



## Main Idea: Paragraphs

When a person exercises, the heart beats faster than when the person is at rest. After exercise, the heart beat returns to its resting rate. Usually, the more quickly a person's heartbeat returns to its resting rate, the fitter that person is. Use the length of time it takes for a person's heartbeat to return to its resting rate as a level of fitness. (Mathematics 9, Nelson)

Most children want to be more like their mother than their father, according to a recent survey of over two thousand children aged from 5 to 12 years old. Thirty-five percent of the ten-year-olds wanted to have the same jobs as their mothers. Only 5 percent wanted their father's jobs. Twenty-five percent of all the boys surveyed wanted jobs like their mothers had, but 10 percent of them wanted their fathers' jobs. The other children wanted different careers than their parents. (Mathematics 9, Nelson)

A Canadian chemical company that hopes to sell its products in Romania may need to hire an interpreter to communicate with potential customers. But the interpreter does not need to translate the formulas of any chemicals. That is because all countries use the same chemical symbols to represent elements and compounds, even when the name is different. For example, the same symbol, Fe, represents the element that people call *iron* in Canada, *fer* in France, and *fier* in Romania. A chemist in any country can identify the content of the bottle in **Figure 1**. (Science 9, Nelson)

When the farmer wants to add fertilizers to the soil, there are two choices: natural or chemical. The farmer can choose a natural fertilizer, such as manure or compost. Such fertilizers are often called "organic" fertilizers, because they are natural materials produced by living organisms. Many people favor this kind of fertilizer because it recycles materials that otherwise might be wasted. Such fertilizers can also save energy because the manure or compost may be produced on or near the farm and will probably not require transportation over long distances. A disadvantage of using natural fertilizers, apart from a rather powerful smell, is that farmers cannot know the exact amounts of nutrients that they are adding. Very large farms also may have difficulty obtaining enough natural fertilizer for their needs. (Science 9, Nelson)

Understanding factors that affect how quickly a substance dissolves is important to the manufacturing of medicines, dyes, and processed foods. For example, some kinds of cold relief remedies are powders that must be mixed with hot water. Scientists who work for drug companies do tests to ensure the powder dissolves quickly in hot water. Understanding how

substances dissolve in other substances is an important part of their job. When you add sugar to a drink, several factors affect how quickly the sugar dissolves. Based on your experience, you probably have some idea of what these are. But have you ever tested your ideas? (Science 7, Nelson)

Since trains can move people and huge loads long distances, they are an efficient mode of transportation. The development of railway systems has been very important in the spread of settlement and growth in many countries. In Canada, transcontinental railways moved large numbers of people and great quantities of materials across the continent. This helped to open up new areas and build our nation. (Physical Geography, Gage)

From outer space, the surface of the earth appears to be relatively smooth, with large bodies of water between the continents. But we know that there are huge mountains, flat plains, and deep valleys on each of the large land masses. Some of the mountains are so high that very few people have ever reached their summits. If we were to drain the oceans we would find great trenches - some deeper than the height of the highest mountains. Humans have inhabited almost every landform on the surface of the earth and have discovered the patterns that exist in them. In fact, patterns are all around us. Geographers study the patterns made by nature, and by people, to help us understand our world. (Physical Geography, Gage)

He felt weak and very tired. He felt alone and wet and feverish and chilled, and he knew he was going to die now, and the knowledge made him suddenly sad. He was not frightened. For some reason, he was not frightened. He was only filled with an overwhelming sadness that his life would be over at sixteen. He felt all at once as if he had never done anything, never seen anything, never been anywhere. There were so many things to do and he wondered why he'd never thought of them before, wondered why the rumbles and the jumps and the purple jacket had always seemed so important to him before, and now they seemed like such small things in a world he was missing, a world that was rushing past at the other end of the alley. (*On the Sidewalk Bleeding*, Evan Hunter)



## Main Idea: Things to do

- Turn Headings into main ideas.
- Unscramble, scrambled paragraphs.
- Unscramble, scrambled series of paragraphs.
- For lists of facts or details, write main ideas.
- For longer sentences with lots of modifying elements, reduce to main idea.
- Establish usual position of main idea.

at beginning (most likely)

at end (next likely)

in middle (occasionally)

- Remove titles and have students compose them.
- Write summaries. (Stage them: reduce paragraphs to single ideas; then take those single ideas and reduce them to a single, single idea for a longer passage.)
- Paraphrase longer passages (put this in a few of your own words).
- Use “the bottom line” metaphor. Attach a bottom line to passages to be completed by students. (See game show below)
- Use various graphic organizers to visually point to a central idea.

### Extension:

Move to multiple paragraph texts and demonstrate a step-by-step process for finding, first, the main ideas of sections of that passage and then combining those to formulate a single main idea for the whole passage.

## Bottom Line Game Show

- Collect paragraphs from different subject area textbooks. For each passage, create 3 possible main ideas, one of which is correct.
- Game show contestants select a subject area.
- Option One: Oral: Host **reads** a passage. Contestants use beepers, say *bottom line*, to get first shot at identifying the correct main idea.

- Contestant must select correct main idea (from an overhead of 3). Host (teacher) is judge.
- Option Two: Contestants must READ the passage from an overhead and use beeper, *say bottom line*, and then host puts up overhead.
- Variation: Contestants are given a main idea and must say a brief speech including 3 things relevant to that idea: again, they use beepers to get first go.
- Point system and prizes need to be worked out.



## Main Ideas / Not Facts

Facts don't make good main ideas. Main ideas (often the opening sentence) are claims, viewpoints or opinions that need further support.

