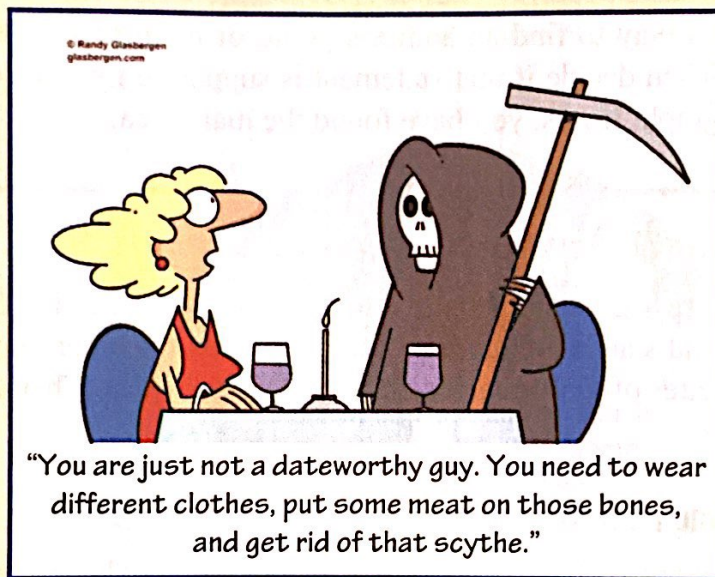


2 Main Ideas

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 humorous point—that the figure of death is not a desirable date—is supported by the woman's three reasons.

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?"

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



Check Your Understanding

Following are four statements from the above 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.

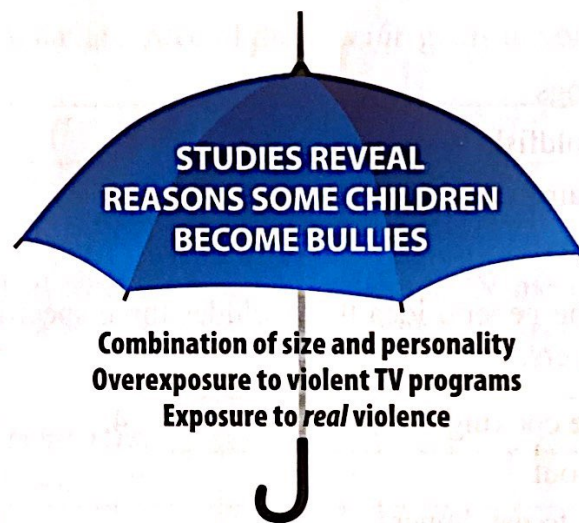
Sentence B: The phrase "several reasons" is a general one. And in fact the rest of the passage goes on to describe a series of three supporting reasons why some children become bullies. Sentence B, then, is the sentence that expresses the main idea of the passage.

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

- S dogs
- S goldfish
- S hamsters
- G pets

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

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <input type="checkbox"/> home cooking | 4. <input type="checkbox"/> traffic delay |
| <input type="checkbox"/> take-out | <input type="checkbox"/> head cold |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ways to eat dinner | <input type="checkbox"/> bad coffee |
| <input type="checkbox"/> frozen foods | <input type="checkbox"/> minor problems |
| 2. <input type="checkbox"/> hot and humid | 5. <input type="checkbox"/> hurry up |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cold and rainy | <input type="checkbox"/> get to bed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cloudy with scattered showers | <input type="checkbox"/> commands |
| <input type="checkbox"/> weather forecasts | <input type="checkbox"/> clean up this mess |
| 3. <input type="checkbox"/> deadbolt locks | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> alarm system | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> barking dog | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> kinds of security | |

**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. This morning we discovered a nest of baby rattlesnakes nearby.
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 email 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 work force 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. 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.

¹Though fun to watch, chimpanzees should not be kept as pets. ²They are dangerously stronger than any NFL lineman. ³Adult chimps weigh only 100 to 160 pounds, but have been measured pulling six to nine times their own weight—with *one hand*. ⁴Thus, 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. ⁵Combined with this strength is the fact that a chimp is capable of losing its temper—for reasons known only to the chimp. ⁶Chimps signal their feelings with subtle cues of behavior that aren't apparent to most humans. ⁷It'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. ⁸Furthermore, it's not wise to keep a cute young chimp and release it into the wild when it becomes dangerous. ⁹Wild-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. Climate change.
- _____ 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. Climate change 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.

