

1

Main Ideas

What Is the Main Idea?



“What’s the point?” You’ve probably heard these words before. It’s a question people ask when they want to know the main idea that someone is trying to express. The same question can guide you as you read. Recognizing the **main idea**, or point, is the most important key to good comprehension. Sometimes a main idea is immediately clear, as in the above cartoon. The point—that the man is a terrible pet owner—is vividly supported by the dog’s reasons: the dog is kept on a chain, must eat on the floor, and is never allowed out in public alone.

To find a point in a reading selection, ask yourself, “What’s the main point the author is trying to make?” For instance, read the paragraph on the following page, asking yourself as you do, “What is the author’s point?”

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

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



Check Your Understanding

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

Four statements from the passage

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

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

Explanation

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

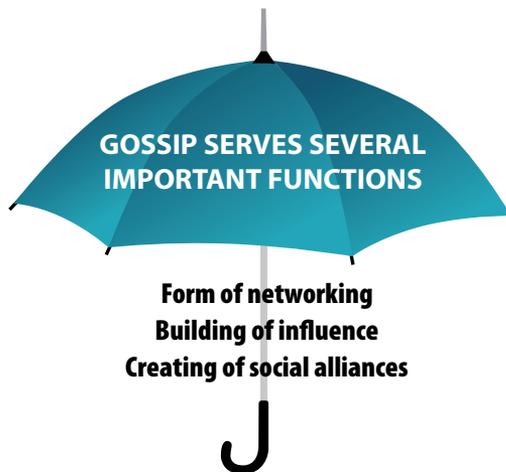
Sentence B: The statement “However, it [gossip] actually serves several important functions in the human community,” is a general one. And the rest of the passage goes on to describe three important functions of gossip. Sentence B, then, is the sentence that expresses the main idea of the passage.

Sentence C: This sentence refers only to the first function of gossip. It is not general enough to include the other two functions that are cited in the paragraph.

Sentence D: This sentence simply provides a detail that supports the third function of gossip. It does not cover the other material in the paragraph.

The Main Idea as an “Umbrella” Idea

Think of the main idea as an “umbrella” idea. The main idea is the author’s general point; 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 in the paragraph on gossip that the main idea is a *general* idea supported by *specific* ideas. The following practices will improve your skill at separating general from specific ideas. Learning how to tell the difference between general and specific ideas will help you locate the main idea.



PRACTICE 1

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

Example

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

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

1. A. Lottery winners have been known to use their winnings to feed their addictions to gambling and/or drugs.
 B. Other lottery winners report squandering their money to help out a never-ending stream of “hard luck” relatives and friends.
 C. Some lottery winners invest large sums on business ventures they know nothing about and wind up losing all they have invested.
 D. Winning the lottery can create as many problems as it solves.
2. A. People like to interact with other people as they shop.
 B. People like to see, touch, try on, and sometimes even smell the items they intend to buy.
 C. Many people still use shopping as simply an excuse to get out of the house.
 D. Despite its growing popularity, Internet shopping will never entirely replace shopping in stores.
3. A. For much of the 1900s, people regarded cancer as a death sentence.
 B. Attitudes toward cancer used to be very different from those of today.
 C. Few people with cancer were willing to speak openly about battling the disease.
 D. Many people thought that having cancer was contagious.
4. A. Instead of simply offering printed material on loan, modern libraries now allow patrons to borrow CDs, videos, and DVDs.
 B. Even very small libraries now provide computers, which patrons may use to access the Internet.
 C. Libraries have changed drastically in the past decade to keep up with the demands of an ever-changing society.
 D. Some libraries even feature refreshment stands that sell beverages and snacks.
5. A. By age 14, 81 percent of young people have tried drinking.
 B. By the time they graduate from high school, more than 43 percent of teenagers have experimented with illegal drugs.
 C. In the United States, teenage drug and alcohol use is especially common.
 D. About one-third of teenagers who have tried illegal drugs have also tried at least one highly addictive and toxic substance, such as cocaine or heroin.

6. ___ A. Female wigs sometimes rose as much as two and a half feet, making the average wearer roughly seven and a half feet tall.
- ___ B. Wigs were so valuable that people often willed them to their descendants.
- ___ C. When traveling, women wearing large wigs often had to sit on the floor of their carriages or ride with their heads sticking out of the windows.
- ___ D. In the 1700s, it was considered the height of fashion among the European upper classes to wear elaborate wigs.
7. ___ A. Many infant girls are given up for adoption by couples in other countries.
- ___ B. The traditional Chinese preference for boys, coupled with that country's "one child" policy, has led to some disturbing consequences.
- ___ C. Other infant girls are not given adequate medical care.
- ___ D. The development of ultrasound technology to determine a child's gender prior to birth has led to the death by abortion of hundreds of thousands of unborn Chinese girls.
8. ___ A. Before Abraham Lincoln was nominated for president, he provided material for a biography that helped to solidify his image as "Honest Abe, the rail-splitter."
- ___ B. A number of presidential candidates have written or co-written books in order to bypass the press and speak directly to voters, giving their viewpoint about events and policies.
- ___ C. John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, which won the 1955 Pulitzer Prize for biography, helped Kennedy impress voters as a high-minded public servant.
- ___ D. *The Audacity of Hope* and *Dreams from My Father* introduced a little-known candidate named Barack Obama to the American public.
9. ___ A. The number of Category 4 and Category 5 hurricanes has nearly doubled in the past three decades, fulfilling some scientists' predictions that global warming will lead to more severe weather.
- ___ B. There is growing evidence that global warming is real.
- ___ C. In the past 100-plus years of record-keeping, eight of the ten hottest years have occurred since 1996.
- ___ D. According to scientists who study the movement of fields of ice, the ice surrounding the North Pole has entered a state of accelerating, long-term decline.

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

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

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

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

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

Socialization (29 pages)

Agents of Socialization

The Family

The Neighborhood

Religion

Day Care

The School

Peer Groups

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

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

Who or what is the selection about?

