

FINDING THE MAIN IDEA IN PARAGRAPHS

By dividing long passages of text into smaller blocks, writers make their written material more readable. These blocks of text are called **paragraphs**. Each **paragraph** in a piece of writing about a subject is a group of sentences dealing with one idea related to that subject. The **main idea** in a paragraph expresses the particular point the author is trying to make about a subject.

When the main idea is stated in a sentence, we call it the **topic sentence** of the paragraph. Although it is often found at the beginning or at the end of the paragraph, the topic sentence can be found anywhere in the paragraph. The topic sentence is typically the most general sentence in the paragraph, and the remaining sentences provide specific evidence and discussion to "back up" the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. The evidence or support for the main idea can be in the form of reasons, details, facts, and/or examples. Transition words often signal this support.

In the following paragraph about alcohol, the main idea is found in the topic sentence, the first sentence of this paragraph, which makes the point that alcohol affects the brain and nervous system in many ways. The rest of the paragraph gives information about how the brain and nervous system are affected. We have also highlighted some transition words that signal each supporting point and show a relationship between them.

Alcohol affects the brain and nervous system in many ways. **Initially**, only the cortex of the brain is involved--the user experiences loss of judgement, willpower, and self-control. **Then**, when the cerebrum becomes involved, the vision is blurred and the speech is slurred. As the cerebellum becomes involved, the ability to coordinate the muscles is lost. Dizziness, staggering, and eventually the inability to walk indicate that total muscle coordination is lost. **Finally**, total helplessness, unconsciousness, and possibly death may result as alcohol overcomes the entire nervous system.

Sometimes the main idea of a paragraph is not directly stated in one sentence, but is implied or suggested by all of the sentences in the paragraph. In this case, the reader is expected to provide the main idea for the paragraph by considering the information given and drawing a conclusion as to what the general idea behind the information might be. Read the following paragraph.

Between 1846 and 1854 the potato famine caused starvation, forcing one and a half million Irish to leave their country. Others left because they were denied religious freedom. They were not allowed to worship as they pleased. Still others left to rejoin the members of their families who had moved on.

There is no sentence in this paragraph which directly states, "There were several reasons why the Irish left their homeland." That idea is only suggested by the facts presented. The sentence above would be an effective topic sentence for that paragraph, however, because it is a general statement which incorporates the information presented by all of the sentences in the paragraph.

Try to find and underline the main idea in the paragraphs on the attached worksheet by applying the strategies discussed above. Notice that the main idea is not always found in the first sentence.

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Read the following paragraphs. Then underline the sentence that best expresses the main idea.

The behavior of human beings can be very complicated. To find out how we learn, scientists often study the activities of animals. Sometimes they see how long it will take for a mouse to reach food in the center of a maze. Sometimes pigeons or other animals are taught to obtain food by pressing buttons. In the first experiments in space flight, trained chimpanzees and dogs were sent into orbit. They proved that living things could carry out certain activities while whirling about in space.

One early theory likened human memory to a muscle that had to be regularly exercised in order to function properly. This theory was eventually replaced by the notion that remembering was like writing, with experience the pen and the mind a blank page. But eventually this theory was also rejected. In its place came another hypothesis--that human memory functioned like a complex and well-stocked library catalogue. With access to a key word, you could look up any piece of stored or catalogued information. But over time that theory has also been discarded. Human memory may, in fact, be too sophisticated and too complex to be explained through any one single simile or metaphor.

The elderly in America will no longer let themselves be ignored. As older Americans have become a larger percentage of America's total population, they have become increasingly aggressive in demanding their rights. The American Association of Retired Persons and the National Council of Senior Citizens have influenced the passage of laws against discrimination in employment on the basis of age and laws providing better health, housing, social security, and other benefits for older people. The Gray Panthers, led by Maggie Kuhn, is a smaller but more militant organization. In the U.S. House of Representatives, Claude Pepper of Florida was successful in securing passage of laws prohibiting mandatory retirement before age seventy in private employment or at any required age level in federal employment.

Experienced divers know that beneath the sea lies an enchantingly beautiful world. But divers know, too, that the sea has its dangers; among the dangers are members of the family Dasyatidae, more commonly known as stingrays. Stingrays are responsible for a high number of underwater injuries. Lying almost completely covered by sand on the ocean floor, the stingray reacts immediately to the touch of a human hand or foot. The tail whips around and plants a sharp spine in the diver's flesh. Because that spine contains poison-filled glands, a wound from a stingray can cause nausea, diarrhea, decreased blood pressure, occasionally even death. Although there have been cases of stingrays becoming accustomed to and tolerating human beings who feed them, this is the exception, not the rule. Where stingrays are concerned, the best rule is "Divers Beware!"

Read the following paragraphs. Then choose the sentence listed after the paragraph that best expresses the main idea.

Who was Will Rogers? Will Rogers was the cowboy-philosopher who won America's heart in the 1920s. Rogers began his career on stage with the Ziegfeld Follies. But his widely quoted wisecracks about the American political scene soon made him famous nationwide as he skewered politicians of every stripe: "I am not a member of any organized party - I am a Democrat." By the time he died in a plane crash in 1935, Rogers had made over twenty films, and quotes from his newspaper column had even appeared on the front page.

- A. Will Rogers liked to good-naturedly make fun of politicians.
- B. With his mixture of down-home humor and political savvy, Will Rogers became one of the most popular men in America.

When a tornado struck Gainesville, Florida, in April of 1939, a student at Brenau College was studying for an exam. It was a hot day (tornadoes are often preceded by still, stifling heat), and she was sitting in a tubful of water on the top floor of a dormitory. She heard a noise which she described later as sounding like a speeding freight train. The building began to shudder, there were cracking, wrenching noises, and the roof of the dormitory was peeled off. The violent updraft picked up the student, along with other objects-- clothing, furniture, books--and carried her the distance of a block. She landed in thick shrubbery, which cushioned her fall, so that she walked away with only cuts and bruises, although she lost the braces from her teeth. The worst part of her ordeal was seeing a baby blown through the air and being unable to help. Any person who lives through a tornado carries such terrifying memories in the mind's eye for years.

- A. In April of 1939 a tornado struck Gainesville, Florida.
- B. Survivors of a tornado usually have frightening memories for years afterward.

Some of the material above was adapted from the following sources:

Kolzow, Lee Vogel and Lehmann, Jane, College Reading: Strategies for Success. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1988, 103-114.

Fleming, Laraine. Reading for Results. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993, 120-124.