

# Identifying Topics, Main Ideas, and Supporting Details



Understanding the *topic*, the *gist*,  
or the big ideas of a textbook  
chapter, an article, a paragraph, a  
sentence or a passage is a  
sophisticated reading task.

Being able to draw conclusions, evaluate, and interpret articles or chapters is important for overall comprehension in non-fiction reading.

Textbook chapters, articles, paragraphs, sentences, or passages all have topics and main ideas. The ***topic*** is the broad, general theme or message.

It is what some call the subject.

The *main idea* is the “important point” being expressed.

***Details*** support the main idea by telling how, what, when, where, why, how much, or how many.

Locating the topic, main idea,  
and supporting details helps you  
understand the point(s) the  
writer is attempting to express.



Understanding the relationship  
between main ideas and details  
will increase your reading  
comprehension.

**Grasping the Main Idea:**

**A paragraph is a group of sentences related to a particular topic.**

**Every paragraph has a purpose, important point or main idea.**

**The main idea is the most important piece of information the author wants you to know about that paragraph.**

**A writer will state his/her main idea clearly somewhere in the paragraph.**

**That main idea may be stated at the beginning of the paragraph, in the middle, or at the end.**

**The sentence in which the main idea is stated is called the *topic sentence* of that paragraph.**

**The topic sentence announces the general subject, ideas or arguments to be dealt with in the paragraph.**

**Although the topic sentence may appear anywhere in the paragraph, it is usually first - and for a very good reason.**

**This sentence provides focus for the writer while writing and for the reader while reading.**

**When you find the topic sentence, be sure to underline it so that it will stand out not only now, but also later when you review.**

**Identifying the Topic:**

The first thing you must be able to do to get at the main idea of a paragraph is to identify the topic - the subject of the paragraph.

Sometimes you can spot the topic by looking for a word or two that repeat.

Usually you can state the topic in a few words.



Think of the paragraph as a wheel with the topic being the hub - the central core around which the whole wheel (or paragraph) spins.

Your strategy for topic identification is simply to ask yourself the question, "What is this about?"

Keep asking yourself that question as you read a paragraph, until the answer to your question becomes clear.

wore their T-shirts backward

took a test before they studied

It was backward day at school.

dessert was served first

tried to walk home backward

Sometimes you can spot the topic by looking for a word or two that repeat. Usually you can state the topic in a few words.

Let us try this topic-finding strategy.

Read the paragraph –

Ask yourself the question, "What is this paragraph about?" To answer, say to yourself in your mind, "The author keeps talking about \_\_\_\_\_ This must be the topic \_\_\_\_\_."

Swim teams can be good for kids. They make friends. The kids get wet and have fun. They exercise their bodies. They learn to swim faster. The teams go to swim meets. They race other teams at the meets. Some of them will win, and that feels great!

Read the second paragraph. Ask yourself "What is this paragraph about?" Did you say to yourself, "This paragraph is about \_\_\_\_\_? That is the topic.

- Tim Cordes went blind as a teen. He did not let his blindness stop him. He ***learned*** how to water ski and how to canoe. He ***learned*** how to compose music. He ***became*** a black belt in martial arts. He ***carried*** the Olympic torch in 2002. He ***went*** to school and became a doctor!

The bulk of an *expository paragraph* is made up of supporting sentences (details), which help to explain or prove the main idea.

These sentences present facts, reasons, examples, definitions, comparison, contrasts, and other pertinent details.

They are most important because they expand on the main idea.

The last sentence of a paragraph is likely to be a concluding sentence.

It is used to sum up a discussion, to emphasize a point, or to restate all or part of the topic sentence so as to bring the paragraph to a close.

The last sentence may also be a transitional sentence leading to the next paragraph.

Of course, the paragraphs you'll be reading will be part of some longer piece of writing - a textbook chapter, a section of a chapter, or a newspaper or magazine article.

Besides expository paragraphs, in which new information is presented and discussed, these longer writings contain three types of paragraphs: ***introductory, transitional, and summarizing***



***Introductory*** paragraphs tell you, in advance, such things as (1) the main ideas of the chapter or section; (2) how the topic is developed; and (3) the writer's attitude toward the topic.