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

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

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

Topic: _____

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

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



Check Your Understanding

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

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

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

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

Explanation

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

Topic: A–F grading system

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

Supporting details:

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



PRACTICE 2

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

Read each paragraph below and do the following:

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

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

Paragraph 1

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

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

Paragraph 2

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

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

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

Paragraph 3

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

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

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

Paragraph 4

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

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

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

Sometimes authors make it fairly easy to find their main idea. They announce it by using **key words**—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 gossip was stated like this: “However, it actually serves several important functions in the human community.” The expression *several important functions* helps you zero in on your target: the main idea. You realize that the paragraph will be about specific functions of gossip.

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

List Words

several **kinds (or ways)** of
three **advantages** of
various **reasons** for

several **causes** of
five **steps**
a number of **effects**

some **factors** in
among the **results**
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 containing list words will be followed by a list of major supporting details.

Note Many other list-word expressions are possible. For example, a writer could begin a paragraph with a sentence containing “four kinds of” or “some advantages of” or “three reasons for.” So if you see a sentence with a word group like the ones above, you’ve probably found the main idea.



Check Your Understanding

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

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

Example Children become unpopular for several common reasons.

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

Explanation

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

In addition to list words, addition words can alert you to the main idea. **Addition words** are generally used right before supporting details. 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

one
first (of all)
second(ly)
third(ly)

to begin with
for one thing
other
another

also
in addition
next
moreover

further
furthermore
last (of all)
final(ly)



Check Your Understanding

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

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

Explanation

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

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

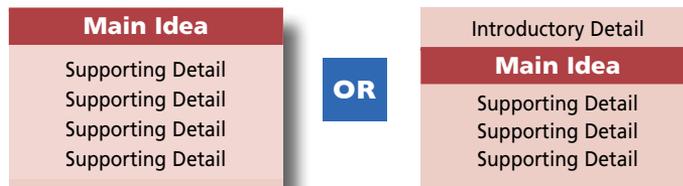
The following chapter, "Supporting Details," includes further information about words that alert you to the main idea and the details that support it. But what you have already learned here will help you find main ideas.

Locations of the Main Idea

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

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

Main Idea at the Beginning



In textbooks, it is very common for the main idea to be either the first or the second sentence of a paragraph.

See if you can underline the main idea in the following paragraph.

¹As a result of more than sixty years of election surveys, we now know a great deal about American voters. ²The wealthier and more educated they are, the more likely people are to support Republican candidates. ³Men are a bit more likely to vote for Republicans, while women slightly favor Democrats. ⁴African Americans vote for Democrats by a margin of more than four to one. ⁵For generations, Catholics voted for Democrats, and Protestants (outside the South) favored Republicans; but today, Catholics and Protestants have similar party preferences, and Southern voters have swung from the Democrats to the Republicans. ⁶But perhaps the most significant fact has to do with the general lack of interest in politics. ⁷Most Americans say politics is not an important part of their lives. ⁸Less than 50 percent of Americans bothered to vote in the fall 2010 elections.

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



Check Your Understanding

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

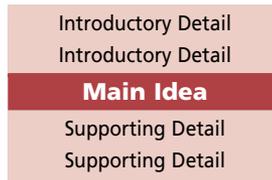
¹Today, most people in the Western world use a fork to eat. ²But before the 1700s, using a fork was highly discouraged. ³Most people in Europe ate with their hands. ⁴People from the upper class used three fingers, while the commoners ate with five. ⁵When an inventor from Tuscany created a miniature pitchfork for eating, Europeans thought that it was a strange utensil. ⁶Men who used a fork were often ridiculed and considered feminine. ⁷Priests called out against the fork, claiming that only human hands were worthy to touch the food God had blessed them with. ⁸One wealthy noblewoman shocked clergymen by eating with a fork she designed herself. ⁹Over dinner, they accused her of being too excessive. ¹⁰When the woman died from the plague a few days later, the priests claimed her death was a punishment from the heavens. ¹¹They warned others that using a fork could bring them the same fate.

Explanation

In the above paragraph, the main idea is stated in the *second* sentence. The first sentence introduces the topic, using a fork, but it is the idea in the second sentence—that before the 1700s, using a fork was highly discouraged—that is supported in the rest of the paragraph. So keep in mind that the first sentence may simply introduce or lead into the main idea of a paragraph.

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

Main Idea in the Middle



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



Check Your Understanding

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

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

Explanation

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

Main Idea at the End

Supporting Detail

Supporting Detail

Supporting Detail

Supporting Detail

Main Idea

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

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

Main Idea at the Beginning and the End



At times an author may choose to state the main idea near the beginning of the paragraph and then emphasize it (as a conclusion) by restating it in other words 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.

¹Stress is a part of everyday life. ²So much so that the term *stress* has become part of our colloquial speech. ³It is a noun (*We have stress*). ⁴It is an adjective (*He has a stressful job*). ⁵And it is a verb (*Writing a paper stresses me*). ⁶Indeed, a recent poll by the American Psychological Association shows that, for many of us, stress levels are high and on the rise. ⁷One-third of Americans surveyed reported “living with extreme stress,” and nearly half believe that their stress had “increased over the past 5 years.” ⁸It seems that being “stressed out” has become a hallmark of modern life.

Note that the main idea—stress is part of everyday life—is expressed in different words in the first and last sentences.

