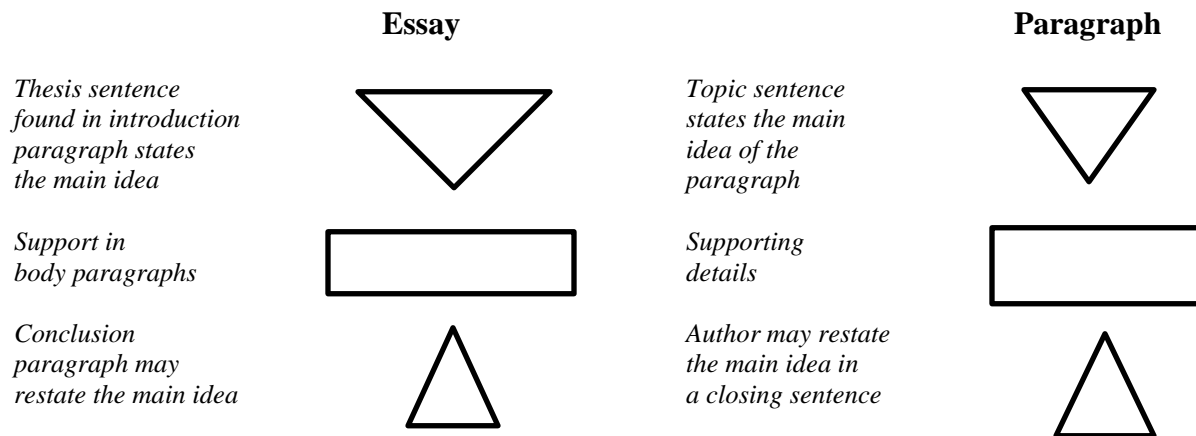


The "You're Going to Love Finding the Main Idea" Cheat Sheet

Finding the main idea in a paragraph is an important reading skill. The **main idea** of a paragraph, usually stated in a **topic sentence**, is the central idea of the paragraph. The **main idea** is a combination of the paragraph's topic and the writer's main point about that topic. **Details** such as facts, examples, and other types of evidence, are NOT the thesis. They develop the topic, elaborating and proving the thesis.

Here's how to find the main idea: Analyze the paragraph the same way a writer narrows a topic to write a paragraph or essay for a writing teacher. In an essay, the thesis sentence states the main, or central, idea of the essay. In a paragraph, the topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. Study the following comparison between essays and paragraphs

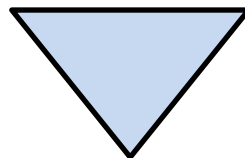


Part One

Most paragraphs fall into a pattern. However, the paragraphs in newspapers, in textbooks, and on tests do not always follow the general-to-specific pattern of the example above. The **main idea** or **topic sentence** is usually found in one of the following five patterns:

1. The topic sentence is the first or second sentence. This is the most common pattern, where the author starts off with the main idea and then develops it with supporting details.

Topic Sentence
Supporting Details



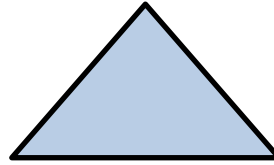
Example:

There is some evidence that colors affect you psychologically. For example, when subjects are exposed to red light, respiratory movements increase; exposure to blue decreases respiratory movements. Similarly, eye blinks increase in frequency when eyes are exposed to red light and decrease when exposed to blue. This seems consistent with intuitive feelings about blue being more soothing and red being more arousing. After changing a school's walls from orange and white to blue, the blood pressure of the students decreased while their academic performance improved.*

2. The topic sentence is the last sentence. Authors will use this pattern to help the reader come to the same conclusion/main idea. By giving all of the supporting details, or proof, first, the reader will likely reach the same main idea as the one given in the last sentence.

Supporting Details

Topic Sentence



Example:

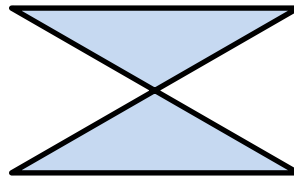
Is there a relationship between aspects of one's personality and that person's state of physical health? Can psychological evaluations of an individual be used to predict physical as well as psychological disorders? Is there such a thing as a disease-prone personality? Our response is very tentative, and the data are not all supportive, but for the moment we can say yes, there does seem to be a positive correlation between some personality variables and physical health.*

3. The topic sentence is the first/second sentence AND the last sentence. Writers like to use this pattern to introduce the main idea early so that the reader's comprehension of the main idea is easier; they repeat the main idea to emphasize the point.

