

Getting the Point: Finding the Main Idea



As readers, it is important that we learn to identify the main idea that an author is trying to express in a passage. As writers, it is also important that we learn to express our main ideas in an effective way.

Whether in reading or writing, all paragraphs have a **topic**, or subject that the paragraph is describing. Paragraphs also usually have a **topic sentence**, or sentence that states the author's position, opinion, view, or point. Topic sentences are often, but not always, found at the start of paragraphs. They can be anywhere in the paragraph.

The **main idea** is the central or most important idea in a paragraph or passage. It is related to the topic and gives a viewpoint, idea, or other point about that topic. For example, a paragraph topic might be recycling, but the topic alone does not tell any special point about recycling. Now look at the sentences below to see what some main ideas about recycling can be.

- a) Every citizen of the planet is responsible to help save it, and all citizens must therefore recycle everything they can every day.
- b) I know I should recycle more, but honestly between washing out jelly jars, breaking down cardboard boxes, and lugging it all to the curb, I find it nearly impossible to do!
- c) Each year, more than 8 million tons of plastic bottles end up in the ocean, polluting our waters and endangering our ocean life;-everyone must recycle all their plastic bottles!

A great way to find the main idea of a paragraph or passage is to 1) *identify the topic*, 2) *look for the topic sentence and/or concluding sentence*, 3) *read all supporting details*, and 4) *ensure understanding of what the author is trying to express*. In other words, really get into the reading, identify all the important parts of it, then put all these together to determine what main idea being shared.

It is just as important to read the supporting sentences and concluding sentences carefully as it is to read the topic sentence to help comprehend the main idea. A **supporting sentence** is a sentence that expands on and supports the topic sentence. Most paragraphs have at least three supporting sentences. A **concluding sentence** is a sentence that usually ends the paragraph and that restates the topic sentence in a different way, therefore further supporting the main idea. By reading the supporting and concluding sentences, we get further clues to the main idea the author is expressing. **To examine this, read the paragraph below.**

Jason is my very “best friend.” Somehow he always remembers to borrow anything of mine he wants without asking, but somehow he never remembers to return any of them. He got mad and threw my Playstation controller one day after I beat him in a game and when it broke, he said he would pay for it but never did. When I told him a secret about my parents, the next day it was all over Facebook and the school and I was totally embarrassed. Yeah, Jason is my “best friend” all right—with friends like him, who needs enemies!

1) What is the topic?

- a) Jason
- b) Facebook
- c) enemies

2) What is the main idea?

- a) Jason is a great best friend
- b) Jason is not a great best friend
- c) Jason is not known by the author

Now that we have seen how to find topics and main ideas, read the two paragraphs below then answer the questions.



Paragraph 1:

Jason is always there whenever I need him. We have so much fun playing basketball and video games almost every day. I can tell him anything and he never tells anyone my secrets. When anyone comes against me, he has my back no matter what. Jason is my very best friend. I hope we stay friends forever!

Paragraph 2:

Jason is my very best friend. He is always there whenever I need him. We have so much fun playing basketball and video games almost every day. I can tell him anything and he never tells anyone my secrets. When anyone comes against me, he has my back no matter what. I hope we stay friends forever!

3) What is the topic?

4) What is the main idea?

5) Which paragraph had the topic sentence at the beginning?

6) Which paragraph had the topic sentence at the end?

Topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences make up a standard formula for readily writing cohesive, clear paragraphs and for understanding what others have written. Together they make main ideas easier to understand when reading and to express when writing!

Parts of a Paragraph

Topic Sentence: This sentence tells the reader the main idea, or what the paragraph will be about.

Supporting Sentence One: This sentence gives specific details relating to the main idea.

Supporting Sentence Two: This sentence gives another specific detail relating to the main idea.

Supporting Sentence Three: This sentence gives more specific details relating to the main idea.

Concluding Sentence: This sentence refers to the topic sentence and sums up the main idea of the paragraph.

Match the vocabulary words to their definitions.

a) supporting sentence

b) concluding sentence

c) topic

d) topic sentence

e) main idea

7) central or most important idea in a paragraph or passage _____

8) subject that the paragraph is describing _____

9) sentence that states the author's position, opinion, view, or point _____

10) sentence that expands on and supports the topic sentence _____

11) often at the end, it restates topic sentence in a different way _____

Answer T or F for the statements below.

12) Most paragraphs have at least five supporting sentences. _____

13) There is no effective way to find the main idea of a paragraph. _____

14) Topic, supporting, and concluding sentences make up a standard format for understanding and writing paragraphs. _____

15) By learning to identify and express main ideas, we can improve our writing skills and increase our reading comprehension. _____