**PRACTICE 3**

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. ¹Everyone knows what it's like to have the "jitters" after one cup of coffee too many. ²Those shaking hands and sleepless nights have convinced many that coffee is as unhealthy as alcohol or cigarettes. ³However, the health benefits of coffee greatly outweigh its negative effects. ⁴In addition to reducing the risk of diseases like diabetes and cirrhosis of the liver, those morning cups of joe have been shown to ward off two of America's most common killers: heart disease and cancer. ⁵Coffee flushes the bloodstream of the excess fat that clogs arteries and also supplies a large dose of antioxidants, which prevent the formation of tumors. ⁶Psychologically, the stimulant effects of a daily cup have proven to reduce suicide rates. ⁷And as for the fear of a troublesome addiction to caffeine, that risk is often overstated. ⁸Physical dependence on coffee becomes a possibility only after drinking five or more cups daily, significantly more than the two or three cups a day that Americans drink on average.
- _____ 2. ¹Offering on-site child care for employees' children provides many physical and financial benefits to companies. ²Such child-care facilities ease the strain on parents. ³While they are at work, they can keep in touch with a baby or toddler and observe the care their child is receiving. ⁴They are able to spend time with their children during breaks and lunch hours, and mothers can even nurse their babies at the center. ⁵These benefits attract and keep capable workers with the company. ⁶Surprisingly, providing child care can even reduce labor costs. ⁷When the United Bank of Monterey, California, decided to measure the cost of its daycare center, officials found that the annual turnover of employees who used the center was just one-fourth that of employees who did not use it. ⁸Users of the centers were also absent from work less often, and they took shorter maternity leaves. ⁹After subtracting the center's costs from these savings, the bank saved more than \$200,000.

- _____ 3. ¹In today's world, crops are raised in soil where nutrients have been depleted. ²Plants are treated with pesticides and other chemicals so they no longer have to fight to live, which further diminishes their nutrient levels—not to mention the toxic exposure we receive from such chemicals. ³Animals are cooped up in pens or giant feedlots instead of roaming free and eating the nutrient-rich wild grains and grasses they once consumed. ⁴Since cows' stomachs are adapted to grass instead of corn, they must take antibiotics to prevent them from exploding. ⁵To complicate this further, all of us are exposed to hazardous toxins and chemicals that poison our bodies; we live with too much stress; we don't sleep enough; we don't exercise enough; and we eat foods that cause inflammatory reactions—making the nutrient demands on our bodies even greater. ⁶For all these reasons, the foods we eat no longer contain the nutrient levels we require for optimal health.
- _____ 4. ¹What do you think of as "cute"? ²Kittens? ³Paintings of children with big sad eyes? ⁴Little dolls? ⁵Golden retriever puppies? ⁶If none of these examples triggers a fond "awwwwww" response in you, you are truly a rare individual. ⁷Scientists who study human behavior say that we are hard-wired not only to identify certain characteristics as "cute," but to respond to them with affection and protectiveness. ⁸Simply put, *cute* (as opposed to *beautiful*) means "baby-like, vulnerable, young, helpless." ⁹And what we identify as "cute" are characteristics borrowed from our own human babies. ¹⁰Those include big round faces, forward-facing eyes set low on the face, awkward floppy arms and legs, and a clumsy, side-to-side walk. ¹¹Because human babies are so helpless for so long, it is essential for our species' survival that adults respond strongly to such "cute" signals. ¹²And indeed, nature has been so successful in this regard that we respond to collections of "cute" characteristics that are outside our own species—just witness our reaction to pandas, penguins, and puppies. ¹³We have such a deeply-rooted response to cuteness that we respond even to cute non-animals. ¹⁴It's no mystery why designers of cars like the Beetle and the Mini Cooper made their vehicles look round-headed and smiling. ¹⁵They know that as absurd as it may be, people want to take "cute" things home and care for them.

A Note on the Central Point

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

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



On the Web: If you are using this book in class, you can go to our website for more practice in recognizing main ideas. Visit our Learning Center at www.townsendpress.net for additional activities and an instructional video on this skill.



REVIEW TEST 1

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

1. To become an active reader, you need to think as you read a paragraph or selection by constantly asking yourself the question, “What is the _____?”
2. To help decide if a certain sentence is the main idea, ask yourself, “Is this statement _____ by most or all of the other sentences in the paragraph?”

3. One strategy that will help you find the main idea is to look for the _____—the general subject of a selection.
4. Addition words such as *first*, *second*, *also*, and *finally* often introduce key supporting _____s for a main idea.
5. While a main idea may appear at any place within a paragraph, in textbooks it most often appears at the _____.



REVIEW TEST 2

Here is a chance to apply your understanding of main ideas to a full-length selection. Read the article from *Time* magazine below, and then answer the questions that follow on main ideas. There are also vocabulary questions to help you practice the skill of understanding vocabulary in context.

Preview

Are you starving? Not for food; for sleep. If you're like many Americans, you've been sleep-deprived so long you no longer know how tired you are. Maybe you even take pride in being able to "get by" on little sleep. But as this article explains, sleep is not a luxury you can afford to be without.

Words to Watch

plummet (2): fall

mimic (5): imitate

circadian rhythm (6): recurring naturally on a twenty-four-hour cycle

GETTING A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Sora Song

1 Americans are not renowned for their powers of self-deprivation; doing without is not something we do particularly well. But experts say there is one necessity of life most of us consistently fail to get: a good night's sleep. The recommended daily requirements should sound familiar: eight hours of sleep a night for adults and at least an hour more for adolescents. Yet 71 percent of American adults and 85 percent of teens do not get the suggested amount, to the detriment of body and mind. "Sleep is sort of like food," says Robert Stickgold, a cognitive neuroscientist at Harvard Medical School. But, he adds, there's one important difference: "You can be quite starved and still alive, and I think we appreciate how horrible that must be. But many of us live on the edge of sleep starvation and just accept it."

2 Part of the problem is we are so used to being chronically sleep-deprived—and have become so adept at coping with that condition—that we no longer notice how exhausted we really are. In 2003, sleep expert David Dinges and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine tested the effects of restricting slumber to eight, six, or four hours a night for two weeks. During the first few days,

subjects sleeping less than eight hours admitted to being fatigued and lacking alertness. But by Day 4, most people had adapted to their new baseline drowsiness and reported feeling fine—even as their cognitive performance continued to plummet°.