Topic Sentence

Supporting Details

Topic Sentence



Example:

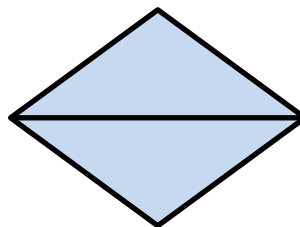
Many elderly people have trouble getting the care and treatment they need for ailments. Most hospitals, designed to handle injuries and acute illness that are common to the young, do not have the facilities or personnel to treat the chronic degenerative diseases of the elderly. Many doctors are also ill-prepared to deal with such problems. As Fred Cottrell points out, "There is a widespread feeling among the aged that most doctors are not interested in them and are reluctant to treat people who are as little likely to contribute to the future as the aged are reputed to do." Even with the help of Medicare, the elderly in the United States often have a difficult time getting the health care that they need.*

4. The topic sentence is in the middle of the paragraph. Writers begin the paragraph by giving background information or interesting details to create interest, put the topic sentence in the middle, and then add details to support their ideas.

Supporting Details

Topic Sentence

Supporting Details



Example:

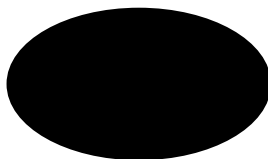
There are 1,500 species of bacteria and approximately 8,500 species of birds. The carrot family alone has about 3,500 species, and there are 15,000 known species of wild orchids.

Clearly, the task of separating various living things into their proper groups is not an easy task.

With the insect family, the problem becomes even more complex. For example, there are about 300,000 species of beetles. In fact, certain species are disappearing from the earth before we can even identify and classify them.*

5. The paragraph does not have a topic sentence. The *main idea* is *implied* or unstated. That means that the reader must state the main idea in his/her own words.

Supporting Details



The Black Hole!

Example:

The average American consumer eats 21 pounds of snack foods in a year, but people in the West Central part of the country consume the most (24 pounds per person) whereas those in the Pacific and Southeast regions eat “only” 19 pounds per person. Pretzels are the most popular snack in the mid-Atlantic area, pork rinds are most likely to be eaten in the South, and multigrain chips turn up as a favorite in the West. Not surprisingly, the Hispanic influence in the Southwest has influenced snacking preferences—consumers in that part of the United States eat about 50 percent more tortilla chips than do people elsewhere.*

Part Two

Once you learn the patterns, you can use the following general guidelines to help you eliminate confusion and save time.

1. To find the main idea or topic sentence in a paragraph
 - a. Read the entire paragraph. Look up any words you do not know in a dictionary.
 - b. Ask yourself, "What was the topic of the paragraph?" Write your answer.
 - c. Ask yourself, "What was the main point the author was making about that topic?" Write your answer.
 - d. Look for the most general sentence in the paragraph, which should be a sentence that relates to what you wrote. This sentence will be the topic sentence.
 - e. If you cannot find a sentence that relates to what you wrote, verify that you have correctly identified the topic and main point. If you did correctly identify the topic and main point, then the main idea is likely implied or unstated. Write your own sentence in the margin that states the main idea.
2. The main idea or topic sentence is should not be stated as a question or as part of an anecdote or story.
3. The main idea or topic sentence will not be a definition.
4. Watch for words like *clearly*, *then*, *therefore*, and *so* to signal the main idea or topic sentence.

5. Consider the author's purpose. What is the author trying to achieve by the paragraph or essay? What is the author trying to *inform* the reader of? What is the author trying to *persuade* the reader of?
6. Is the author using a standard pattern of organization, such as narration, comparison-contrast, or problem-solution? If so, then it will be easier for you to identify the major points. The following clue words may help you identify a pattern.

Cause-Effect: cause, effect, so, consequently, therefore

Classification/Division/Topical: headings, subheadings, and numbers may be used

Comparison-Contrast: in comparison, in contrast, similarly, likewise, on the other hand

Definition and Example: defined as, is, is stated as, for example, for instance, to illustrate

Descriptive: inside, outside, above, below, next to, to the right, behind, in front of

Enumeration/Listing: first, second, third, in addition, also, besides

Narration/ Process/Time Order: first, next, soon, after, after that, the next day, an hour later

Problem-Solution: problem, solution, answer, solve, question, deal with this

Part Three

Practice finding the main idea or topic sentence in the paragraphs below. Underline the topic sentence. If the main idea of a paragraph is implied, write your own topic sentence for that paragraph in the margin.

Paragraph 1 Topic: Safe Tires

(1) There are three ways you can be sure the tires on your car give you a safe ride. (2) First, buy good tires of the right kind. (3) The handbook in your car tells you what kind is best. (4) Second, keep the right air pressure in the tires. (5) Check the air in each tire once a month. (6) Third take good care of your tires. (7) Change tires around to even the wear; all four tires should show equal wear.

Paragraph 2 Topic: Maturity

(1) Age is not the only sign of a mature person. (2) Both young and old can judge what is right. (3) Maturity means choosing right over wrong. (4) Mature people learn about laws and obey them. (5) They do their jobs well even if they will not be checked by someone. (6) They take the blame for their mistakes in good spirit. (7) They don't blame others. (8) They take good care of things that belong to others. (9) Mature people respect their bodies' needs for food, rest, and exercise. (10) Mature people are responsible for their own behavior, property, and health.