Is the first sentence of this paragraph

fact?

opinion?

When a person exercises, the heart beats faster than when the person is at rest. After exercise, the heart beat returns to its resting rate. Usually, the more quickly a person's heartbeat returns to its resting rate, the fitter that person is. Use the length of time it takes for a person's heartbeat to return to its resting rate as a level of fitness. (Mathematics 9, Nelson)

Write a good main idea for this paragraph.

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Is the first sentence of this paragraph

fact?

opinion?

Most children want to be more like their mother than their father, according to a recent survey of over two thousand children aged from 5 to 12 years old. Thirty-five percent of the ten-year-olds wanted to have the same jobs as their mothers. Only 5 percent wanted their father's jobs. Twenty-five percent of all the boys surveyed wanted jobs like their mothers had, but 10 percent of them wanted their fathers' jobs. The other children wanted different careers than their parents. (Mathematics 9, Nelson)

Is that first sentence the main idea?



# Distinguishing Main Idea From Support

Instructions: **Unscramble the Paragraph**

1. Sort the sentences so that they are in the right reading order to make a good paragraph.
2. Underline the *linking words and phrases* that helped you do this task.

*To understand clearly what you read, you sometimes have to MAKE a main idea. The writer's words imply something. The strategic reader will draw the appropriate conclusion.*

3. Write a main idea for the paragraph - the idea that all this discussion of chemical formulas implies.

That is because all countries use the same chemical symbols to represent elements and compounds, even when the name is different. A chemist in any country can identify the content of the bottle in **Figure 1**.

For example, the same symbol, Fe, represents the element that people call *iron* in Canada, *fer* in France, and *fier* in Romania.

But the interpreter does not need to translate the formulas of any chemicals.

A Canadian chemical company that hopes to sell its products in Romania may need to hire an interpreter to communicate with potential customers.

(Science 9, Nelson)



# Main Idea & Patterns of Thinking

Writers use different patterns of organization to make information clear. The pattern tells something about their purpose. Here are some of those purposes and PATTERNS.

- Let me EXPLAIN something to you....
- I'll DESCRIBE it for you.....
  
- My ARGUMENT is that...
- I want to COMPARE the similarities and differences for you...
- Let me DEFINE what this means....
- There is a GOOD SIDE / BAD SIDE to this....
- There is a SEQUENCE to be followed, and it's this...

From the list of patterns, select TWO that are in the paragraph below.

When the farmer wants to add fertilizers to the soil, there are two choices: natural or chemical. The farmer can choose a natural fertilizer, such as manure or compost. Such fertilizers are often called “organic” fertilizers, because they are natural materials produced by living organisms. Many people favor this kind of fertilizer because it recycles materials that otherwise might be wasted. Such fertilizers can also save energy because the manure or compost may be produced on or near the farm and will probably not require transportation over long distances. A disadvantage of using natural fertilizers, apart from a rather powerful smell, is that farmers cannot know the exact amounts of nutrients that they are adding. Very large farms also may have difficulty obtaining enough natural fertilizer for their needs. (Science 9, Nelson)

Of those two, which seems to be the **main** pattern?

Now you are ready to write a main idea for this paragraph. What is it?





## Locating Main Idea

Main ideas usually come first. But it's not always that way. Look at these sentences. The underlined part is the main idea.

The farmer can choose a natural fertilizer, such as manure or compost.

When the farmer wants to add fertilizers to the soil, there are two choices: natural or chemical.

From outer space, the surface of the earth appears to be relatively smooth, with large bodies of water between the continents.

Where is the main idea sentence in this paragraph? Can you offer some proof for your answer?

Since trains can move people and huge loads long distances, they are an efficient mode of transportation. The development of railway systems has been very important in the spread of settlement and growth in many countries. In Canada, transcontinental railways moved large numbers of people and great quantities of materials across the continent. This helped to open up new areas and build our nation. (Physical Geography, Gage)

Where is the main idea in this paragraph? Offer some explanation for your answer.

From outer space, the surface of the earth appears to be relatively smooth, with large bodies of water between the continents. But we know that there are huge mountains, flat plains, and deep valleys on each of the large land masses. Some of the mountains are so high that very few people have ever reached their summits. If we were to drain the oceans we would find great trenches - some deeper than the height of the highest mountains. Humans have inhabited almost every landform on the surface of the earth and have discovered the patterns that exist in them. In fact, patterns are all around us. Geographers study the patterns made by nature, and by people, to help us understand our world. (Physical Geography, Gage)



# Implied Main Ideas

Writers don't always WRITE the main idea they have in mind. Often, in a paragraph or longer piece, the writer is collecting ideas or information that lead the reader to a main idea. *But the reader, to really understand, has to formulate it.*

Basically, when the writer gives you the main idea, it is usually quite clear. When the main idea is *implied*, the challenge is stronger.

When you read to understand, you should find yourself struggling to think the main idea. This will help you read on.

Write the main idea *you get* from reading this paragraph of a story.

He felt weak and very tired. He felt alone and wet and feverish and chilled, and he knew he was going to die now, and the knowledge made him suddenly sad. He was not frightened. For some reason, he was not frightened. He was only filled with an overwhelming sadness that his life would be over at sixteen. He felt all at once as if he had never done anything, never seen anything, never been anywhere. There were so many things to do and he wondered why he'd never thought of them before, wondered why the rumbles and the jumps and the purple jacket had always seemed so important to him before, and now they seemed like such small things in a world he was missing, a world that was rushing past at the other end of the alley. (*On the Sidewalk Bleeding*, Evan Hunter)

Main Idea:

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