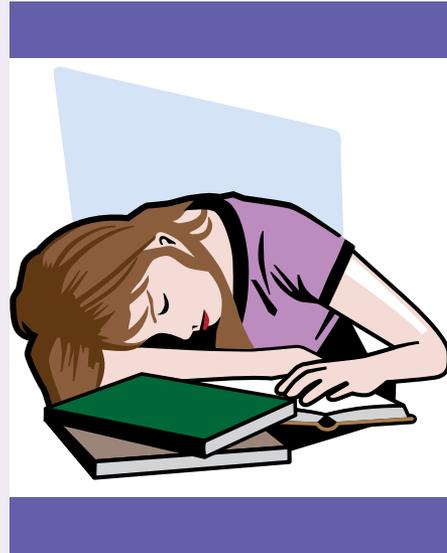
3 Over time, the experiment's sleep-restricted subjects became so impaired that they had difficulty concentrating on even the simplest tasks, like pushing a button in response to a light. "The human brain is only capable of about 16 hours of wakefulness [a day]," says Dinges. "When you get beyond that, it can't function as efficiently, as accurately or as well."

4 In the real world, people overcome their somnolence—at least temporarily—by drinking coffee, taking a walk around the block or chatting with office mates. But then they find themselves nodding off in meetings or, worse, behind the wheel. Those short snatches of unconsciousness are what researchers call microsleep, a sure sign of sleep deprivation. "If people are falling asleep because 'the room was hot' or 'the meeting was boring,' that's not coping with sleep loss. I would argue that they're eroding their productive capability," says Dinges.

5 What most people don't realize

is that the purpose of sleep may be more to rest the mind than to rest the body. Indeed, most of the benefits of eight hours' sleep seem to accrue to the brain: sleep helps consolidate memory, improve judgment, promote learning and concentration, boost mood, speed reaction time and sharpen problem solving and accuracy. According to Sonia Ancoli-Israel, a psychologist at the University of California at San Diego who has done extensive studies in the aging population, lack of sleep may even mimic° the symptoms of dementia. In recent preliminary findings, she was able to improve cognitive function in patients with mild to moderate Alzheimer's simply by treating their underlying sleep disorder. "The need for sleep does not change a lot with age," says Ancoli-Israel, but often because of disruptive illnesses and the medications used to treat them, "the ability to sleep does."

- 6 If you're one of the otherwise healthy yet perpetually under-rested, there's plenty you can do to pay back your sleep debt. For starters, you can catch up on lost time. Take your mom's advice, and get to bed early. Turn off the TV half an hour sooner than usual. If you can't manage to snooze longer at night, try to squeeze in a midday nap. The best time for a siesta is between noon and 3 p.m., for about 30 to 60 minutes, according to Timothy Roehrs, director of research at the Sleep Disorders and Research Center at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. He advises against over-



sleeping on weekend mornings to make up for a workweek of deprivation; later rising can disrupt your circadian rhythm°, making it even harder later to get a full night's rest.

7 According to Dinges' analysis of data from the 2003 American Time Use Survey, the most common reason we shortchange ourselves on sleep is work. (The second biggest reason, surprisingly, is that we spend too much time driving around in our cars.) But consider that in giving up two hours of bedtime to do more work, you're losing a quarter of your recommended nightly dose and gaining just 12 percent more time during the day. What if you could be 12 percent more productive instead? "You have to realize that if you get a good night's sleep, you will actually be more efficient and get more done the next day. The more you give up on sleep,

the harder it is to be productive,” says Ancoli-Israel. “What is it going to be?”

8 If mental sharpness is your goal, the

answer is clear: stop depriving yourself, and get a good night’s sleep.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Vocabulary in Context

_____ 1. In the sentence below, the word *detriment* (dět' rə-mənt) means

- A. consideration.
- B. harm.
- C. influence.
- D. benefit.

“Yet 71 percent of American adults and 85 percent of teens do not get the suggested amount, to the detriment of body and mind.” (Paragraph 1)

_____ 2. In the sentence below, the word *baseline* (bās' līn) means

- A. a baseball term which refers to the area within which a runner must stay when running between bases.
- B. a line bounding each back end in a tennis court.
- C. a line serving as a base, as for purposes of measurement.
- D. caused by extreme boredom.

“But by Day 4, most people had adapted to their new baseline drowsiness and reported feeling fine—even as their cognitive performance continued to plummet.” (Paragraph 2)

_____ 3. In the excerpt below, the word *somnolence* (sŏm' nə-ləns) means

- A. lack of sensitivity.
- B. laziness.
- C. boredom.
- D. sleepiness.

“In the real world, people overcome their somnolence—at least temporarily—by drinking coffee, taking a walk around the block or chatting with office mates.” (Paragraph 4)

- _____ 4. In the sentence below, the words *accrue to* (ə-krōō'tōō) mean
- A. improve.
 - B. put pressure on.
 - C. wear away.
 - D. communicate to.

"Indeed, most of the benefits of eight hours' sleep seem to accrue to the brain: sleep helps consolidate memory, improve judgment, promote learning and concentration, boost mood, speed reaction time and sharpen problem solving and accuracy." (Paragraph 5)

Main Ideas

- _____ 5. The central idea of this selection is that
- A. Americans are willing to deprive themselves of sleep in order to complete more work.
 - B. Americans use unsuccessful strategies in order to compensate for lack of sleep.
 - C. Americans may not realize it, but chronic sleep deprivation is actually harming them and lowering their productivity.
 - D. the need for sleep does not change a lot with age.
- _____ 6. The main idea of paragraph 1 is stated in the
- A. first sentence.
 - B. second sentence.
 - C. third sentence.
 - D. fourth sentence.
- _____ 7. The main idea of paragraph 2 is stated in the
- A. first sentence.
 - B. second sentence.
 - C. third sentence.
 - D. fourth sentence.
- _____ 8. The main idea of paragraph 5 is stated in the
- A. first sentence.
 - B. second sentence.
 - C. third sentence.
 - D. fourth sentence.
- _____ 9. The topic of paragraph 6 is
- A. sleep-deprived people.
 - B. oversleeping on weekends.
 - C. paying back your sleep debt.
 - D. midday naps.

