

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

You already know that to find the main idea of a selection, you look first for a general statement. You then check to see if that statement is supported by most of the other material in the paragraph. If it is, you've found the main idea. Another approach that can help you find the main idea is to decide on the topic of a given selection.

The **topic** is the general subject of a selection. It can often be expressed in one or more words. Knowing the topic can help you find a writer's main point about that topic. Paying close attention to the topic of a selection can lead you to the main idea.

Textbook authors use the title of each chapter to state the overall topic of that chapter. They also provide many topics and subtopics in boldface headings within the chapter. For example, here is the title of a chapter in a psychology textbook:

Theories of Human Development (26 pages)

And here are the subtopics:

Psychoanalytic Theories (an 8-page section)

Learning Theories (a 9-page section)

Cognitive Theories (a 9-page section)

If you were studying the above chapter, you could use the topics to help find the main ideas. (Pages 9–10 explain just how to do so, as well as other textbook study tips.)

But there are many times when you are not given topics—with standardized reading tests, for example, or with individual paragraphs in articles or textbooks. To find the topic of a selection when the topic is not given, ask this simple question:

Who or what is the selection about?

For example, look again at the beginning of the paragraph that started this chapter:

Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.

What, in just a few words, is the above paragraph about? On the line below, write what you think is the topic.

Topic: _____

You probably answered that the topic is "TV violence." As you reread the paragraph, you saw that, in fact, every sentence in it is about TV violence.

The next step after finding the topic is to decide what main point the author is making about the topic. Authors often present their main idea in a single sentence. (This sentence is also known as the **main idea sentence** or the **topic sentence**.) As we have already seen, the main point about TV violence is "we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways."



Check Your Understanding

Let's look now at another paragraph. Read it and then see if you can answer the questions that follow.

¹Recently a family of four was found dead in a suburban home in New Jersey—victims of carbon monoxide. ²Such cases are tragically common. ³Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons. ⁴To begin with, it is created in the most ordinary of ways—by the burning of wood, coal, or petroleum products. ⁵Once created, this gas is impossible to detect without instruments: it is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. ⁶Also, carbon monoxide mingles with and remains in the air rather than rising and being carried away by the wind. ⁷Then, when people unsuspectingly breathe it in, it chokes them, taking the place of the oxygen in their blood. ⁸Furthermore, it can do its lethal work in very small quantities: anyone exposed to air that is just 1 percent carbon monoxide for even a few minutes will almost certainly die.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? In other words, what is the paragraph about? (It often helps as you read to look for and even circle a word, term, or idea that is repeated in the paragraph.)

2. What is the *main idea* of the paragraph? In other words, what point is the author making about the topic? (Remember that the main idea will be supported by the other material in the paragraph.)

Explanation

As the first sentence of the paragraph suggests, the topic is “carbon monoxide.” Continuing to read the paragraph, you see that, in fact, everything in it is about carbon monoxide. And the main idea is clearly that “Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons.” This idea is a general one that sums up what the entire paragraph is about. It is an “umbrella” statement under which all the other material in the paragraph fits. The parts of the paragraph could be shown as follows:

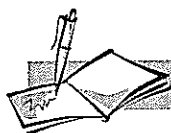
Topic: Carbon monoxide

Main idea: Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons.

Supporting details:

1. Is easily created.
2. Is difficult to detect.
3. Remains in the air.
4. Chokes by taking the place of oxygen in the blood.
5. Deadly even in small quantities.

The following practices will sharpen your sense of the difference between a topic, the point about the topic (the main idea), and supporting details.

**PRACTICE 6**

Below are groups of four items. In each case, one item is the topic, one is the main idea, and two are details that support and develop the main idea. Label each item with one of the following:

- T — for the **topic** of the paragraph
- MI — for the **main idea**
- SD — for the **supporting details**

Note that an explanation is provided for the first group; reading it will help you do this practice.

Group 1

- _____ A. One bite from a piranha's triangular-shaped teeth can sever a person's finger or toe.
- _____ B. The piranha.
- _____ C. The piranha—only eight to twelve inches long—is an extremely dangerous fish.
- _____ D. A school of piranha can strip a four-hundred-pound hog down to a skeleton in just a few minutes.

Explanation

All of the statements in Group 1 are about piranhas, so item B must be the topic. (Topics are easy to identify because they are expressed in short phrases, not complete sentences.) Statements A and D are specific examples of the damage that piranhas can do. Statement C, on the other hand, presents the general idea that piranhas can be extremely dangerous. It is the main idea about the topic of "the piranha," and statements A and D are supporting details that illustrate that main idea.

Group 2

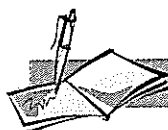
- _____ A. Joint custody of a divorced couple's children has become more common.
- _____ B. The number of men with sole custody of children has also grown.
- _____ C. Alternatives to giving the mother sole child custody have increased in recent years.
- _____ D. Alternative child-custody arrangements.

Group 3

- _____ A. In later adulthood, we begin to come to terms with our own mortality.
- _____ B. Stages of human development.
- _____ C. Adolescence is typically a time of identity crisis.
- _____ D. According to psychologists, we pass through various stages of human development throughout our lives.

