How to Find the Main Idea
Overview of Presentation

I. Topic vs. Main Idea

II. Topic vs. Main Idea vs. Supporting Detail

III. Stated Main Idea Statements in Paragraphs

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First, it is very important to recognize the difference between the topic of a reading selection and the main idea. The topic of a selection is the subject matter, what it is about. It usually is expressed in a word or phrase.
If you are not sure of the difference, it might be helpful to use your prior knowledge and think of what you do know of topic and main idea. Since most of us like movies, it could be helpful to think of topic and main idea in terms of a film. Most of us have seen the blockbuster hit Titanic.

The topic of the movie Titanic is this: a love story of two lovers on the Titanic. The main idea would be what the author says about the topic, a complete sentence: The film describes the story of Jack and Rose, two lovers from radically different circumstances, who fall in love during the maiden voyage of the ship Titanic and who tragically sink with the ship.
Here is an example using a book you have probably read.

The topic of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* is this: a boy with special skills entering a school for wizards.
The main idea of *Harry Potter: The Sorcerer’s Stone* in a complete sentence:

Harry Potter, a young boy with magical talents, is sent to a school for wizards where he meets loyal friends who help him fight evil enemies.
Let us look at one last example. Have you read or heard of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s book *The Great Gatsby*?

- The **topic** of *The Great Gatsby* is the wasteful lives of the New York wealthy during the Jazz Age.

- A **main idea** of Fitzgerald’s classic novel (or **theme** as it usually is called in literary works) is this: *The Great Gatsby*, the story of a young man who moves to New York and who becomes involved in the affairs of the idle rich, offers a commentary on the materialism and lack of morality of the 1920s in America.
Topic vs. Main Idea

Remember: Topic refers to subject matter; main idea refers to a complete statement, the point the writer is making about the topic.
Let us do some practice. Identify the topic and then the main idea.

1. Smoking has been proven dangerous to people’s health, yet many continue to smoke for various reasons. For young people, smoking often represents maturity and individuality. Many smoke as a way to reduce tension. In addition, the regular smoker becomes addicted psychologically and physically to the nicotine in cigarettes.

   Topic:
   a. Health c. Addiction
   b. Smoking d. Nicotine

   Main Idea:
   a. Smoking has been proven dangerous to people’s health in various ways.
   b. Regular smokers become addicted to nicotine.
   c. Although smoking is dangerous, people continue doing it for various reasons.
   d. Nicotine is what smokers become addicted to, both psychologically and physically.

   (Langan 29)
Did you get the correct answer?

- The topic is b, **Smoking**.
- The main idea is c: **Although smoking is dangerous, people continue doing it for various reasons.**
Main Idea vs. Supporting Detail

After you identify the topic of a selection, you then are on your way to finding the main idea. As you read through a reading selection, you must distinguish between the main idea statements and the supporting details. What is the difference?

Details explain, illustrate, elaborate upon the main idea. Details are specific pieces of information. Main idea statements are general and more broad.
There is some evidence that colors affect you physiologically. For example, when subjects are exposed to red light respiratory movements increase; exposure to blue decreases respiratory movements. Similarly, eye blinks increase in frequency when eyes are exposed to red light and decrease when exposed to blue. This seems consistent with intuitive feelings about blue being more soothing and red being more arousing. After changing a school’s walls from orange and white to blue, the blood pressure of the students decreased while their academic performance improved. (DeVito, qtd. in McWhorter 136)

What is the topic? What is the main idea? What are the details?
There is some evidence that colors affect you physiologically (main idea).

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What was the topic of the paragraph?

The topic is Colors.
Now that you understand the distinction between the topic and the main idea and supporting details, you might wonder how you locate the main idea of a reading selection.
Here are a few tips.

The main idea of a paragraph or essay or textbook chapter is stated explicitly about half of the time. It makes sense that you first look to see if there is a main idea sentence.
Before we start, let us define some useful terms

- The main idea statement is called a **topic sentence** in a paragraph.
- The main idea statement is called a **thesis or thesis statement** in an essay or article.
- In literature, the main idea is referred to as the **theme**.
Where are Useful Places to Look for the Main Idea Statement?

- One common place for the topic sentence of a paragraph is in the beginning.