Paragraph 4

¹On a vocabulary test, a student is asked to remember a word that means "to make something worse." ²She is certain that she knows the word; in fact, it feels as if it's on the tip of her tongue. ³Desperately searching her mind for the word, she is able to recall the first letter, the number of syllables, and the pattern of sounds. ⁴But the only word she can come up with is *exasperate*, which she knows means "to annoy." ⁵After staring at the question for several minutes, she finally gives up and turns in her test. ⁶Then, as she runs to catch her bus, the word suddenly pops into her mind: *exacerbate*. ⁷This kind of tip-of-the-tongue experience demonstrates that people are often aware of what they do and do not know—an ability that can be both useful and maddening.

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

¹You may have heard the expression "multiplying like rabbits." ²That's because, as the size of a rabbit population gets bigger and bigger, the number of rabbits increases even faster and faster. ³As a simple example, imagine that a rabbit can produce four babies every month. ⁴If each of those rabbits later produces four more rabbits, in two months there will be 16 rabbits. ⁵A month later there will be 64, then 256, then 1,024, then 4,096. ⁶By the end of the year, there will be 16,777,216 rabbits! ⁷This pattern, called exponential growth, occurs in many real-world situations, including population size, the spread of viruses, computer technology, and finance. ⁸For example, if your credit card charges 15% interest, an unpaid balance of \$1,000 will grow to \$1,013 at the end of the first month. ⁹If no payments are made, by the end of the year the balance will be \$1,160.75. ¹⁰And at the end of ten years, you will owe \$4,440.21—more than four times what you originally thought you had spent!

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.

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 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

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 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*, *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.

Besides 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

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

**Check Your Understanding**

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

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

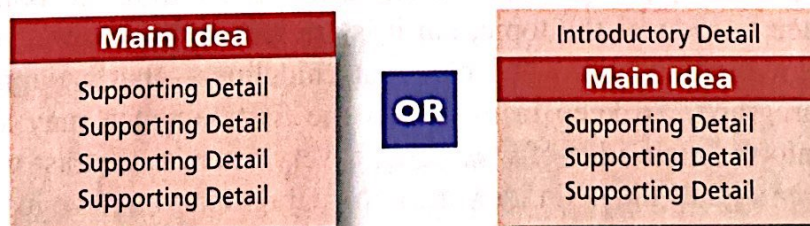
The following chapter, “Supporting Details,” includes further information about words that alert you to the main idea and the details that support it. But what you have already learned here will help you find main ideas.

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.

¹Spanking is a poor way to shape a child's behavior. ²For one thing, spanking will result in feelings of anger and frustration. ³The child, then, will not learn anything positive from the punishment. ⁴In addition, spanking may actually lead to more bad behavior. ⁵Having learned that hitting is okay, the child may attack smaller children. ⁶Finally, spanking teaches children to hide certain actions from their parents. ⁷Once 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:

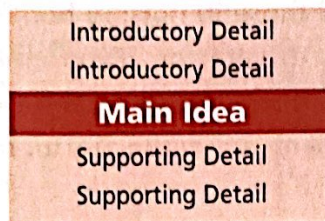
¹Tailgating—following too closely behind another vehicle—is a common cause of accidents. ²Yet tailgating accidents could be avoided if drivers followed some clear-cut guidelines. ³Any car that is less than two seconds behind the one ahead is definitely too close. ⁴Two car lengths is a safe following distance to maintain in local driving. ⁵Two-car accidents often become chain-reaction pileups when a number of drivers are all tailgating in a line. ⁶At freeway speeds, or in snowy, icy or foggy conditions, people should increase following distance well beyond what is normally safe. ⁷Finally, 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.

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

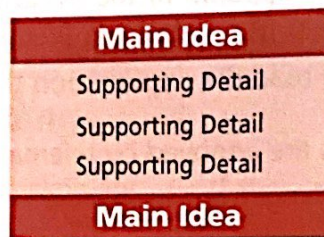
Main Idea at the End



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.