Group 4

- _____ A. Kinds of power.
- _____ B. Force, which the Italian statesman Machiavelli called “the method of beasts,” is the use of physical coercion.
- _____ C. Influence, the ability to control or affect the behavior of others, is also a form of power.
- _____ D. Power, the ability to control or change the behavior of others, takes different forms.

**PRACTICE 7**

Following are four paragraphs. Read each paragraph and do the following:

- 1 Ask yourself, “What seems to be the topic of the paragraph?” (It often helps to look for and even circle a word or idea that is repeated in the paragraph.)
- 2 Next, ask yourself, “What point is the writer making about this topic?” This will be the main idea. It is stated in one of the sentences in the paragraph.
- 3 Then test what you think is the main idea by asking, “Is this statement supported by most of the other material in the paragraph?”

Hint: When looking for the topic, make sure you do not pick one that is either **too broad** (covering a great deal more than is in the selection) or **too narrow** (covering only part of the selection). The topic and the main idea of a selection must include everything in that selection—no more and no less.

For instance, in the example given in Practice 1, page 58, the topic is “bad qualities.” “Character traits” would be too broad, because these would include good qualities as well as bad qualities. “Greed” would be too narrow, since this is only one type of bad quality mentioned.

Paragraph 1

¹ Shocking as it seems, cannibalism is common in the animal world. ² In species such as the red-back spider, the black widow spider, the praying mantis, and the scorpion, the female commonly eats the male after mating. ³ Another widespread form of cannibalism is size-structured cannibalism, in which large individuals consume smaller ones. ⁴ Octopus, bats, toads, fish, monitor lizards, salamanders, crocodiles, spiders, crustaceans, birds, mammals, and a vast number of insects have all been observed to engage in size-structured cannibalism. ⁵ Yet another common form of cannibalism is infanticide. ⁶ Classic examples include the chimpanzees, where groups of adult males have been observed to attack their infants; and lions, where adult males commonly kill infants when they take over a new harem after replacing the previous dominant males. ⁷ Also, gerbils and hamsters eat their young if they are stillborn, or if the mothers are especially stressed.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? In other words, what (in one or more words) is the paragraph about? _____
- _____ 2. What point is the writer making about the topic? In other words, which sentence states the *main idea* of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 2

¹ The Great Wall of China is a truly remarkable creation. ² At 4,500 miles long, taller than five men, and wide enough to allow at least six horses to gallop side by side atop it, the Great Wall is so huge it can be seen from space. ³ The Wall is constructed of four-inch blocks made of compressed earth, stone, willow twigs, and the remains of laborers who died among the millions who worked on its construction. ⁴ The Great Wall follows mountain slopes and has inclines as great as seventy degrees. ⁵ The paths on the Wall are even more difficult to travel because the steps are of uneven depth, width, and height. ⁶ Through much of its 2,500-year history, armies marched and camped on the Wall, keeping lookout for invaders and repelling trespassers who dared to pitch ladders to try to mount it. ⁷ Today the Great Wall is a tourist attraction that brings many visitors to China. ⁸ Tourists are eager to make the strenuous hike over precarious paths to take in the greatness of its size and history.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? In other words, what (in one or more words) is the paragraph about? _____
- _____ 2. What point is the writer making about the topic? In other words, which sentence states the *main idea* of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 3

¹At the beginning of the twentieth century, families often hired older women known as chaperones to keep watch over their daughters. ²These women played an important role in courtship. ³When a young man asked a girl on a date, he automatically invited her chaperone as well. ⁴If a young lady entertained her boyfriend in the parlor, the chaperone did not budge from the room. ⁵Because of her responsibilities, the chaperone had the power to make courtship pleasurable or miserable. ⁶Some chaperones had soft hearts and gave young lovers some privacy. ⁷Others were such sticklers for appearances that they prevented the young couple even from exchanging personal remarks. ⁸In addition to being guardians, chaperones sometimes functioned as private eyes. ⁹They investigated the backgrounds of gentlemen who called on their charges to see which one would make the best match.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? In other words, what (in one or more words) is the paragraph about? _____
- _____ 2. What point is the writer making about the topic? In other words, which sentence states the *main idea* of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.

Paragraph 4

¹Cardiovascular disease—disease of the heart or blood vessels—is the leading cause of death in the United States, killing about 1 million people a year. ²Cardiovascular disease is actually a group of disorders. ³This group includes high blood pressure, or hypertension, which significantly increases the risk of other diseases in the group. ⁴Atherosclerosis, or coronary artery disease, is another member of the group. ⁵In this cardiovascular disorder, a fatty deposit, plaque, builds up on the walls of the arteries, restricting the flow of blood and causing strain to the heart, which must work harder to pump blood through the narrowed arteries. ⁶Sometimes an aneurysm occurs: the artery ruptures. ⁷Heart attack—technically, myocardial infarction—is also in this group. ⁸It happens when plaque builds up so much that blood flow to the heart is cut off and some heart muscle dies. ⁹Congestive heart failure, a chronic disease, is part of the group as well. ¹⁰In this disorder the heart has been weakened and can no longer pump enough blood. ¹¹Stroke, too, is a cardiovascular disease: it occurs when blood flow to the brain is restricted or cut off.

1. What is the *topic* of the paragraph? In other words, what (in one or more words) is the paragraph about? _____
- _____ 2. What point is the writer making about the topic? In other words, which sentence states the *main idea* of the paragraph? In the space provided, write the number of the sentence containing the main idea.