- Topic sentence
- Supporting detail
- Supporting detail
- Supporting detail

Americans even differ in their preferences for “munchies.” The average consumer eats 21 pounds of snack foods in a year (hopefully not all at one sitting), but people in the West Central part of the country consume the most (24 pounds per person) whereas those in the Pacific and Southeast regions eat only 19 pounds per person. (Solomon, qtd. in McWhorter 143)
Americans even differ in their preferences for “munchies.” The average consumer eats 21 pounds of snack foods in a year (hopefully not all at one sitting), but people in the West Central part of the country consume the most (24 pounds per person) whereas those in the Pacific and Southeast regions eat only 19 pounds per person.
Americans express a remarkably high agreement that pornography should be restricted. An overwhelming 91 percent of all Americans think that the law should limit or forbid its distribution—48 percent favoring laws that forbid the distribution of pornography to persons under eighteen, and another 43 percent favoring laws that would keep pornography from people no matter what their age. Females feel even more strongly about this matter than do males, with a full 50 percent wanting to entirely forbid the distribution of pornography (Langan 37).
However, topic sentences are not always the first sentence in a paragraph. Sometimes, a topic sentence may be in the middle. Here is an example of main idea in the middle:

Unlike people in the United States, who believe that different individuals have different abilities, the Japanese believe that all students have much the same innate ability and that differences in academic performance must be due to differences in effort. Therefore, the key to superior performance is hard work, which begins at an early age. Before most Japanese children even enroll in school, their parents—usually their mothers—have taught them numbers, the alphabet, and some art skills. By age four, more than 90% of Japanese children are attending preschool in order to receive a head start on their education. The typical Japanese student spends six to seven hours a day in school, five full days a week and a half-day on Sunday. (Curry et al, Sociology for the Twenty-First Century, qtd in McWhorter 144)
Structure Of Paragraph With Topic Sentence in Middle
Sometimes a topic sentence may be at the end of a paragraph as represented in this type of structure:
Here is an example:

We can measure the radioactivity of plants and animals today and compare this with the radioactivity of ancient organic matter. If we extract a small, but precise, quantity of carbon from an ancient wooden ax handle, for example, and find it has one-half as much radioactivity as an equal quantity of carbon extracted from a living tree, then the old wood must have come from a tree that was cut down or made from a log that died 5730 years ago. In this way, we can probe into the past as much as 50,000 years to find out such things as the age of ancient civilizations or the times of the ice ages that covered the earth.

(Hewitt, Conceptual Physics, qtd. in McWhorter 143)
Sometimes, a writer may start a paragraph with a topic sentence and restate the main idea at the end as well.

The study of prehistoric humans is, of necessity, the study of fossil remains. To begin to understand who our ancestors were and what they were like, we must be able to interpret the fragments of them that are coming to the surface in increasing numbers. Given fairly reliable methods to determine their age, we can now turn with more confidence to primate fossils for an answer to the all-important question: How do we tell monkeys, apes, and humans apart? For present-day species this is no problem; all have evolved sufficiently so that they no longer resemble one another. But since they all have a common ancestor, the farther back we go in time, the more similar their fossils begin to look. There finally comes a point when they are indistinguishable. The construction of a primate fossil family tree is essential if we are ever going to discover the line of descent from early hominid to modern human.

(Campbell and Loy, *Humankind Emerging*, qtd. in McWhorter, 144)
Let us stop and review what you have learned about main idea statements in paragraphs.

- The main idea statement in a paragraph is called a topic sentence.
- The topic sentence may be the first sentence.
- The topic sentence may be the last sentence.
- The topic sentence may be in the middle of the paragraph.
- The topic sentence is sometimes the first and also the last sentence.
As an active reader, you must search for the sentence that states the central point, the gist of the paragraph.
Implied Main Idea

It is important to recognize that you may not always find a topic sentence in each paragraph. Sometimes the main idea is implied. What this means is that there is not an explicitly stated main idea sentence but one that you, as a reader, must figure out. The term most often used to describe this is inference. You infer the main idea in this situation.
How Do You Understand An Implied Main Idea?

- First, identify the topic of the paragraph. What is this paragraph about?
- Then read carefully all the supporting details. What does the writer want you to know about the topic?
- How do the details connect? What larger idea do they explain?
- Express this idea in your own words. The implied main idea sentence must be broad enough to cover all the details in the paragraph but must not be too narrow so that some details are left out.
Let us look at an example.

