the worst of odors as a by-product.

(Continues on next page)
1. In both Canada and the United States, many people arrested for a crime never receive appropriate punishment. 2. Prosecutors often drop charges because of flaws in the arrest procedures—officers didn’t follow the rules with sufficient care or file their paperwork properly. 3. In many other cases, the charges are dismissed at preliminary hearings because of problems of evidence, such as key witnesses failing to appear. 4. Of cases surviving these barriers, many are resolved by a plea bargain. 5. That is, the charges are reduced in exchange for a plea of guilty. 6. This spares the government the expense of a trial, but it also makes punishment less severe. 7. And of those who do go to prison, very few will serve their full sentence. 8. Time off for good behavior often equals 25 percent of one’s sentence, so most will be out on parole well before their time is up.

If we compressed the entire history of life on the planet into a single year, the first modern human would not appear until December 31 at about 11:53 p.m., and the first civilizations would emerge only about a minute before the end of the year. Yet humanity’s achievements in its brief history on Earth have been remarkable. Some 15,000 years ago, our ancestors practiced religious rituals and painted superb pictures on the walls of their caves. Around 11,000 years ago, some human groups began to domesticate animals and plants, thereby freeing themselves from total dependence on hunting and gathering food. About 6,000 years ago, people began to live in cities, to specialize in different forms of labor, to divide into social classes, and to create distinct political and economic institutions. Within a few thousand years, empires were created, linking isolated groups and bringing millions under centralized rule. Advanced agricultural practices improved farming, resulting in growing populations and the emergence of large nation-states. A mere 250 years ago, the Industrial Revolution began, thrusting us into the modern world of factories and computers, jets and nuclear reactors, instantaneous global communications, and terrifying military technologies.
MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 6

The five paragraphs that follow are all taken from college textbooks. The main idea may appear at any place within each paragraph. Write the number of each main idea sentence in the space provided.

_____ 1. ¹People may think that love and romantic feelings are enough of a basis for choosing a spouse. ²The chances of a marriage surviving, however, would improve if prospective marriage partners considered a few unromantic questions before deciding on matrimony. ³For example, do the two individuals involved share a common socioeconomic background? ⁴The more similar they are in their social, economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, the more similar their expectations about married life will be. ⁵In addition, what are their goals? ⁶It’s a big advantage to the marriage if they know and share one another’s goals concerning career, lifestyle, and family. ⁷Finally, and maybe most important, how does the prospective spouse treat others in his or her life? ⁸During the courtship, the boyfriend or girlfriend may get special consideration, but in the long run, spouses will probably treat each other about the same way they treat their own family members.

_____ 2. ¹There is a tendency in our society to turn important decisions over to groups. ²In the business world, most important decisions are made around a conference table rather than behind one person’s desk. ³In politics, major policy decisions are seldom made by just one person. ⁴Groups of advisers, cabinet officers, committee members, or aides meet to deliberate and decide. ⁵In the courts, a defendant may request a trial by jury, and for some serious crimes, a jury trial is required by law. ⁶And of course, the U.S. Supreme Court renders group decisions on issues of major importance.

_____ 3. ¹The American ideal of a lush green lawn is borrowed from England, where the cool, misty climate makes it easy to grow grass. ²In America, however, lawns are an energy-intensive, wasteful, and nonproductive form of landscaping. ³To begin with, achieving a picture-perfect lawn requires gallons of expensive fertilizer and hazardous pesticides that pollute groundwater and run off into lakes and rivers. ⁴In addition, lawn owners often exterminate the insects, moles, and gophers that play a part in the balance of nature. ⁵Equally destructive is the constant watering lawns require, often where water is a limited resource. ⁶Finally, the lawn must be mowed on a regular basis to give it that green carpet effect, requiring endless output of human and mechanical energy. ⁷After all the labor and expense, the final result is a flat covering that lacks interesting features, wildlife, or edible produce.

(Continues on next page)
4. Propaganda is information that is methodically spread in order to persuade audiences to adopt a certain opinion. Advertising is an ever-present form of propaganda in our lives. Four common propaganda techniques are present in the advertising we see and hear every day. One technique, the testimonial, involves having a well-known person appear on behalf of the product being sold. Advertisers assume, for example, that if we admire a sports star, we'll want to eat the cereal he or she endorses. Another common propaganda technique, the bandwagon, makes us want to be “one of the gang.” “Everybody’s switching to . . .” “Don’t be left out . . .” and “All across America, people are discovering . . .” are phrases that signal a bandwagon approach. The plain-folks propaganda technique is especially popular on TV. In plain-folks commercials, we see and hear “regular” consumers talk about their experience using a certain phone company, headache remedy, or brand of coffee. The fourth common propaganda technique, the transfer, encourages us to link two unrelated objects in our mind. When a powerful cougar prowls around a shiny new car, for example, advertisers hope we will transfer our sense of the wild cat’s speed, strength, and beauty to our vision of their product.

5. Stories of the mythical Camelot, the location in England of King Arthur’s court, depict a world of dashing knights in shining armor and beautiful damsels in distress. In actuality, the real world of that time probably consisted of smelly men in rusty tin suits and damsels in a certain kind of distress—the distress of being constantly pregnant and of having no rights in a male-dominated society. Those same stories often glorified the brave men who fought to the death for king and country. However, most battle fatalities of the time resulted from medieval medicine. Letting the “bad blood” out of a sick person was a common medical practice, and cleanliness was not. Other stories of the fabled Camelot housed royalty in glittering palaces, clothed them in silks, and covered them in mystery and awe. But what is awesome about living in a cold, stone, rat-infested fortress with poor ventilation? As for silks, war-indebted kings could rarely afford such foreign commodities. Wool from home usually did the trick. And there’s certainly nothing silly about the discomfort caused by coarse woolen undergarments. It is obvious that the Camelot myth ignores the harsh realities of life in the Middle Ages in favor of a fantastic, unrealistic view of history.