- _____ 10. The main idea of paragraph 6 is stated in the
- first sentence.
 - second sentence.
 - sixth sentence.
 - seventh sentence.

Discussion Questions

- How much sleep do you typically get in a night? Do you feel that you sleep enough? If not, what do you think are the major reasons you aren't sleeping more? What are some ways in which you could restructure your life in order to get a full eight hours of sleep a night?
- A scientist quoted in paragraph 1 compares sleep with food, but notes that while we would not accept being deprived of food, we accept being sleep-deprived. Why do you think so many people simply accept the fact that they don't get enough sleep?
- The selection mentions nodding off at meetings and falling asleep at the wheel as two potential consequences of sleep deprivation. What are some other negative consequences that you can think of? Conversely, what might some positive consequences be if people got more sleep?
- In your view, are there any factors which contribute to Americans' sleep deprivation other than those mentioned in the selection? If so, what are they, and what—if anything—could be done to counteract them?

Note: Writing assignments for this selection appear on page 635.

Check Your Performance

MAIN IDEAS

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Number Right</i>	<i>Points</i>	<i>Score</i>
Review Test 1 (5 items)	_____	× 6 =	_____
Review Test 2 (10 items)	_____	× 7 =	_____
	TOTAL SCORE	=	_____ %

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

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. Write the letter of each point in the space provided.

- _____ 1. A. German immigrants added such words as *kindergarten*, *hoodlum*, and *delicatessen* to the American vocabulary.
B. We owe common phrases like *to bad-mouth*, *a high five*, and *jam session* to African speech patterns.
C. If you've eaten spaghetti, pizza, or lasagna, you've eaten a dish named by Italians.
D. Various ethnic groups and races have contributed to the English language as Americans speak it.
- _____ 2. A. Most tall buildings in the United States are struck, on average, 100 times per year.
B. In one recorded incident, the Empire State Building was struck 15 times in 15 minutes.
C. The old saying that lightning never strikes twice is far from true.
D. The exceptions don't just apply to buildings: Roy Sullivan, a U.S. forest ranger, was struck by lightning seven times over the course of 40 years.
- _____ 3. A. While many people fear a piranha will bite off their finger, in fact the majority of a piranha's diet is vegetable matter.
B. Although piranhas are most notorious as fearsome killers, they actually make good pets.
C. Although piranhas will attack other types of fish in an aquarium, they don't attack one another and can coexist peacefully.
D. Piranhas are very hardy and adaptable to different types of water, so they require a minimum of tank maintenance.

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

_____ 4. ¹Thoughts are forever coming into and going out of our minds. ²They are a lot like an ongoing movie. ³There are a number of types or categories of thoughts that are commonly featured in the movies of our minds. ⁴Planning thoughts are those in which we try to decide exactly what to do, specifically (“I’ll go to Burger King for lunch today”) or generally (“I really should quit this job”). ⁵Desire thoughts include wishes for anything, from sex to world peace. ⁶Fear thoughts include any type of worry: unhealthy eating, money, work, you name it. ⁷Happy or appreciative thoughts are often noting pleasurable sensations such as the sun on one’s face or the smell of freshly brewed coffee. ⁸Judging thoughts are those in which we approve of, or, more likely, criticize anything or anyone. ⁹Righteous thoughts are those in which we are right and other people are wrong. ¹⁰Angry thoughts can be self-hating thoughts or feelings of hatred for the behavior of others.

_____ 5. ¹One of the contradictions of humanity is that people long for peace while at the same time they glorify war. ²War is so common that a cynic might say it is the normal state of society. ³Sociologist Pitirim Sorokin counted the wars in Europe from 500 B.C. to A.D. 1925. ⁴He documented 967 wars, an average of one war every two or three years. ⁵Counting years or parts of a year in which a country was at war, at 28 percent Germany had the lowest record of warfare. ⁶Spain’s 67 percent gave it the dubious distinction of being the most war-prone. ⁷Sorokin found that Russia, the land of his birth, had experienced only one peaceful quarter-century during the entire previous thousand years. ⁸Since the time of William the Conqueror, who took power in 1066, England was at war an average of 56 out of each 100 years. ⁹Spain fought even more often. ¹⁰It is worth noting the history of the United States in this regard: Since 1850, it has intervened militarily around the world about 160 times, an average of once a year.

MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 2

A. 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. Write the letter of each point in the space provided.

- _____ 1. A. Appalachian children of eastern Kentucky typically fall asleep with their parents for the first two years of their life.
B. Japanese children usually lie next to their mothers throughout infancy and early childhood and continue to sleep with a parent or other family member until adolescence.
C. Among the Maya of rural Guatemala, mother-infant co-sleeping is interrupted only by the birth of a new baby, at which time the older child is moved beside the father or to another bed in the same room.
D. Parent and infant bed sharing is common around the globe, in industrialized and unindustrialized countries alike.
- _____ 2. A. About 45 million years ago, the subcontinent of India collided with the continent of Asia to form the spectacular Himalaya Mountains.
B. The Alps are thought to have formed as a result of a collision between Africa and Europe many millions of years ago.
C. Some mountain ranges have formed as the result of collisions between continents.
D. The European continent collided with the Asian continent to produce the Ural Mountains, which extend in a north-south direction through present-day Russia.
- _____ 3. A. Hunting and gathering societies tend to have fewer social divisions than other societies.
B. Because what they hunt and gather is perishable, hunters and gatherers accumulate few personal possessions.
C. There is no money and no way to become wealthier than anyone else in hunting and gathering societies.
D. Hunters and gatherers place a high value on sharing their food resources, which are essential to their survival.

