

Finding the Main Idea

To fully understand any selection that you read, it is important to find the main idea and its supporting details. One way to find the main idea is to use a two-step process:

1. Find the topic. Ask who or what the sentence is about.
2. Then find the author's main point about the topic. Ask what the person or thing is doing or what is happening to that person or thing. You now have the main idea.

Any selection that you read will be about a particular topic. The topic is the selection's general subject. The topic of a paragraph, for example, might be "Automobile Safety Features."

1. *Topic:* Automobile Safety Features

Now ask yourself, "What does the author want me to know about the topic?"

The main idea is the writer's primary point about the subject. The main idea of the paragraph about automobile safety features might be that automobile safety features save lives.

1. *Topic:* Automobile Safety Features
2. *Main Idea:* Automobile safety features save lives.

The rest of the paragraph will be a few sentences that give examples of *how* automobile safety features save lives. They might include: seat belts prevent drivers and passengers from being ejected from the car in the event of an accident; air bags cushion vehicle occupants from hitting the windshield or steering wheel during a crash; and backup, or rear-view, cameras can reduce the risk of children being struck by a car that is backing up.

This paragraph would be typical of paragraphs in general; it would have a **topic**, a **main idea** about the topic, and **details** that develop the main idea.

In longer selections made up of many paragraphs, such as an article or essay, there is an overall main idea called the central point or thesis.

In the following paragraph the first sentence is the main idea; the main idea is also underlined.

Office managers have complicated jobs that require expertise in a variety of areas. On the most basic level, an office manager ensures that the materials needed to keep the business running are in stock – including paper clips, pens, and the company's letterhead stationery. Office managers are also responsible for ensuring that the firm's accounting and bookkeeping

figures are accurate and up to date. To do this, familiarity with the computer programs that track billing and records is needed. On another level, much of the office manager's time is taken up with the hiring, training, and dismissing of employees. Knowledge of policy issues, such as OSHA and ADA regulations mandated by the government, is required in personnel-related duties.

In the following paragraph the last sentence is the main idea.

The martial arts are a good way to achieve physical fitness. Karate, for example, stretches and strengthens the leg muscles, and Capoeira kicking drills improve flexibility and balance as well as strengthen the hips and back. Another benefit of the martial arts is psychological well-being. Its emphasis on stress reduction and skill development promotes greater self-confidence and improved self-image. The main goal of the martial arts, however, may be self-defense. The practice of martial arts provides valuable self-defense abilities which might someday be needed as self-protection from an assault or an attack by others. Improving physical fitness, psychological well-being, and acquiring self-defense skills all make the martial arts training a popular choice for many people.

In the following paragraph the last sentence is the main idea.

The foundations of today's popular music were built by an unlikely source: a poor white boy from Tupelo, Mississippi. Elvis Presley's country roots would become a major factor in his success as the King of Rock and Roll. While it is true that Elvis was not the inventor of rock and roll music, he was the first man to introduce postwar youth to the genre that would revolutionize American culture. The role he played in the evolution of popular music is unprecedented. His style has been impersonated, and his music is still revered by young people all over the world. Elvis's impact can be understood through the music he performed, his status as a pop icon, and the lingering presence of his legacy in today's society.

In the following paragraph the last sentence is the main idea.

New breakthroughs in reproductive science and gene therapy are bringing humanity closer to having control over its own genetic make-up and, therefore, its own destiny. While many scientists and proponents of these new technologies are excited about the possibilities of curing disease and improving lives, many others fear the repercussions of tinkering with the genetics of human beings. They fear that what begins as a genuine effort to cure people of deadly disease will turn into an obsession to design and create superior people. Although the study of gene therapy promises breakthroughs in the treatment of illness and the improvement of our quality of life, there are many ethical concerns that need to be addressed.