Paragraph 3 Topic: Swimming

(1) An effective schedule of swimming is one thousand yards in about thirty minutes, three times a week. (2) In a forty-foot pool, this would be seventy-five laps without stopping. (3) A swimming program of this type conditions the heart and lungs. (4) Red blood cells and hemoglobin, which carry oxygen to the tissues, brain, and kidneys, are built up. (5) More blood and oxygen get to the tissues, brain, and kidneys. (6) Swimming increases your energy. (7) It builds resistance to disease. (8) Swimming gives you a sense of well-being. (9) Your mind is kept alert and functions better.

Paragraph 4 Topic: A Great United States Speaker

(1) William Jennings Bryan was among the great speakers Americans flocked to hear in tents in the early part of the twentieth century. (2) Bryan spoke on at least three thousand platforms set up in large, brown tents throughout the United States. (3) When he was to speak, forty acres of parked cars gave witness to his popularity. (4) Whole families came to hear his powerful voice. (5) He never grew weary and never let the weather deter him. (6) No topic escaped his interest. (7) He gave inspirational talks on popular themes. (8) He pounded his fists and expounded on political issues. (9) He shared his views on philosophy and religion. (10) The energy and fire of William Jennings Bryan's speeches drew huge crowds and made him one of the greatest speakers in the history of the United States.

Paragraph 5 Topic: Uncle Sam

(1) Everyone recognizes the Uncle Sam pictured in cartoons and posters and portrayed as a costumed figure in parades. (2) He is easily identified as a tall, lanky gentleman in striped pants and cutaway coat. (3) His height is accentuated by his top hat with its star-studded band. (4) His name comes from Uncle Sam Wilson, a merchant who sold supplies to the U.S. government during the war of 1812. (5) Uncle Sam Wilson labeled his casks U.S. for identification. (6) For some reason, U.S. became an abbreviation with dual meanings: United States and Uncle Sam. (7) Uncle Sam's appearance comes from the collective genius of America's political cartoonists. (8) The cartoon figure, Uncle Sam, which has remained a popular symbol for the United States, has a curious origin.

Paragraph 6 Topic: The Diplomatic Reception Room

(1) Presidents have sometimes addressed the nation from the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House. (2) The furnishings of the room were chosen to illustrate examples of early American crafts. (3) Into the beautiful cream-colored rug are woven the seals of the fifty states. (4) Furniture in the style of early New England is upholstered in yellow. (5) The entire design of the room uses the colors gold and white, which were popular in the early days of the Republic. (6) The wall paper continues the theme, with views of Niagra Falls, Boston Harbor, West Point, New York Bay, and other landmarks of the early nineteenth century. (7) The Diplomatic Reception Room in the White House creates an early-American atmosphere.

Paragraph 7 Topic: Creative People

(1) Children ask many questions, but as they grow older, many stop asking. (2) There are many reasons why creative people continue to ask a lot of questions while less creative people stop. (3) One reason they stopped as children is that adults got tired of answering their questions. (4) Another reason has to do with "being smart." (5) They didn't want to look "dumb", so they pretended to know a lot. (6) Creative people continued asking questions even when adults were tired of giving answers. (7) And they didn't worry as much about looking "dumb."

Part Four

Now, practice finding the main ideas in this essay. Underline the thesis twice and the topic sentences twice. If the main idea of a paragraph is unstated, write your own topic sentence in the margin.

The Bounty of the Sea **By Jacques Cousteau**

During the past thirty years, I have observed and studied the oceans closely, and with my own two eyes I have seen them sicken. Certain reefs that teemed with fish only ten years ago are now almost lifeless. The ocean bottom has been raped by trawlers. Priceless wetlands have been destroyed by landfill. And everywhere are sticky globs of oil, plastic refuse, and unseen clouds of poisonous effluents. Often, when I describe the symptoms of the oceans' sickness, I hear remarks like "they're only fish" or "they're only whales" or "they're only birds." But I assure you that our destinies are linked with theirs in the most profound and fundamental manner. For if the oceans should die—by which I mean that all life in the sea would finally cease—this would signal the end not only for marine life but for all other animals and plants of the earth, including man.

With life departed, the ocean would become, in effect, one enormous cesspool. Billions of decaying bodies, large and small, would create such an insupportable stench that man would be forced to leave all the coastal regions. But far worse would follow.

The ocean acts as the earth's buffer. It maintains a fine balance between the many salts and gases which make life possible. But dead seas would have no buffering effect. The carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere would start on a steady and remorseless climb, and when it reached a certain level a "greenhouse effect" would be created. The heat that normally radiates outward from the earth to space would be blocked by the CO₂, and sea level temperatures would dramatically increase.