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

- _____ 4. ¹Data across time, cultures, and methodologies strongly support the notion that people lose their cool and behave more aggressively in hot temperatures. ²More violent crimes occur in the summer than in the winter, during hot years than in cooler years, and in hot cities than in cooler cities at any given time of year. ³The numbers of political uprisings, riots, homicides, assaults, rapes, and reports of violence all peak in the summer months. ⁴Indirect acts of aggression also increase in excessive heat. ⁵As temperatures rise to uncomfortable levels, laboratory participants become more likely to interpret ambiguous events in hostile terms, and drivers in cars without air conditioning become more likely to honk their horns at motorists whose cars are stalled in front of them. ⁶Researchers have also found that as the temperature rises, major-league baseball pitchers are significantly more likely to hit batters with a pitch.
- _____ 5. ¹Is it really possible to convince people that they are guilty of a crime they did not commit? ²To search for an answer, researchers recruited pairs of college students to work on a fast- or slow-paced computer task. ³At one point, the computer crashed, and students were accused of having caused the damage by pressing a key that they had been specifically instructed to avoid. ⁴All students were actually innocent and denied the charge. ⁵In half the sessions, however, the second student (who was really an actor, posing as a participant) said that she had seen the student hit the forbidden key. ⁶Demonstrating the process of compliance, many students confronted by this false witness agreed to sign a confession handwritten by the experimenter. ⁷Next, demonstrating the process of internalization, some students later “admitted” their guilt to a stranger (also an actor) after the experiment was supposedly over and the two were alone. ⁸In short, innocent people who are vulnerable to suggestion can be induced to confess and to internalize guilt by the presentation of false evidence.

MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 3

A. 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. Write the letter of each point in the space provided.

- _____ 1. A. In the 1950s, more than 75 percent of American households owned sewing machines, but now that figure is under 5 percent.
B. As more women began working outside the home, fewer and fewer undertook unpaid volunteer work.
C. Women who work outside the home are too busy to do the things they used to do.
D. Women used to clip manufacturers' coupons—today less than 3 percent of manufacturers' coupons are ever redeemed.
- _____ 2. A. In many preindustrial societies in which children are of particular importance, sterility or impotence are primary grounds for divorce.
B. In some traditional patriarchal Islamic societies, husbands needed only to proclaim “I divorce thee” three times in front of two witnesses for marriages to end.
C. Throughout most of American history, cruelty, desertion, or adultery were the most common legal grounds for divorce.
D. Just as norms regulate marriage and family relationships, they also specify conditions under which marriages may be dissolved.
- _____ 3. A. Contrary to what some animal lovers believe, the natural world is not particularly moral.
B. Infanticide, siblicide (killing of siblings), and rape can be observed in many kinds of animals.
C. Infidelity is common in so-called pair-bonded species.
D. Cannibalism can be expected in all species that are not strictly vegetarians.

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

_____ 4. ¹Married people are more likely than those who are single, divorced, or widowed to survive cancer for five years; gay men infected with HIV are less likely to contemplate suicide if they have close ties than if they do not; and people who have a heart attack are less likely to have a second one if they live with someone than if they live alone. ²Among students stressed by schoolwork, and among the spouses of cancer patients, more social support is also associated with a stronger immune response. ³Based on a review of eighty-one studies, researchers have concluded that in times of stress, having social support lowers blood pressure, lessens the secretion of stress hormones, and strengthens the immune system. ⁴On the flip side of the coin, people who are lonely exhibit greater age-related increases in blood pressure and have more difficulty sleeping at night. ⁵There's no doubt about it: Being isolated from other people can be hazardous to your health.

_____ 5. ¹Individuals vary widely in what they dream about, the feelings associated with their dreams, and how often they remember dreams. ²Nevertheless, there are some patterns that seem to apply to all dreams. ³One pattern found in dream content relates to gender. ⁴For example, although the dreams of men and women have become more similar over the last several decades, men more often dream about weapons, unfamiliar characters, male characters, aggressive interactions, and failure outcomes, whereas women are more likely to dream about being the victims of aggression. ⁵Dream content also varies by age. ⁶Very young children (ages 2 to 5) tend to have brief dreams, many of which involve animals; but the images are usually unrelated to each other, and there is seldom any emotional narrative or story line. ⁷It is not until the child is 7 to 9 years old that dreams take on a narrative, sequential form. ⁸Feelings and emotions also make their appearance in dreams in the years between 7 and 9, and children more often appear as characters in their own dreams at that age. ⁹Between ages 9 and 15, dreams become more adult-like: Narratives follow well-developed story lines, other people play important roles, and there are many verbal exchanges in addition to motor activity. ¹⁰Finally, cross-cultural studies have shown that people from different cultures report dream content consistent with the unique cultural patterns inherent in their respective cultures.

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. ¹Less than a hundred years ago, many people saw adolescence as a time of great instability and strong emotions. ²For example, G. Stanley Hall, one of the first developmental psychologists, portrayed adolescence as a period of “storm and stress,” fraught with suffering, passion, and rebelliousness. ³Recent research, however, suggests that the “storm and stress” view greatly exaggerates the experience of most teenagers. ⁴The great majority of adolescents do not describe their lives as filled with turmoil and chaos. ⁵Most adolescents manage to keep stress in check, experience very little disruption in their everyday lives, and generally develop more positively than is commonly believed. ⁶For instance, a cross-cultural study that sampled adolescents from ten countries, including the United States, found that over 75 percent of them had healthy self-images, were generally happy, and valued the time they spent at school and work.
- _____ 2. ¹Scientists have calculated that in the year 2029, there is a 1 in 38 chance that an asteroid will smash into our planet. ²That may not be a high probability, but when that probability represents a hole the size of several European countries, 1 in 38 is still cause for concern. ³Luckily, scientists have developed an effective strategy for avoiding an asteroid collision. ⁴Rather than blow up the asteroid and risk its fragments chaotically raining down on the Earth, the best strategy is to slowly deflect the asteroid’s path. ⁵Using a nuclear-powered engine that consumes very little fuel, a spacecraft would hover beside the asteroid for as many as twenty years. ⁶Since the force of gravity is such that any object exerts a pull on the objects around it, the spacecraft’s mass would slowly pull the asteroid off course. ⁷Although the pull would be very weak, space would offer no resistance, and the asteroid could be safely pulled away from its collision course over a period of many years.
- _____ 3. ¹AIDS is an excellent example of the relationship between behavior, environment, and disease. ²This disease was first noted in male homosexuals. ³One person, Gaetan Dugas, an airline steward from Canada, played a key role in its rapid transmission, for he or one of his sex partners had sex with 40 of the first 248 AIDS cases reported in the United States. ⁴The disease then hit another group whose lifestyle also encouraged its transmission—

(Continues on next page)

intravenous drug users who shared needles. ⁵The third of the groups that were the hardest hit represents an environmental risk: Hemophiliacs, who need regular blood transfusions, were exposed to the disease through contaminated blood. ⁶Lifestyle was also central to how the disease entered the general population; the bridge was prostitutes who had sex with intravenous drug users and with bisexual and heterosexual men. ⁷Lifestyle and environment continue to be significant: AIDS is more common among drug users who share needles and among people who have multiple sexual partners.

