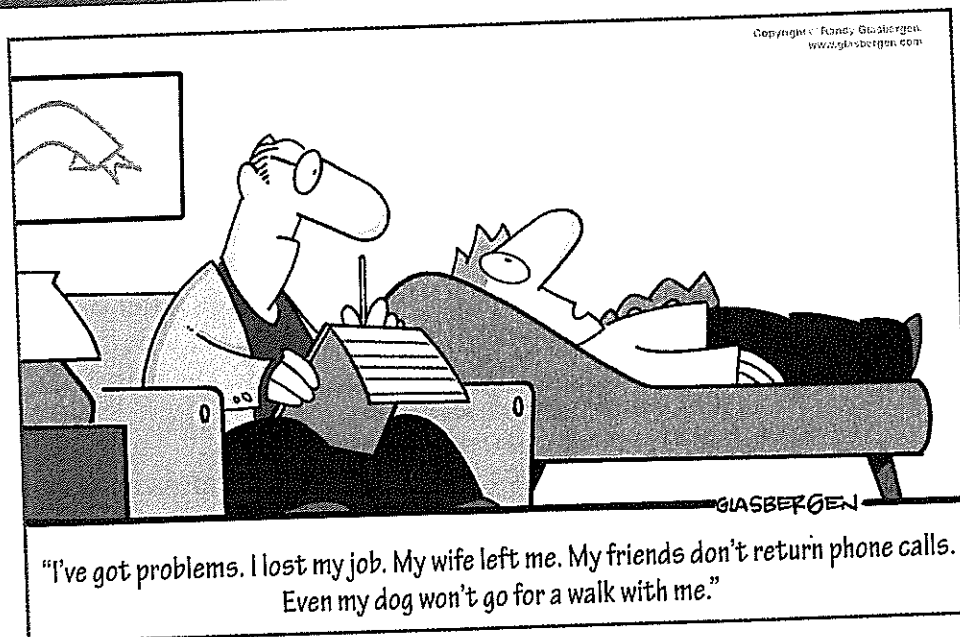


## 2 Main Ideas

### What Is the Main Idea?



"**W**hat's the point?" You've probably heard these words before. It's a question people ask when they want to know the main idea that someone is trying to express. The same question can guide you as you read. Recognizing the **main idea**, or point, is the most important key to good comprehension. Sometimes a main idea is immediately clear, as in the above cartoon. The point—that the man on the couch has problems—is well supported by the statements about his job, wife, friends, and dog.

To find the main idea of a reading selection, ask yourself, "What's the point the author is trying to make?" For instance, read the paragraph on the following page, asking yourself as you do, "What is the author's point?"

<sup>1</sup>Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. <sup>2</sup>However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways. <sup>3</sup>One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. <sup>4</sup>They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns. <sup>5</sup>In addition, that same study showed that heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than non-TV watchers. <sup>6</sup>It seems that the constant violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. <sup>7</sup>Another study, of a group of children, found that TV violence increases aggressive behavior. <sup>8</sup>Children who watched violent shows were more willing to hurt another child in games where they were given a choice between helping and hurting. <sup>9</sup>They were also more likely to select toy weapons over other kinds of playthings.

A good way to find an author's point, or main idea, is to look for a general statement. Then decide if that statement is supported by most of the other material in the paragraph. If it is, you have found the main idea.

Below are four statements from the passage. Pick out the general statement that is supported by the other material in the passage. Write the letter of that statement in the space provided. Then read the explanation that follows.

Four statements from the passage:

- A. Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment.
- B. However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.
- C. One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others.
- D. They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns.

The general statement that expresses the main idea of the passage is \_\_\_\_\_.

### *Explanation*

*Sentence A:* The paragraph does not support the idea that TV violence is harmless, so sentence A cannot be the main idea. However, it does introduce the topic of the paragraph: TV violence.

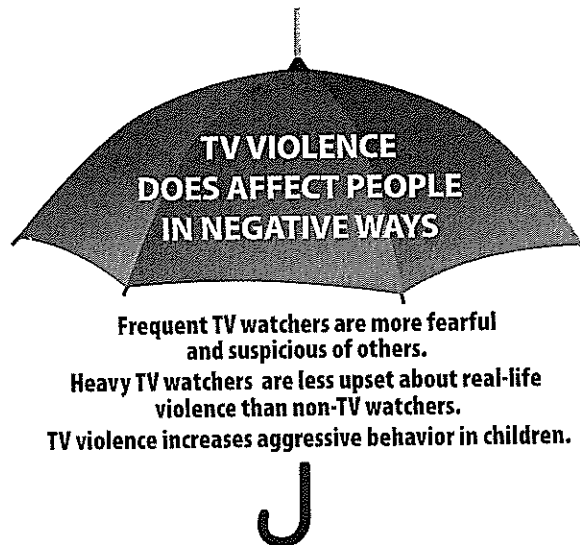
*Sentence B:* The statement "TV violence does affect people in negative ways" is a general one. And the rest of the passage goes on to describe three negative ways that TV violence affects people. Sentence B, then, is the sentence that expresses the main idea of the passage.