One catastrophic effect of this heat would be melting of the icecaps at both the North and South Poles. As a result, the ocean would rise by 100 feet or more, enough to flood almost all the world's major cities. These rising waters would drive one-third of the earth's billions inland, creating famine, fighting, chaos, and disease on a scale almost impossible to imagine.

Meanwhile, the surface of the ocean would have scummed over with a thick film of decayed matter, and would no longer be able to give water freely to the skies through evaporation. Rain would become a rarity, creating global drought and even more famine.

But the final act is yet to come. The wretched remnant of the human race would now be packed cheek by jowl on the remaining highlands, bewildered, starving, struggling to survive from hour to hour. Then would be visited upon them the final plague, anoxia (lack of oxygen). This would be caused by the extinction of plankton algae and the reduction of land vegetation, the two sources that supply the oxygen you are now breathing.

And so man would finally die, slowly gasping out his life on some barren hill. He would have survived the oceans by perhaps thirty years. And his heirs would be bacteria and a few scavenger insects.[^]

Part Five

Some authors write in a more rambling style, putting the thesis somewhere in the middle of the essay, article, or chapter or developing more than one idea in a support paragraph. In times like this the questioning method—focusing on answering who, what, where, when, why, and how about the subject may help you find the important information in a text.

Closely read this excerpt from the textbook titled *Sociology: A Down-to-Earth Approach*. After you've read it, think about the author's purpose—what does he want you to

know about urban legends in general? And what facts does he give you about urban legends? Use the questioning method to find out the important information about urban legends.

Urban Legends **James M. Henslin**

Did you hear about Katie and Paul? They were parked at Echo Bay, listening to the radio, when the music was interrupted by an announcement that a rapist-killer had escaped from prison. Instead of a right hand, he had a hook. Katie said they should leave, but Paul laughed and said there wasn't any reason to go. When they heard a strange noise, Paul agreed to take her home. When Katie opened the door, she heard something clink. It was a hook hanging on the door handle!

For decades, some version of "The Hook" story has circulated among Americans. It has appeared as a "genuine" letter in "Dear Abby," and some of my students heard it in grade school. **Urban legends** are stories with an ironic twist that sound realistic but are false. Although untrue, they usually are told by people who believe that they happened.

Another urban legend that has made the rounds is the "Kentucky Fried Rat."

One night, a woman didn't have anything ready for supper, so she and her husband went to the drive-through at Kentucky Fried Chicken. While they were eating in their car, the wife said, "My chicken tastes funny."

Her husband said, "You're always complaining about something." When she insisted that the chicken didn't taste right, he put on the light. She was holding fried rat—crispy style. The woman went into shock and was rushed to the hospital.

A lawyer from the company offered them \$100,000 if they would sign a release and not tell anyone. This was the second time this happened.

Folklorist Jan Brunvand (1981, 1984, 1986) reported that urban legends are passed on by people who think that the event happened just one or two people down the line of transmission, often to a "friend of a friend." The story has strong appeal and gains credibility from naming specific people or local places. Brunvand views urban legends as "modern morality stories"; each one teaches a moral lesson about life.

If we apply Brunvand's analysis to these two urban legends, three major points emerge. First, these morals serve as warnings. "The Hook" warns young people that they should be careful about where they go, with whom they go, and what they do. The world is an unsafe place, and "messing around" is risky. "The Kentucky Fried Rat" contains a different moral: Do you really know what you are eating when you buy food from a fast-food outlet? Maybe you should eat at home, where you know what you are getting.

Second, each story is related to social change: "The Hook" to changing sexual morality, the "Kentucky Fried Rat" to changing male-female relationships, especially to changing sex roles at home. Third, each is calculated to instill guilt and fear: guilt—the wife failed in her traditional role of cooking supper, and she was punished; and fear—we should all be afraid of the dangerous unknown, whether it lurks in the dark countryside or inside our bucket of chicken. The ultimate moral of these stories is that we should not abandon traditional roles or the safety of the home.

These principles can be applied to an urban legend that made the rounds in the late 1980s. I heard several versions of this one; each narrator swore that it had just happened to a friend of a friend.

Jerry (or whoever) went to a nightclub last weekend. He met a good-looking woman, and they hit it off. They spent the night in a motel. When he got up the next morning, the woman was gone. When he went into the bathroom, he saw a message scrawled on the mirror in lipstick:

"Welcome to the wonderful world of AIDS."

What moral and aspects of social change does this legend illustrate?*

*From McWhorter, Kathleen T. *Reading Across the Disciplines: College Reading and Beyond*. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007. 39-50 and 170-72.

^From Conlin, Mary Lou. *Patterns Plus: A Short Prose Reader with Argumentation*. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995. 281-82