- _____ 4. ¹Today, people who find themselves with too much debt can get help from the government. ²But before the mid-1800s, Americans who couldn't pay their debts were often given harsh punishments. ³Some people were put in a jail called "debtors' prison." ⁴They were forced to sit in their cells until they had the money to pay back their debts. ⁵However, since they couldn't go to work, there was no way for them to get the money unless someone gave it to them. ⁶Many people died in debtors' prison because they could not afford to leave. ⁷Some people were required to give away everything they had, except for their bedding, in order to pay back a debt. ⁸Other people were forced to become indentured servants. ⁹Indentured servants were forced to do work without a salary until their debt was paid. ¹⁰Sometimes even the children of people who owed money were required to work in order to pay off their parents' debt.
- _____ 5. ¹Religion sometimes teaches that the existing social arrangements of a society represent what God desires. ²For example, during the Middle Ages, Christian theologians decreed the "divine right of kings." ³That doctrine meant that God determined who would become a king, and set him on the throne. ⁴The king ruled in God's place, and it was the duty of a king's subjects to be loyal to him (and pay their taxes). ⁵To disobey the king would be to disobey God. ⁶The religion of ancient Egypt claimed that the Pharaoh himself was a god. ⁷The Emperor of Japan was similarly declared divine. ⁸In India, Hinduism supports the caste system by teaching that an individual who tries to change caste will come back in the next life as a member of a lower caste—or even as an animal. ⁹In the decades before the Civil War, Southern ministers used Scripture to defend slavery, saying that it was God's will—while Northern ministers legitimated their religion's social structure by using Scripture to denounce slavery as evil.

MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 5

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. ¹In speaking and writing, the best language is often the simplest. ²Your words should be immediately understandable to your audience. ³Don't try to impress them with jargon and inflated language full of multi-syllable words. ⁴For example, instead of *utilize*, say *use*; instead of *alternative*, say *other*; instead of *augment*, say *increase*; instead of *adequate number*, say *enough*. ⁵As linguist Paul Roberts advises, "Decide what you want to say and say it as vigorously as possible . . . and in plain words." ⁶In his classic essay, "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell lists rules for clear writing, including this prescription for simplicity: "Never use a long word where a short one will do. ⁷If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. ⁸Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent." ⁹And James J. Kilpatrick has said, "Use familiar words—words that your readers will understand, and not words they will have to look up. ¹⁰No advice is more elementary, and no advice is more difficult to accept. ¹¹When we feel an impulse to use a marvelously exotic word, let us lie down until the impulse goes away."
- _____ 2. ¹Humans breathe automatically every few seconds. ²Dolphins, by contrast, breathe only voluntarily and can hold their breath for longer than thirty minutes. ³So how do they go to sleep without risking oversleeping and drowning? ⁴To maintain control of their breathing during sleep, dolphins sleep with only half of their brain at a time. ⁵Electroencephalograms, measuring the electric levels in dolphins' brains, show that the left side of a dolphin's mind shuts down while the right side powers its basic life functions. ⁶Later, the right side sleeps while the left side takes over. ⁷In this way, the dolphin achieves a full eight hours of sleep while still maintaining the ability to swim to the surface and take a breath of air. ⁸The strange sleep habits of dolphins might explain a behavior known as "logging" that sailors commonly observe, in which dolphins swim very slowly near the surface of the ocean.
- _____ 3. ¹We've all heard stories about people whose spectacular abilities are apparent at an early age. ²Mozart started composing music at the age of five, Picasso turned out masterly paintings by the time he was ten, and some mathematicians have enrolled in college before entering their teens. ³Yet a significant number of famous people were thought to be "slow" rather than gifted when they were children. ⁴Thomas Alva Edison was a prime example of this. ⁵Little Tom Edison did not learn to talk until he was almost

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four years of age. ⁶When Tom was seven, his teacher lost patience with the boy's persistent questioning and lack of interest in the rote lessons he was supposed to be learning, and expressed his belief that the boy's brains were "addled," or scrambled. ⁷Albert Einstein was another example of a genius who started off slowly. ⁸In the primary grades, he was considered to be a slow learner, possibly due to dyslexia, shyness, or simply a lack of interest in formal schooling. ⁹Another future scientist who made great contributions to the atomic age, Ernest Rutherford, was not able to read until the age of eleven, and even then he still could not write.