*Sentence C:* This sentence is about only one study. It is not general enough to include the other studies that are also cited in the paragraph. It is the first supporting idea for the main idea.

*Sentence D:* This sentence provides detailed evidence for the first supporting idea, which is that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. It does not cover the other material in the paragraph.

## The Main Idea as an “Umbrella” Idea

Think of the main idea as an “umbrella” idea. The main idea is the author’s general point; all the other material of the paragraph fits under it. That other material is made up of **supporting details**—specific evidence such as examples, causes, reasons, or facts. The diagram below shows the relationship.



The explanations and activities on the following pages will deepen your understanding of the main idea.

## Recognizing a Main Idea

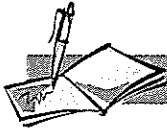
As you read through a passage, you must **think as you read**. If you merely take in words, you will come to the end of the passage without understanding much of what you have read. Reading is an active process, as opposed to watching television, which is passive. You must actively engage your mind, and, as you read, keep asking yourself, “What’s the point?” Here are three strategies that will help you find the main idea.

- 1 Look for general versus specific ideas.
- 2 Use the topic to lead you to the main idea.
- 3 Use key words to lead you to the main idea.

Each strategy is explained on the following pages.

## 1 Look for General versus Specific Ideas

You saw in the paragraph on TV violence that the main idea is a *general* idea supported by *specific* ideas. The following practices will improve your skill at separating general from specific ideas. Learning how to tell the difference between general and specific ideas will help you locate the main idea.



### PRACTICE 1

Each group of words below has one general idea and three specific ideas. The general idea includes all the specific ideas. Identify each general idea with a **G** and the specific ideas with an **S**. Look first at the example.

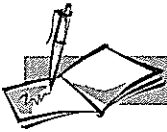
#### Example

- S dishonesty
- S greed
- G bad qualities
- S selfishness

(*Bad qualities* is the general idea which includes three specific types of bad qualities: dishonesty, greed, and selfishness.)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>1. ___ handsome<br/>___ appearance<br/>___ well-dressed<br/>___ shabby</p>                                  | <p>5. ___ giggling<br/>___ childish behavior<br/>___ tantrums<br/>___ playing peek-a-boo</p>   |
| <p>2. ___ seafood<br/>___ oysters<br/>___ clams<br/>___ lobster</p>  | <p>6. ___ paper cuts<br/>___ minor problems<br/>___ broken nails<br/>___ wrong numbers</p>   |
| <p>3. ___ heavy traffic<br/>___ bus not on time<br/>___ alarm didn't go off<br/>___ excuses for being late</p> | <p>7. ___ try to be kinder<br/>___ eat healthier foods<br/>___ go to bed earlier<br/>___ resolutions</p>   |
| <p>4. ___ poor pay<br/>___ mean boss<br/>___ very dull work<br/>___ undesirable job</p>                        | <p>8. ___ take stairs instead of elevator<br/>___ ride bike instead of driving<br/>___ exercise opportunities<br/>___ walk instead of riding bus</p> |

9. \_\_\_ skip breakfast  
\_\_\_ grab a donut mid-morning  
\_\_\_ poor eating habits  
\_\_\_ order supersize portions
10. \_\_\_ different goals  
\_\_\_ no common interests  
\_\_\_ dislike each other's friends  
\_\_\_ reasons for breaking up

**PRACTICE 2**

Write out the answers to each question in the spaces provided. For each question, the answers are specific details that illustrate the general idea, which is underlined.

1. There are many material things in everyday life (appliances, electronic equipment, and the like) that we come to depend upon. What are three things that you would hate to be without?

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2. If you were suddenly wealthy, you could hire other people to do tasks that you dislike. What are three specific chores that you'd hand over to somebody else?

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3. Most of us enjoy a good movie, but we have different ideas of what makes a film "good." What are three specific qualities that a movie needs in order for you to really like it?

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4. We all know people whom we find difficult. Think of a person that you find hard to get along with. Name three specific reasons you find this person difficult.

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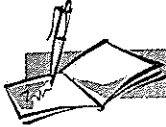
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**PRACTICE 3**

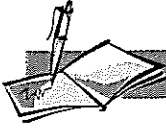
In the following groups, one statement is the general point, and the other statements are specific support for the point. Identify each point with a **P** and each statement of support with an **S**.

