

## Steps in Reading to Find the Main Idea

The main idea in a piece of writing is the point the author is making about a topic. Use the following steps to find the main idea.

### 1. Preview

Look for meaning clues in introductions, titles, chapter headings, subheadings, bold words, boxed information, pictures, charts, and graphs. This will help you discover the topic being discussed (what the writing is about), the author's "slant" or perspective on the topic how the material is organized, and what's more and less important. During previewing you may also form questions about the topic. Having questions in mind as you read will help you establish a purpose for reading, and you will be more involved as you read, which will help you absorb new information.

### 2. Read

Read the entire text, looking for the general idea or ideas being presented. Re-read to find and highlight key words and concepts.

### 3. Focus

Focus on individual paragraphs within the text, starting at the beginning. Generally, each paragraph in a piece of writing about a topic is a group of sentences dealing with one idea related to that topic. The following steps will help you find the main idea in a paragraph, the particular point the author is trying to make about the topic.

### 4. Look for transition words

Words and phrases such as "thus," "first," "next," "however," and "in addition," often indicate shifts in thought and signal the presence of examples and supporting details.

### 5. Identify the most general statement

Sometimes the main idea of a paragraph is directly stated in a sentence, called the **topic sentence** of the paragraph. Although it is often found at the beginning or end, the topic sentence can be found anywhere in the paragraph. It is typically the most general sentence, and the remaining sentences provide specific evidence and discussion to "back up" the main idea expressed in the topic sentence.

### 6. Look for supporting evidence and discussion

Sometimes the main idea is not directly stated in one sentence but is implied or suggested by all of the sentences in the paragraph. In this case, the reader must provide the main idea by considering all of the support--the examples, details, facts, etc.--and discussion about the topic provided by the writer. The main idea will be a general statement which incorporates the information presented by all of the sentences in the paragraph.

**7. State the main idea for each paragraph in your own words**

You may also find it helpful to underline the main idea in the text and/or jot your own statement of the main idea in the margin. You may also make an **outline** of the entire piece of writing. Your notes and outline will be a good study tool and will come in handy when preparing for a test.

**8. Find the main idea of the entire piece of writing by considering all of the points presented in the paragraphs.**

As with topic sentences in paragraphs, the author may have included a main idea statement somewhere in the text, and at this point you may recognize it easily. Often this comes in the first or last paragraph, but not always. However, there may be no direct statement of the main idea, and the reader will need to construct a main idea statement based on all of the points presented in the text.

**EXERCISES**  
**Reading to Find the Main Idea**

From the following list of details, write an effective main idea. Note the transition words in the list; these may give you some clues.

Details: First, students must complete four years of liberal arts studies, including pre-med courses. Once they have finished college, pre-med students must attend medical school for an additional four years of intensive study in medicine. Then, doctors must complete internship and residency requirements at a hospital for another one or two years. Finally, after a review by supervisors and other doctors, the new doctors are ready to practice their profession.

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Read the following paragraphs. Circle the topic sentence in the first paragraph and write a possible topic sentence for the second paragraph on the lines provided. Then, check your answer by looking at the topic sentence in the original paragraph on the back of this sheet. How close were you?

**Paragraph 1:**

No one disputes that aggression, so tragically widespread among human beings, is also found among members of the animal kingdom. But what about cooperation? Is there any evidence that it exists among animals? The answer is an undisputed yes; cooperative behavior appears between and within species. For example, groups of porpoises will encircle a female ready to give birth. They will drive away any sharks who might approach. If one of their members is wounded, they will bring it to the surface to get air. Similarly, wild oxen found in the Arctic form a protective circle around the young if they sense the approach of danger. Even if hunters approach and start shooting, they will not break the circle. They will stand and let themselves be shot one by one, determined to save their young.

**Paragraph 2:**

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For one thing, the people in charge of lie detectors are not necessarily experts. Many states do not employ licensed examiners who have been trained to read and interpret the lie detector's printout. In addition, many subjects react to a lie detector test by becoming anxious. As a result, their bodies behave as if they were lying even when they are telling the truth. Just the opposite, some subjects are smart enough to use relaxation techniques to maintain the appropriate calm, even when they are telling a string of lies.

## **Paragraph 2:**

Most Americans are accustomed to thinking of lie detectors as fool-proof, as machines that can, without error, separate the guilty from the innocent. But, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. **Lie detectors can and do make mistakes.** For one thing, the people in charge of lie detectors are not necessarily experts. Many states do not employ licensed examiners who have been trained to read and interpret the lie detectors printout. In addition, many subjects react to a lie detector test by becoming anxious. As a result, their bodies behave as if they were lying even when they are telling the truth. Just the opposite, some subjects are smart enough to use relaxation techniques to maintain the appropriate calm, even when they are telling a string of lies.