¹A study at one prison showed that owning a pet can change a hardened prison inmate into a more caring person. ²Another 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. ³Even emotionally disturbed children have been observed to smile and react with interest if there is a cuddly kitten or puppy to hold. ⁴Animals, 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.

¹People react strongly to red. ²The next time you go into a bookstore, notice which books catch your eye. ³Those with red covers are likely to stand out. ⁴The color of blood, red puts us on the alert. ⁵Often it signals danger. ⁶Red traffic lights and stop signs tell us to halt. ⁷Red also flags problems. ⁸Errors commonly are marked in red. ⁹Debts place us "in the red." ¹⁰Red is the color of negative emotion. ¹¹We redden with overexertion or embarrassment. ¹²When we're angry, we "see red." ¹³But red also is associated with strong positive feelings. ¹⁴The red hearts and roses of Valentine's Day speak of romance. ¹⁵Red cheeks convey health; red lips and nails, sexuality. ¹⁶Red can even confer a competitive advantage. ¹⁷When the colors worn by Olympic athletes in sports such as boxing were analyzed, in blue. ¹⁸Apparently, red suggests power. ¹⁹Physiologically, our eyes are more sensitive to red than to blue or green. ²⁰Asked to name any color, most adults respond, "Red." ²¹Red 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. ¹Many people think the purpose of dictionaries is to dictate what is acceptable—to tell us which words we're allowed to use, as well as how to spell them. ²In fact, dictionaries simply describe how language is currently being used, so that we can understand words we're likely to read. ³Merriam-Webster's editors, for example, spend time reading a wide variety of works, including books, magazines, newspapers, and electronic publications. ⁴They search for new words, as well as for changes in a word's spelling, meaning, or usage. ⁵The editors then decide which entries should be added, revised, or dropped. ⁶To be included in the dictionary, words or changes must be used by many different writers and appear in many different publications. ⁷That's why, for instance, the 17th-century word *jargogle* no longer appears in most dictionaries, while the 21st-century word *selfie* does.
- _____ 2. ¹Recently while I was sitting in a small auditorium waiting for a play to begin, I saw three audience members chatting on cell phones. ²In 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. ³Let's face it: in the 21st century, cell phones are everywhere. ⁴In addition to using cell phones to talk, people use them to email, 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. ⁵According to a 2015 survey, more than 260 million Americans, including 98 percent of those aged 18 to 29, carry a cell phone. ⁶Ninety-seven percent of U.S. households have at least one cell phone; many have three or more. ⁷In the United States, cell phones now far outnumber wired phones. ⁸Americans clearly love cell phones, right? ⁹Wrong. ¹⁰A survey asked U.S. adults which invention they most hate. ¹¹The most frequent reply? ¹²The cell phone.
- _____ 3. ¹Parents have always known that singing a lullaby can help babies fall asleep. ²But music has been shown to soothe adults as well. ³In one study, for example, listening to music proved more effective than prescription drugs in lowering patients' pre-surgical anxiety. ⁴Researchers have also found that listening to music boosts the body's immune system and protects people from infections. ⁵Music also lowers the production of the stress hormone cortisol, which, over time, can be harmful to health. ⁶Musician Billy Joel once said, "I think music in itself is healing." ⁷Now science has proven that music has the power to improve both mental and physical health.

- _____ 4. ¹To prevent the spread of disease, governments often use quarantines to keep ill people away from others. ²Although sometimes effective, quarantines have also been used to discriminate against people and take away their basic rights. ³For example, during a 1900 outbreak of bubonic plague, a Chinese immigrant was found dead in a San Francisco hotel. ⁴City officials used barbed wire to seal off a large section of Chinatown. ⁵Residents of Chinese origin were quarantined, while others were allowed to come and go. ⁶The decision was likely motivated by anti-immigrant feelings, because bubonic plague is spread by rats, not humans. ⁷During World War I, men with sexually transmitted diseases could not be drafted. ⁸So the U.S. military rounded up more than 30,000 women, put them in prisons, and kept them there—even after tests proved they were disease-free. ⁹More recently, during a 2014 outbreak of Ebola in West Africa, the Liberian president ordered her troops to impose a 21-day quarantine on an overcrowded slum in the capital city. ¹⁰As a result, 70,000 of Liberia's poorest people panicked, the cost of food doubled, and clashes between residents and the military led to injuries and even death.
- _____ 5. ¹For hundreds of years, philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists have tried to understand why some people enjoy being scared while others do not. ²Recent neurological findings suggest that differences in brain chemistry help explain our varied responses to being frightened. ³When faced with a terrifying situation, the brain releases dopamine, a chemical involved in pleasure and rewards. ⁴But the amount of dopamine released varies from person to person. ⁵Therefore, people whose brains release large quantities of dopamine feel a natural high while watching a horror movie; those whose brains produce less dopamine feel only horror. ⁶Of course, to enjoy a scary situation rather than run away from it, we must first feel safe. ⁷When we enter a haunted house, for example, the spooky sounds and sights flood our brains with chemicals involved in the fight-or-flight response. ⁸For most people, the brain has time to realize that there is, in fact, no real danger. ⁹But for some people, the situation may resemble an earlier experience of real-life threat. ¹⁰In that case, lasting and terrifying memories created by those same chemicals overwhelm any possible feelings of pleasure.

