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## How Can I Locate the Main Idea?

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## Identifying Topics, **Main Ideas** and Supporting Details

Understanding the *topic*, the *gist*, or the larger conceptual framework 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 critically interpret articles or chapters is important for overall comprehension in college 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 "key concept" being expressed. *Details*, major and minor, 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. Identifying the relationship between these will increase your comprehension.

A writer will state his/her main idea explicitly 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 the *topic sentence* of that paragraph.

## 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. **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. 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.

## 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.

Let's use the paragraph below as an example. First find the topic, then look for the main idea.

*Summer is a wonderful time to spend at West Beach. It is a beach with light-colored, soft sand. The coastline goes on for a long way and many people enjoy walking along it. Children like to play in the surf and walk along the rocks that are visible at low tide. This is a fun beach for people of all ages.*

In this paragraph:

- the topic is *West Beach*
- the main idea (what the writer is saying about the topic) is that summer is a wonderful time at West Beach

Here is another example:

The movie *Apollo 13* was a blockbuster for the summer of 1995.

It is an exciting story about space exploration. In the movie, the astronauts get in trouble while they are trying to return to Earth. People in the audience are on the edge of their seats waiting to see what happens. What makes it even more exciting is that it is a true story.

In this paragraph:

- the topic is the movie *Apollo 13*
- the main idea is in the first sentence: *Apollo 13 was a blockbuster for the summer of 1995*

While the main idea is usually in the first sentence, the next most common placement is in the last sentence of a paragraph. The author gives supporting information first and then makes the point in the last sentence.

Here's a paragraph we can use as an example. Try to locate the topic and the main idea.

*Most teenagers and young adults do not know what they want to do for the rest of their lives. It is a big decision. There are a number of things you can do to narrow the choices. For example you can take an interest test, do some research on your own about a career, try volunteer work in the field in which you are interested, or "job-shadow", in which you spend a day with a person who is working in a field that interests you. These are just a few helpful ideas as you begin to choose a career.*

In this paragraph:

- the topic is *jobs* or *career choices*
- the main idea is a few ideas to help the reader choose a career

Finally, an author might put the main idea in the middle of a paragraph. The author will spend a few sentences introducing the topic, present the main idea, then spend the rest of the paragraph supporting it. This can make the main idea more difficult to find.

See if you can find the topic and main idea in the paragraph below.

*The United States seems to be in love with the idea of going out to eat. Because of this, a real variety of restaurants has come about specializing in all kinds of foods. McDonald's is the king of a subgroup of restaurants called fast-food restaurants. Chances are, no matter where you live, there is a McDonald's restaurant near you. There are even McDonald's in the Soviet Union. Now McDonald's is trying something new. It is called McDonald's Express and there is a test site in Peabody, Massachusetts. It is part of a Mobil gas station. This allows you to fill up with gas and fill up on food at the same time. What will they think of next?*

**In this paragraph:**

- the topic is *McDonald's*

- the main idea is in the middle of the paragraph, in the third sentence: *McDonald's is the king of fast food*