***Detail*** paragraphs are usually short; their sole function is to expand on the thesis of the paper and provides answers to the readers questions using details, descriptions, facts, and opinions.

***Summarizing*** paragraphs are used to restate briefly the main ideas of the chapter or section. The writer may also draw some conclusion from these ideas, or speculate on some conclusion based on the evidence he/she has presented.

## **Exercise:**

***Read the following paragraph and underline the stated main idea. Write down in your own words what you are able to conclude from the information.***

The rules of conduct during an examination are clear. No books, calculators or papers are allowed in the test room. Proctors will not allow anyone with such items to take the test. Anyone caught cheating will be asked to leave the room. His or her test sheet will be taken. The incident will be reported to the proper authority. At the end of the test period, all materials will be returned to the proctor. Failure to abide by these rules will result in a failing grade for this test.

## **Answer:**

You should have underlined the first sentence in the paragraph - this is the stated main idea.

What can be concluded from the information is: If you do not follow the rules, you will automatically fail the test.

This concluding information is found in the last sentence.

*You can't comprehend the subject matter if you haven't identified the topic, the main idea, and the supporting details.*

***Read each paragraph  
carefully. Choose the best  
answer to the questions  
that follow.***

**Juan loves to play games. His favorite game is chess because it requires a great deal of thought.**

**Juan also likes to play less demanding board games that are based mostly on luck. He prefers Monopoly because it requires luck and skill. If he's alone, Juan likes to play action video games as long as they aren't too violent.**

What is the main idea of this paragraph?

- a. Juan dislikes violence.
- b. Juan likes to think.
- c. Juan enjoys Monopoly.
- d. Juan enjoys playing games.



Maria is watching too much television. A toddler shouldn't be spending hours staring blankly at a screen. Worse yet, some of her wild behavior has been inspired by those awful cartoons she watches. We need to spend more time reading books with her and pull the plug on the TV!

What is the main idea of this paragraph?

- a. Watching a lot of television isn't good for Maria.
- b. Books are good.
- c. All cartoons are bad.
- d. Some cartoons are bad for Maria.

Samantha, I can't eat or sleep when you are gone. I need to hear your scratchy voice and see your lovely toothless smile. I miss that special way that you eat soup with your fingers. Please come home soon!

What is the main idea of this paragraph?

- a. Samantha, you have bad manners.
- b. Samantha, you should see a dentist.
- c. Samantha, I miss you.
- d. Samantha, I have lost my appetite.

**Paragraph A** <sup>1</sup>Do you have a favorite season? <sup>2</sup>Winter, fall, and spring have many advantages. <sup>3</sup>However, summertime is my favorite season because it offers the tranquility of the beach as well as the exhilaration of outdoor sports. <sup>4</sup>First, sitting on the other side of a sand dune, hidden by sea oats and sedge, I like looking at the Atlantic Ocean, scanning for dolphins and pelicans. <sup>5</sup>Looking at something larger than I am gives me a sense of awe and gratitude and provides a backdrop for some deep musings. <sup>6</sup>Second, summertime provides me with the chance to go sailing, surfing, and hiking along the shore. <sup>7</sup>The exercise enhances my sense of well being and creates a feeling of optimism.

**5.**The topic of the paragraph is

a. summertime

seasons at the beach

ways to develop optimism



The main idea of paragraph is a. sentence 1 . sentence 2. sentence  
sentence 4

## Paragraph B

A rite of passage, according to psychologists, is an event that prompts movement from one stage of life to another.<sup>2</sup> Weddings and graduations are two examples of new beginnings that are considered significant rites of passage.<sup>3</sup> For the bride and groom, a wedding signifies the covenant of fidelity and the couple's public declaration of love.<sup>4</sup> Making the promise for life before loved ones is the first step to their new life together.<sup>5</sup> Graduations also signify a rite of passage.<sup>6</sup> Tests will not be scheduled, and paperwork will no longer be graded on a curve.<sup>7</sup> Whether it is a high school or college graduation, students acknowledge they are beginning a new path on their journey.

The topic of the paragraph is

- a. a psychologist's view of life.
- b. stages of life.
- c. new beginnings in life.
- d. the importance of weddings.