Note on the Central Point

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

MAIN IDEAS: Level 8, Test 1

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. ¹There are several different parenting styles. ²One is the authoritarian style. ³Authoritarian parents give orders and punish their children if those orders are not quickly obeyed. ⁴There is also the authoritative style. ⁵Authoritative parents make it clear they are in charge, but they are open to seeing their children's point of view. ⁶The next style is that of permissive parents, who avoid ever saying "no" and give the children a good deal of power. ⁷Fourth is the uninvolved parenting style. ⁸An uninvolved parent does not ask much of children, and does not give much attention either. ⁹Most child-rearing experts feel that children's needs are best met by authoritative parents.
- _____ 2. ¹We often think that we keep "sharing" the same cold with our friends or loved ones. ²But the truth is that it's very unlikely that you would catch the same cold twice. ³There are hundreds of different kinds of cold viruses floating around. ⁴When you catch a cold, your body builds up immunity to the specific virus that gave you the cold. ⁵If that virus tries to infect you again, your immune system usually will protect you from it. ⁶However, that immunity may not protect you from catching a cold from a different cold virus.
- _____ 3. ¹Walking regularly burns calories, and this can help maintain a healthy weight. ²It also improves muscle tone in the legs, the abdomen, and (if you pump your arms as you walk) the arms. ³It helps the heart by improving blood circulation and lowering blood pressure. ⁴In addition, walking releases hormones in your body that can reduce pain and brighten your mood. ⁵Furthermore, when you walk places, you are more likely to interact with other people than you are when you drive a car. ⁶Walking can be a good way to get to know your neighbors better. ⁷In short, walking offers a number of physical, mental, and social benefits.

(Continues on next page)

4. ¹The cars we drive are generally comfortable, convenient, and dependable. ²However, the first automobiles were quite unlike what we are used to today. ³For one thing, the wheels—and many other parts of the car—were made of wood. ⁴The combination of the hard seats, the wooden wheels, and the rutted dirt roads made a Sunday drive a bone-crunching experience. ⁵In addition, many early cars were made without doors or roofs, so drivers and their passengers were exposed to dust, mud, and rain. ⁶Motorists had to wear goggles to protect their eyes because there were no windshields. ⁷There were no gas stations, so gasoline was purchased in containers at a general store. ⁸To start the car, drivers had to turn the engine by hand using a metal crank and be careful not to break a thumb in the process. ⁹Once the car was started, it was not very dependable and frequently broke down. ¹⁰And it was not unusual to get at least one or two flat tires during a half-day trip.
5. ¹Most people feel anxious when they have to make a speech or take a test, but the feeling is not long-lasting and does not interfere with their lives in general. ²A phobia, on the other hand, is a continuing, extreme fear of something that is not likely to be harmful. ³For example, some people have a phobia about elevators. ⁴They worry that if they enter an elevator, the cable will break and they will fall hundreds of feet to their death. ⁵While such an accident can happen, it is extremely rare. ⁶Agoraphobia is the fear of open spaces. ⁷People with this phobia may be afraid to use public transportation or to be in a crowd. ⁸For some people, this phobia is so strong that they cannot even leave home. ⁹These and other phobias can usually be overcome, often fairly quickly, with the right direction and treatment.