1. \_\_\_ The vegetables were soggy and tasteless.  
\_\_\_ The chicken was hard to chew.  
\_\_\_ The meal was very unpleasant.  
\_\_\_ The rolls were rock-hard.
  
2. \_\_\_ The team's best player is averaging over 30 points a game.  
\_\_\_ The basketball team is in first place in its division.  
\_\_\_ The team has won eight of its first ten games.  
\_\_\_ The basketball team is off to a great start.
  
3. \_\_\_ The man doesn't use his turn signals.  
\_\_\_ The man drives too fast down narrow residential streets.  
\_\_\_ The man is an unsafe driver.  
\_\_\_ The man doesn't come to a complete stop at stop signs.
  
4. \_\_\_ Students stay in touch with friends through Facebook and e-mail.  
\_\_\_ Students write papers and share class notes online.  
\_\_\_ Students do much of their research on the Internet.  
\_\_\_ Students have practical uses for computers.

**PRACTICE 4**

In each of the following groups, one statement is the general point, and the other statements are specific support for the point. Identify each point with a **P** and each statement of support with an **S**.

1. \_\_\_ A. Among teenage girls, gossip contributes to bonding.  
\_\_\_ B. Political gossip often is leaked to the media as a way of learning how the public is likely to react to a particular policy.  
\_\_\_ C. Gossip takes many forms and serves various purposes.  
\_\_\_ D. In the business world, gossip can provide insights unavailable through official facts and figures.
  
2. \_\_\_ A. When answering the phone, some people's first words are "Who's this?"  
\_\_\_ B. Some people have terrible telephone manners.  
\_\_\_ C. Some people never bother to identify themselves when calling someone.  
\_\_\_ D. Some people hang up without even saying goodbye.
  
3. \_\_\_ A. Federal law should prohibit banks from giving credit cards to college students.  
\_\_\_ B. Credit-card debt is the leading cause of bankruptcy for young Americans.  
\_\_\_ C. Taking advantage of the fact that many parents will pay their children's credit-card debts, banks extend excessive credit to students.  
\_\_\_ D. When they receive their monthly credit-card bills, many students can pay only the minimum required and so have hefty interest charges on large unpaid amounts.
  
4. \_\_\_ A. Bats are so rarely rabid that a person has a better chance of catching rabies from a cow than from a bat.  
\_\_\_ B. Bats, in spite of their bad reputation, are not a danger to human beings.  
\_\_\_ C. Bats are afraid of humans and do their best to stay away from them.  
\_\_\_ D. Unlike movie vampires, bats do not bite people unless frightened or under attack.

**PRACTICE 5**

In each of the following groups—all based on textbook selections—one statement is the general point, and the other statements are specific support for the point. Identify each point with a **P** and each statement of support with an **S**.

1. \_\_\_ A. Companies that lose lawsuits usually pass the cost along to consumers.  
\_\_\_ B. To protect themselves from malpractice suits, doctors now give more patients unneeded tests, which cost hundreds of millions of dollars a year.  
\_\_\_ C. The cost of fighting a lawsuit forces some small businesses to close, even when they have successfully defended themselves.  
\_\_\_ D. The ever-growing number of lawsuits has had a number of negative consequences.
  
2. \_\_\_ A. Our social roles—whether we're students, employees, visitors, etc.—limit what emotions are acceptable for us to express.  
\_\_\_ B. Given the widespread habit of suppressing our emotions, many of us have trouble recognizing what we're really feeling.  
\_\_\_ C. Most of us rarely express our deepest emotions because of a number of factors.  
\_\_\_ D. We often hide our emotions rather than display them so as not to seem weak or needy to others.
  
3. \_\_\_ A. Disagreeing parties can accept the status quo, agreeing to just live with the situation as it stands.  
\_\_\_ B. When faced with a disagreement, the parties involved have several ways to proceed.  
\_\_\_ C. One party may use physical, social, or economic force to impose a solution on the others.  
\_\_\_ D. Negotiation, or reaching a mutually acceptable solution, is one means of dealing with conflict.
  
4. \_\_\_ A. With bribes, Prohibition-era bootleggers persuaded politicians, police, and other public officials to ignore the illegal sale of alcoholic beverages.  
\_\_\_ B. Prohibition glamorized drinking and made it fashionable for people to drink in illegal bars and break the law.  
\_\_\_ C. Prohibition encouraged the formation of organized-crime empires that illegally manufactured, transported, and sold liquor.  
\_\_\_ D. Prohibition, which banned alcoholic beverages in the United States from 1920 to 1933, resulted in much illegal activity.