## 8. The main idea of the paragraph is

- 
- a. sentence 1.
  - b. sentence 2.
  - c. sentence 3.
  - d. sentence 7.

paragraph is

- 
- |  |
|--|
|  |
|  |
- a. sentence 1.
  - b. sentence 2.
  - c. sentence 3.
  - d. sentence 7.



## Paragraph C

<sup>1</sup>A growing trend in many organizations is to find opportunities to serve others in a community effort. <sup>2</sup>While participants expect to provide aid to people less fortunate, they often discover something else. <sup>3</sup>A community effort to complete a project such as building a house can provide gratifying results. <sup>4</sup>First, participants learn the art of cooperation. <sup>5</sup>Working with a diverse group to accomplish a monumental task such as laying cinder block walls in 112° heat or cutting wood for doors with only a hand saw offers an understanding of what can be done as they connect with others. <sup>6</sup>In addition, participants learn the art of communication. <sup>7</sup>As a result, they also learn that people are more alike than different. <sup>8</sup>Finally, workers gain a sense of pride and confidence from knowing they helped build something that will shelter a family and provide a venue for happy memories.

9. The main idea of the paragraph is

Coveted sports cars are impressive status symbols signifying affluence, competence, and privilege. <sup>2</sup> People rationalize that they are purchasing a Corvette, BMW Z3, or even a Dodge Viper for their safety record, their quality construction, or the value they are receiving in a high-performance car. <sup>3</sup> However, they are also saying, "Look at me! I can afford this expensive vehicle, so I am obviously successful." <sup>4</sup> A truly successful person, however, does not necessarily need to spend a small fortune on transportation. <sup>5</sup> For example, Barbara Walters does not even own a driver's license. <sup>6</sup> However, a very wealthy driver can rightfully rationalize, "I am financially secure, and I deserve an expensive toy because I worked hard for it." <sup>7</sup> Consequently, the car is more than just a fun diversion.

**10.** The main idea of the paragraph is

- a. sentence 1.   b. sentence 2.   c. sentence 3.   d. sentence 7.



How easily can we find and define a topic sentence inside an existing paragraph? A GED instructor working at the Helping Up Mission of Baltimore hoped to find out.

Using two paragraphs taken from her students' GED text, Jeannette tried, with the help of her students, to define their "true" topic sentences. The class didn't all agree so, she sought, through an email request, to obtain expert opinions.

## Paragraph 1

(1) Deep in the bogs of the coastal North and South Carolina lurks an unusual plant, the Venus's flytrap.

(2) The bogs provide damp soil, but the soil lacks the nitrogen that the plant needs to survive. (3) The Venus's flytrap has developed a unique way of getting this essential nutrient. (4) Its hinged leaves have bristled edges and sensitive hairs on the insides. (5) When prey touches the hairs, the leaf closes quickly. (6) The struggling victim is trapped as the carnivorous plant h.

secretes fluids to digest the insect and get the needed nitrogen.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which sentence is the topic sentence for Paragraph 1?
2. How do you know? Write down your reasons for
3. choosing this sentence.
2. Now, look carefully at the other sentences in the paragra

(1) Have you ever heard that no two fingerprints are alike?

(2) Each fingerprint is made up a pattern of ridges that vary in number, size, and location.

(3) There are three basic patterns of fingerprints: loops, whorls, and arches.

(4) The most commonly occurring of the three patterns is the loop.

(5) A loop must have one ridge that enters from one side, curves around, and exits from the same side. (6) Whorls involve ridges that curve in a circular pattern. (7) The arch, the least common pattern, is formed by ridges that enter from one side, rise in the middle, and then exit.

Questions for Discussion:

3. Which sentence is the topic sentence for Paragraph 2? How do you know?

4. Now, look carefully at the other sentences in the paragraph.

A topic sentence is a sentence which states the main idea and usually comes at the beginning of a paragraph. (student definition)

Kevin says: The main idea in the paragraph is identified in the topic sentence and the other sentences support or explain that idea.

Brad says: Paragraphs are of limited length (sometimes only one sentence) and so can contain limited contents.









