**Rules for Finding the Main Idea in a Paragraph**

**(if is directly stated)**

**1. The main idea sentence (often called topic sentence) is often first or second,** but could be in any position in the paragraph.

**2. A main idea sentence is usually more "general" than the other sentences,** that is, it talks about many things and looks at the big picture. Sometimes it refers to more than one thing. Plurals and the words "many", "numerous", or "several" often signal a main idea sentence.

**3. Detail sentences are usually more "specific" than the main idea sentence. Detail sentences** usually talk about one single or small part or side of an idea. Also, the words "for example", "first", "second", "third", etc., and "finally" often signal a detail.

**4. Detail sentences support, give examples, prove, talk about, or point toward the main idea in some way.**

**5. How can you be sure that you have a main idea sentence? Try this trick:**

**Switch the sentence around into a question. If the other sentences seem to "answer" the question, then you've got it.**

**Topic and Main Idea Example: YOU**

The main idea of a passage or reading is the central thought or message. In contrast to the term *topic*, which refers to the subject being discussed, the term *main idea* refers to the point or message the author expresses. The difference between a topic and a main idea will become clearer to you if you imagine yourself overhearing a conversation in which your name is repeatedly mentioned. When you ask your friends what they were discussing, they say they were talking about you. At that point, you have the topic but not the main idea. Undoubtedly, you wouldn’t be satisfied until you learned what your friends were saying about this particular topic. You would probably pester them until you knew the main idea, until you knew, that is, exactly what they were saying about your personality, appearance, or behavior. The same principle applies to reading. The topic is seldom enough. You also need to discover the main idea.

**Reading Tips:**

1. As soon as you can define the topic, ask yourself “What point does the author want to make about this topic?” Once you can answer that question, you have more than likely found the main idea.

2. Most main ideas are stated or suggested early in a reading; pay special attention to the first third of any passage, article, or chapter. That’s where you are likely to get the clearest statement of the main idea.

3. **Pay attention to any idea that is repeated in different ways**. If an author returns to the same thought in several different sentences or paragraphs, that idea is the main or central thought under discussion.

4. Once you feel sure you have found the main idea, test it. Ask yourself if the examples, reasons, statistics, studies, and facts included in the reading lend themselves as evidence or explanation in support of the main idea you have in mind. If they do, your comprehension is right on target. If they don’t, you might want to revise your first notion about the author’s main idea.

5. The main idea of a passage can be expressed any number of ways. You can state it in your own words or in the words of the author.

6. If you are taking a test that asks you to find the *thesis* or *theme* of a reading, don’t let the terms confuse you, you are still looking for the main idea.

**Paragraph A** Find the Topic

**1**Do you have a favorite season? **2**Winter, fall, and spring have many advantages. **3**However, summertime is my favorite season because it offers the tranquility of the beach as well as the exhilaration of outdoor sports. **4**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. **5**Looking at something larger than I am gives me a sense of awe and gratitude and provides a backdrop for some deep musings. **6**Second, summertime provides me with the chance to go sailing, surfing, and hiking along the shore. **7**The exercise enhances my sense of well-being and creates a feeling of optimism.

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

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | a. sailing and surfing. |
|  | b. summertime. |
|  | c. seasons at the beach. |
|  | d. ways to develop optimism. |
|  |  |

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

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | a. sentence 1.  |
|  | b. sentence 2.  |
|  | c. sentence 3.  |
|  | d. sentence 4.  |
|  |  |

**Paragraph B**

1A rite of passage, according to psychologists, is an event that prompts movement from one stage of life to another. 2Weddings and graduations are two examples of new beginnings that are considered significant rites of passage. 3For the bride and groom, a wedding signifies the covenant of fidelity and the couple's public declaration of love. 4Making the promise for life before loved ones is the first step to their new life together. 5Graduations also signify a rite of passage. 6Tests will not be scheduled, and paperwork will no longer be graded on a curve. 7Whether it is a high school or college graduation, students acknowledge they are beginning a new path on their journey.

3. The topic of the paragraph is

 a. a psychologist's view of life.

 b. new beginnings and stages of life—rites of passage

 c. weddings and graduations, according to psychologists

 d. the importance of weddings.

4. The main idea of the paragraph is

 a. sentence 1.

 b. sentence 2.

 c. sentence 3.

 d. sentence 7.

Read the following and then tell the main idea.

Summer is a wonderful time to spend at Westport. It has a beach with a long man-made jetty that softens the waves near the town where boats are moored. 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. Sometimes you can see whales send up spouts of water in the distance. This is a fun beach for people of all ages.

Read the following and then tell what the main idea is. You may to use parts of two sentences to make one good main idea sentence.

Most teenagers and young adults do not know what they want to do for the rest of their lives. Choosing something you want to do for the rest of your life is an important 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" by spending 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.

What is the main idea of the following paragraph?

*People in the United States seem to be in love with the idea of going out to eat fast food.* McDonald's is the king of 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 both a Mobil gas station and a McDonald’s. This allows you to fill up with gas and fill up on food at the same time. What will McDonald’s think of next?