Birds that roost in communities keep warmer and save more energy than those who roost separately. Another advantage to staying in flocks is that many birds are more likely to find food and detect danger than a solitary bird—several pairs of eyes are better than one. In addition, birds that eat on the ground with their flock can more easily escape attack because at least one member of the flock will alert the others. Then, when all the birds fly upward to escape together, they cause confusion, turning a predator’s interest away from any one individual. Several small birds may even act together to “mob” a larger intruder and drive it away. (Langan 41)
What is the implied main idea?

Let’s go through these questions.

Q. What is the topic?
   A. Birds

Q. What does the writer want me to know about birds?
   A. He or she wants me to understand why birds live in flocks.

Q. How do the details connect? What larger idea do they explain?
   A. They explain the reasons why many birds live together in flocks.

Q Can you express this in your own words?
   A. There are several advantages for birds to stay together in flocks rather than live separately.
Why don’t you read this paragraph and see if you can figure out the implied main idea?

Once the most popular and affordable form of public transportation in America, streetcars in the early part of this century carried a record 11 billion passengers on 45,000 miles of track. By 1960, however, trolley systems were virtually extinct. Companies backed by General Motors, Firestone Tire and Rubber, Standard Oil, and others with a financial interest in cars and buses had bought and closed up almost every trolley in America. Now, however, public officials are concerned with finding cheaper, more convenient alternatives to subway systems. San Diego was the first to construct a major new trolley line. As ridership soared, second and third lines were added, with more planned for the future. Portland and Sacramento then started theirs, and more than twenty other cities have proposed new trolley lines. (Langan 45)
What is the implied main idea?

Ask yourself the questions mentioned before to help you infer the main idea.
How did you do?

- The topic is **trolley systems**.

- The writer wants me to know that trolley systems in the United States used to be popular, then fell out of favor, but now seem to be making a comeback.

- The implied main idea is this: **Trolley systems are making a comeback throughout the United States.**
Main Idea in Longer Reading Selections

When you read longer articles and essays, you must also try to locate the main idea statement (a *thesis* or *thesis statement*). About half of the time there will be an explicitly stated thesis that you can find. Other times, you will need to infer it.
How to Find the Main Idea in Longer Selections

Follow the same tips mentioned for finding the main idea in paragraphs though with some modification.

- Look carefully not at just the first sentence but the first paragraph or two. Quite often, the thesis will be in the introductory paragraph (main idea in beginning).

- Many times, the thesis will be presented in the introduction but also restated in the concluding paragraph (main idea in beginning and end).
Sometimes the main idea will be in the middle, often after a paragraph or two which may be used to engage the reader or to provide background information (main idea in middle).

Last, there will be times when the main idea is implied. You then need to identify the topic, examine all the supporting details, and then try to express the larger idea that unites the details as an implied main idea statement (implied main idea).
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Idea in Paragraphs</th>
<th>Main Idea in Essays</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Topic sentence may be first sentence.</td>
<td>• Thesis often is in the introductory paragraph.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Topic sentence may be last sentence.</td>
<td>• Thesis may be presented at end.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Topic sentence may be first sentence and also at the end.</td>
<td>• Thesis may be stated in beginning of essay and also restated at the end.</td>
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<td>• Topic sentence may be in the middle.</td>
<td>• Thesis may be in the middle of the essay.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• There may not be a topic sentence. Main idea is implied.</td>
<td>• There may not be a thesis. Main idea is implied.</td>
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Summary: How to Find the Main Idea

- The **topic** of a selection is the subject matter. It usually can be expressed in a word or phrase.
- The **main idea** of a selection is a complete sentence, what the writer wants you to understand about the topic.
- The main idea statement of a paragraph is called a **topic sentence**.
- The main idea statement of an essay is called a **thesis** or **thesis statement**.
- The main idea of a literary work is referred to as a **theme**.
Summary (cont.)

- It is important to recognize the difference between the main idea statement and the supporting details.

- The topic sentence of a paragraph may be the first sentence, or the last sentence, or both first and last sentences, or even in the middle. Sometimes there isn’t a topic sentence and it is implied.

- The thesis of an essay may be found in the introductory paragraph, may be in the concluding paragraph, may be in both introductory and concluding paragraphs, or may be in the middle. Sometimes the thesis is not present and it is implied.
References


Note: Reading selections that were used from McWhorter include excerpts from the following works:


