

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Sometimes authors make it fairly easy to find their main idea. They announce it using **key words**—verbal clues that are easy to recognize. One group of these is **list words**, which tell you a list of items will follow. For example, the main idea in the paragraph about TV violence was stated like this: “However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.” The expression *negative ways* helps you zero in on your target: the main idea. You realize that the paragraph will most likely be about specific ways that TV violence affects people. As you read on and see the series of negative effects, you know your assumption about the main idea was correct.

Here are some common word groups that often announce a main idea. Note that each of them contains a word that ends in *s*—a plural that suggests the supporting details will be a list of items.

List Words

several kinds (or ways) of
three advantages of
various reasons for

several causes of
five steps
a number of effects

some factors in
among the results
a series of

When expressions like these appear in a sentence, look carefully to see if that sentence might be the main idea. Chances are a sentence containing list words will be followed by a list of major supporting details.



Check Your Understanding

Underline the list words in the following sentences.

Hint: Remember that list words usually end in *s*.

Example Emotional decisions can be divided into two main types.

1. At least five job trends deserve watching in today's world.
2. Pathologists identify four different stages of cancer in the body.
3. Several steps can be effective in helping people deal with prejudice.
4. Winners of presidential elections share various traits in common.
5. Giving birth to and raising a child will require a number of adjustments in the parents' lives.

Explanation

You should have underlined the following groups of words: *five job trends*, *four different stages*, *several steps*, *various traits*, and *a number of adjustments*. Each of these phrases tells you that a list of details may follow.

In addition to list words, addition words can alert you to the main idea. **Addition words** are generally used right before supporting details. When you see this type of clue, you can assume that the detail it introduces fits under the umbrella of a main idea.

Here are some of the addition words that often introduce supporting details and help you discover the main idea.

Addition Words

one	to begin with	also	further
first (of all)	for one thing	in addition	furthermore
second(ly)	other	next	last (of all)
third(ly)	another	moreover	final(ly)

**Check Your Understanding**

Reread the paragraph about TV violence, underlining the addition words that alert you to supporting details.

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

Explanation

The words that introduce each new supporting detail for the main idea are *One*, *In addition*, and *Another*. When you see these addition words, you realize the studies are all being cited in support of an idea—in this case, that TV violence affects people in negative ways.

That main idea includes the list words *negative ways*, which suggest that the supporting details will be a list of negative ways TV violence affects people. In this and many paragraphs, list words and addition words often work hand in hand.

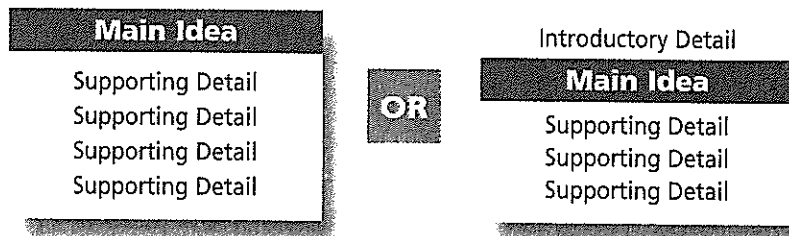
The following chapter, “Supporting Details,” includes further practice in the words and phrases that alert you to the main idea and the details that support it. But what you have already learned here will help you find main ideas.

Locations of the Main Idea

Now you know how to recognize a main idea by 1) distinguishing between the general and the specific, 2) identifying the topic of a passage, and 3) using key words. You are ready to find the main idea no matter where it is located in a paragraph.

A main idea may appear at any point within a paragraph. Very commonly, it shows up at the beginning, as either the first or the second sentence. However, main ideas may also appear further within a paragraph or even at the very end.

Main Idea at the Beginning



In textbooks, it is very common for the main idea to be either the first or the second sentence of a paragraph.

See if you can underline the main idea in the paragraph on the following page.

¹People tend to cling to their first impressions, even if they are wrong. ²Suppose you mention the name of your new neighbor to a friend. ³"Oh, I know him," your friend replies. ⁴"He seems nice at first, but it's all an act." ⁵Perhaps this appraisal is off-base. ⁶The neighbor may have changed since your friend knew him, or perhaps your friend's judgment is simply unfair. ⁷Whether the judgment is accurate or not, once you accept your friend's evaluation, it will probably influence the way you respond to the neighbor. ⁸You'll look for examples of the insincerity you've heard about, and you'll probably find them. ⁹Even if this neighbor were a saint, you would be likely to interpret his behavior in ways that fit your expectations.

In this paragraph, the main idea is in the *first* sentence. All the following sentences in the paragraph provide a detailed example of how we cling to first impressions.



Check Your Understanding

Now read the following paragraph and see if you can underline its main idea:

¹For shy people, simply attending class can be stressful. ²Several strategies, though, can lessen the trauma of attending class for shy people. ³Shy students should time their arrival to coincide with that of most other class members—about two minutes before the class is scheduled to begin. ⁴If they arrive too early, they may be seen sitting alone or, even worse, may actually be forced to talk with another early arrival. ⁵If they arrive late, all eyes will be upon them. ⁶Before heading to class, shy students should dress in the least conspicuous manner possible—say, in the blue jeans, sweatshirt, and sneakers that 99.9 percent of their classmates wear. ⁷That way they won't stand out from everyone else. ⁸They should take a seat near the back of the room. ⁹But they shouldn't sit at the very back, since instructors sometimes make a point of calling on students there.

Explanation

In the above paragraph, the main idea is stated in the *second* sentence. The first sentence introduces the topic, shy people in class, but it is the idea in the second sentence—several strategies can lessen the trauma of attending class for shy people—that is supported in the rest of the paragraph. So keep in mind that the first sentence may simply introduce or lead into the main idea of a paragraph.

Hint: Very often, a contrast word like *however*, *but*, *yet*, or *though* signals the main idea, as in the paragraph you have just read.

Main Idea in the Middle

Introductory Detail

Introductory Detail

Main Idea

Supporting Detail

Supporting Detail

The main idea at times appears in the middle of a paragraph. Here is an example of a paragraph in which the main idea is somewhere in the middle. Try to find it and underline it. Then read the explanation that follows.

¹A television ad for a new sports car showed scenes of beautiful open country that suggested freedom and adventure. ²The car never appeared in the ad at all. ³An ad for a hotel chain showed a romantic couple in bed together. ⁴They were obviously on vacation and having a leisurely, romantic, sexy morning. ⁵As these ads suggest, advertisers often try to sell products and services by associating them with positive images rather than by providing relevant details about the product or service. ⁶An ad giving the car's gas mileage, safety rating, or repair frequency would be more important to a buyer, but it might not draw the viewer's interest as much as beautiful scenery. ⁷Similarly, details on the hotel's prices and service would be more informative than images of a glamorous vacation. ⁸But the romantic couple gets people's attention and associates the hotel in viewers' minds with a good time.

If you thought the fifth sentence gives the main idea, you were correct. The first four sentences introduce the topic of advertisers and provide specific examples of the main idea. The fifth sentence then presents the writer's main idea, which is that advertisers often try to sell their products by associating them with appealing images rather than with relevant details. The rest of the paragraph continues to develop that idea.

Main Idea at the End

Supporting Detail

Supporting Detail

Supporting Detail

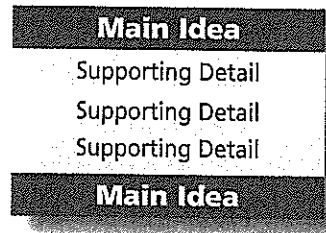
Supporting Detail

Main Idea

Sometimes all the sentences in a paragraph will lead up to the main idea, which is presented at the end. Here is an example of such a paragraph.

¹Only about 1 percent of insect species are destructive to crops and property. ²Nevertheless, this small group causes several billion dollars of damage each year in the United States alone. ³Harmful insects include household pests, such as termites; crop and livestock pests, such as boll weevils; and hosts of disease-causing organisms, such as mosquitoes infected with parasitic protozoa. ⁴Many insects, on the other hand, are beneficial to human society. ⁵Some insects pollinate fruit trees, flowers, and many field crops. ⁶Bees produce honey and beeswax, silkworms form cocoons from which silk is spun, and lac insects provide the raw material for commercial shellac. ⁷Some kinds of insects are natural enemies of destructive insects. ⁸For example, the larvae of certain wasps feed on caterpillars that destroy plants. ⁹**Clearly, insects are both harmful and beneficial to human society.**

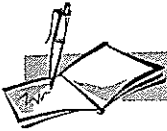
Main Idea at the Beginning and the End



At times an author may choose to state the main idea near the beginning of the paragraph and then emphasize it (as a conclusion) by restating it in other words later in the paragraph. In such cases, the main idea is at both the beginning and the end. Such is the case in the following paragraph.

¹**An important result of medical advances is an increase in the number of conditions thought to be of medical concern.** ²In the not-too-distant past, birth and death usually occurred at home. ³Family members and friends were there or close by. ⁴Now most people are born and die in a hospital, surrounded by bright lights and expensive machines. ⁵People who were addicted to alcohol or drugs were once considered sinful or lacking in willpower. ⁶Now they are considered "sick." ⁷Problems that used to be accepted as part of life—baldness, wrinkles, small breasts, sleeplessness—are now deemed proper matters for medical attention. ⁸Some criminologists have even defined antisocial behavior as a medical problem. ⁹Lawbreakers of all kinds, from the shoplifter to the mass murderer, may potentially be labeled "sick." ¹⁰**Because of current medical knowledge, what were once thought to be problems of life or of character are now considered medical issues.**

Note that the main idea—because of medical advances, more problems are considered medical issues—is expressed in different words in the first and last sentences.

**PRACTICE B**

The main ideas of the following paragraphs appear at different locations—in the beginning, somewhere in the middle, or at the end. Identify each main idea by filling in its sentence number in the space provided.

- _____ 1. ¹Many people think of thieves as clever. ²In reality, thieves can be remarkably foolish. ³One evening, a Los Angeles woman was walking her miniature poodle when a man came up behind her, pushed her to the ground, grabbed the plastic bag she was holding, and drove away. ⁴Afterward, when asked about the mugging, the woman cheerfully commented, "I only wish there had been more in the bag." ⁵The woman had used the bag when she cleaned up her dog's messes. ⁶In Baltimore, an even dumber burglar broke into a house while the woman who lived there was home, ransacked the place, and, having found only \$11.50 in cash, demanded that the victim write him a check for \$30. ⁷When the woman asked to whom she should make the check payable, the thief gave his own name, in full. ⁸He was arrested a few hours later. ⁹But an Oklahoma thief may have been dumbest of all. ¹⁰Charged with purse-snatching, he decided to act as his own attorney. ¹¹At his trial, he cross-examined the victim: "Did you get a good look at my face when I took your purse?" ¹²Not surprisingly, he was convicted.
- _____ 2. ¹For 250 million years, reptiles—which appeared on Earth long before the first mammals—have been fighting over territory. ²Today, human beings do battle over property as well. ³But the reptiles' way of fighting is generally more civilized and humane than the humans'. ⁴Lizards will take a few rushes at one another to test which one is stronger. ⁵After a few passes, the loser rolls over on his back to signal defeat. ⁶The winner allows him to leave unharmed. ⁷Rattlesnakes, similarly, will duel over territory. ⁸But they do it with their necks twined together so that they cannot injure each other with their fangs. ⁹Humans, of course, generally fight with the intent of injuring one another. ¹⁰The victor often seems to feel he hasn't really won until he's wounded and humiliated his opponent, if not killed him.
- _____ 3. ¹If asked to describe ourselves, most of us would not answer that we are mostly water, but that's exactly what we are. ²A 150-pound person is actually 100 pounds of water and only 50 pounds of everything else. ³Our blood plasma is 92% water, and our brains are 75% water. ⁴We use the expression "dry as a bone," but in fact our bones are not dry at all—they are about 20% water.

⁵Our "inner sea" is constantly in motion, flowing through us every moment, bringing food and oxygen to our cells, carrying away wastes, lubricating our joints, cushioning our brains and regulating our temperatures. ⁶If the percentage of water in our bodies drops even 1 or 2 percent, we feel thirsty. ⁷A drop of 10% is usually fatal. ⁸Every day, we lose about two and a half quarts of water. ⁹Surprisingly, we replace less than half this lost water through drinking. ¹⁰The rest we replenish with food which, just like us, is mostly water. ¹¹A tomato, for example, is over 87% water, which is released into the body when we eat it.

- _____ 4. ¹Today, as many as one and a half million children are believed to be homeschooled; twenty years ago, only 12,500 students were educated at home. ²This dramatic increase in the number of homeschooled children can be explained in part by the growth of membership in fundamentalist Christianity, whose members often choose to educate their children at home. ³While religious motivation is the reason that most families choose homeschooling, it is not the only reason. ⁴A number of reasons draw parents to homeschooling. ⁵Some parents prefer to educate their children in the security of their own homes away from the dangers of guns and violence in many urban schools today. ⁶Other parents believe that homeschooling provides their children a more intimate and nurturing learning environment. ⁷Economics can also play a role. ⁸One parent can stay home and be a home teacher, saving the high cost of childcare. ⁹Finally, motivations can even be negative: sometimes racism, anti-Semitism, or some other hateful reason can cause parents to reject public schooling for homeschooling.

The Central Point

Just as a paragraph may have a main idea, a longer selection may have a **central point**, also known as a **central idea** or **thesis**. The longer selection might be an essay, a reading, or a section of a textbook chapter. You can find a central point in the same way that you find a main idea—by identifying the topic (which is often suggested by the title of the selection) and then looking at the supporting material. The paragraphs within the longer reading will provide supporting details for the central point.



Check Your Understanding

In the following essay, the central point is stated in one sentence. See if you can find and underline this sentence. Then write its number in the space provided.

Peer Pressure

¹We often hear about the dangers of peer pressure to teenagers. ²Teens take drugs, skip school, get drunk, or have sex to impress their friends. ³However, there is another, perhaps equally bad, effect of peer pressure. ⁴Desperate to conform to their friends' values, teens may give up their interests in school, in hobbies, and even in certain people.

⁵Teens may lose or hide their interest in school in order to be like their friends. ⁶They adopt a negative attitude in which school is seen as a battlefield, with teachers and other officials regarded as the enemy. ⁷In private, they may enjoy certain teachers, but in front of their friends, they put on a sarcastic or hostile act. ⁸In addition, teenagers may stop participating in class. ⁹They may refuse to join in class discussions, even when the topic interests them. ¹⁰They may decide it is cool to show up without the assigned homework. ¹¹If their peers demand it, they may interfere with others' learning by disrupting class. ¹²Conforming also means not joining in after-school activities.

¹³Teenagers also give up private pleasures and hobbies to be one of the crowd. ¹⁴Certain pastimes, such as writing poems, practicing piano, reading books, or joining an after-school club may be off-limits because the crowd laughs at them.

¹⁵Most sadly, teenagers sometimes give up the people they love in order to be accepted. ¹⁶If necessary, they sacrifice the old friend who no longer dresses well enough, listens to the wrong kind of music, or refuses to drink or take drugs. ¹⁷Potential boyfriends or girlfriends may be rejected, too, if the crowd doesn't like their looks or values. ¹⁸Teens can even cut their families out of their lives if they are too poor, too conventional, or too different from their friends' parents.

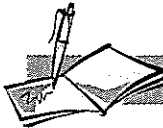
_____ is the number of the sentence that states the central point.

Explanation

The central point is a general statement that covers all or most of the details in a reading. To find the central point of the essay above, look first at its topic. Since the title is "Peer Pressure," and every paragraph is about that subject, we can say "peer pressure" is the topic. Then decide on what point is being made about the topic by looking at the major details of the essay. The first major detail, presented in the second paragraph, is about giving up interest in school as a result of peer pressure. The next major detail, in the third paragraph, is about giving up interest

in hobbies; and the third major detail, in the fourth paragraph, is about giving up interest in certain people.

The central point, then, will be a general statement that covers all of the major details presented. As is often the case, the central point is stated in the first paragraph. Sentence 4 in that paragraph expresses the idea that peer pressure may cause students to give up interest in school, in hobbies, and in certain people.



PRACTICE 9

The author has stated the central point of the following textbook selection in one sentence. Find that sentence, and write its number in the space provided.

Prewriting Strategies

¹Prewriting refers to strategies you can use to generate ideas before starting the first draft of a paper. ²Prewriting techniques have various advantages. ³They encourage imaginative exploration and therefore also help you discover what interests you most about your subject. ⁴Having such a focus early in the writing process keeps you from plunging into your initial draft without first giving some thought to what you want to say. ⁵Prewriting thus saves you time in the long run by keeping you on course.

⁶Prewriting can help in other ways, too. ⁷When we write, we often interfere with our ability to generate material because we continually critique what we put down on paper. ⁸"This makes no sense," "This is stupid," "I can't say that," and other critical thoughts pop into our minds. ⁹Such negative, self-critical comments stop the flow of our thoughts and reinforce the fear that we have nothing to say and aren't very good at writing. ¹⁰During prewriting, you deliberately ignore your internal critic. ¹¹Your purpose is simply to get ideas down on paper without evaluating their effectiveness. ¹²Writing without immediately judging what you produce can be liberating. ¹³Once you feel less pressure, you'll probably find that you can generate a good deal of material. ¹⁴And that can make your confidence soar.

¹⁵One final advantage of prewriting: The random associations typical of prewriting tap the mind's ability to make unusual connections. ¹⁶When you prewrite, you're like an archaeologist going on a dig. ¹⁷On the one hand, you may not unearth anything; on the other hand, you may stumble upon one interesting find after another. ¹⁸Prewriting helps you appreciate—right from the start—this element of surprise in the writing process.

_____ is the number of the sentence that states the central point.