- _____ 4. ¹When a specimen of pure radium was first isolated in 1902, people failed to realize that the glowing radioactive substance could be deadly. ²Radium in extremely diluted form was added to face creams, health tonics, cosmetics, bath salts, and so on. ³One drink, Radithor, which contained one part radium salts to 60,000 parts zinc sulfide, was said to cure cancer and mental illness, as well as restore sexual vigor and vitality. ⁴Upper-class men and women carried small vials of radium bromide around with them as the latest "status symbol." ⁵Watches with glowing, radium-painted numbers and dials were also extremely popular. ⁶Eventually, radium became linked with an alarming rise in incidences of cancer.
- _____ 5. ¹Aside from admitting to a bad back, young, dynamic President John F. Kennedy appeared the picture of health. ²Yet several years after his assassination, the truth came out that he had suffered from Addison's disease, a debilitating disorder involving the adrenal glands. ³Kennedy was not the only president to keep his health problems a secret. ⁴The first president to lie about his health was Chester A. Arthur, our 21st president, who was diagnosed with Bright's disease, a fatal kidney disorder, shortly after he took office. ⁵Unwilling to jeopardize what he wanted to accomplish, Arthur kept his disease a secret, struggled on for four years, then died shortly after he left office. ⁶President Grover Cleveland also kept the true state of his health a secret. ⁷In 1893, when the country was experiencing an economic depression, doctors secretly operated on Cleveland to cut out a large cancerous growth on the roof of his mouth. ⁸A cover story about the removal of two bad teeth kept the suspicious press from learning the rather alarming truth. ⁹In October 1919, President Woodrow Wilson suffered a serious stroke which incapacitated him until the end of his term in 1921. ¹⁰The public was never informed of this situation, and Wilson's wife, Edith, virtually ran the government for more than a year. ¹¹Our 32nd president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, failed to reveal the fact that he had been diagnosed with life-threatening hypertension before he ran for and was elected to a fourth term.

MAIN IDEAS: Mastery Test 6

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. ¹As you might anticipate, research clearly shows that economic hardships are a huge source of stress for individuals and their families. ²Few events are more stressful than watching one's retirement accounts shrivel up, losing one's job, or, worse yet, losing one's home to foreclosure. ³A recent study of people going through foreclosure found that 29 percent were burdened by medical bills they could not afford, 58 percent had to skip meals due to lack of money, 47 percent suffered from minor to major depression, and a substantial portion had increased their smoking or drinking since their foreclosure. ⁴Other research has shown that prolonged economic setbacks typically send families into a downward emotional spiral marked by anxiety, depression, anger, alienation, and marital conflict. ⁵The stress on parents often spills over to affect their children, who act out and struggle in school. ⁶Another line of research, looking at the effects of unemployment and underemployment, has shown that these afflictions are associated with anxiety, depression, hostility, paranoia, pessimism, helplessness, social isolation, and a host of physical maladies.
- _____ 2. ¹While the telephone is associated with Alexander Graham Bell, Elisha Grey of Chicago filed for a patent for the same invention within hours of Bell on the same day in 1876. ²After extensive litigation, Bell was awarded the patent. ³In fact, neither of them may have been first. ⁴Italian Antonio Meucci had a successful working model years earlier. ⁵Orville and Wilbur Wright are forever associated with the invention of the airplane in 1903. ⁶However, there is evidence that in New Zealand, a farmer named Richard Pearse made a successful flight some months ahead of the Wright brothers. ⁷Others claim that Gustave Whitehead flew a homemade plane two years earlier in Bridgeport, Connecticut. ⁸The invention of the television is usually credited to Philo Farnsworth of San Francisco in 1926. ⁹In Scotland, also in 1926, John Logie Baird demonstrated a machine he called the "televisor." ¹⁰When Baird and Farnsworth met and compared inventions some months later, Baird admitted Farnsworth had the better design. ¹¹Clearly, while famous inventions usually come to be associated with one person, there are often competing claims for the same invention.
- _____ 3. ¹Most of us, when we are in a depressed mood, are able to relieve it through our own thoughts and actions. ²After a certain period of gloom, we grab our bootstraps and pull ourselves up, using such means as positive

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thinking, problem solving, talking with friends, or engaging in activities that we especially enjoy. ³However, severely depressed people have patterns of thought and action that work against their recovery, rather than for it. ⁴Imagine severe depression as a vicious triangle in which a person's mood, thoughts, and actions interact in such a way as to keep him or her in a depressed state. ⁵Depressed mood promotes negative thinking and withdrawal from enjoyable activities; negative thinking promotes depressed mood and withdrawal from enjoyable activities; and withdrawal from enjoyable activities promotes depressed mood and negative thinking. ⁶Each corner of the triangle supports the others.

- _____ 4. ¹Most of us assume that color is “out there,” in the environment; our eyes simply take it in. ²While many animals—including some reptiles, fish, and insects—have color vision, what colors they see vary. ³Humans and most other primates perceive a wide range of colors. ⁴Most other mammals experience the world only in reds and greens or blues and yellows. ⁵Hamsters, rats, squirrels, and other rodents are completely colorblind. ⁶So are owls, nocturnal birds of prey that have only rods in their eyes. ⁷At the same time, however, other animals can see colors that we can't. ⁸Bees, for example, see ultraviolet light. ⁹To a bee's eyes, flowers with white petals that look drab to us flash like neon signs pointing the way to nectar. ¹⁰Birds, bats, and moths find red flowers irresistible, but bees pass them by. ¹¹Tradition notwithstanding, bulls can't see red either; they are red-green colorblind. ¹²The matador's cape is bright red to excite the humans in the audience, who find red arousing, perhaps especially when they expect to see blood.
- _____ 5. ¹Have you ever wondered what on earth some of those strange nursery rhymes you learned as a child were supposed to mean? ²Rhymes such as “Jack and Jill” and “Three Blind Mice” have fairly gruesome explanations, but the seemingly innocent “Ring Around the Rosy” takes the prize for its ghastly meaning. ³Written around 1348, this brief song refers to the bubonic plague—a horrifying epidemic that killed 25 million people in Europe in the mid-1300s. ⁴Because contracting the illness meant almost certain death, those who fell ill were simply sent home to die and were instructed to pray continuously with their rosary beads (“Ring around the rosy”). ⁵And because people were dying faster than they could be buried, a little bundle of flowers known as a “posy” was carried in one's pocket and held up to the nose in order to mask the smell of rotting bodies (“A pocket full of posies”). ⁶In time, churches resorted to burning the dead instead of burying them when the corpses began piling up too high in the streets (“Ashes, ashes. We all fall down”). ⁷Ultimately, the plague killed one-third of Europe's inhabitants, leading Europeans at that time to understandably imagine that, in the end, everyone would be killed.