



COLLEGE OF IDAHO

Main Idea

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The main idea of a paragraph or article is the author's message about the topic. It is often expressed directly, or it can be implied.

The main idea usually includes the topic and the author's attitude or opinion about the topic. To identify the main idea, ask yourself:

1. Who or what is the paragraph about? The answer is the topic. The topic can be stated in just a few words.
2. What is the author's controlling point about the topic? The answer is the main idea.

The main idea is stated in one sentence.

Topic + Point = Main Idea

The cooldown period is an important part of an exercise workout.

Often, but not always, the main idea of a paragraph is written as that paragraph's topic sentence. A topic sentence is a single sentence that states the topic and words that qualify the topic by revealing the author's opinion about the topic or the author's approach to the topic. Topic sentences can also reveal the author's thought pattern or organizational strategy.

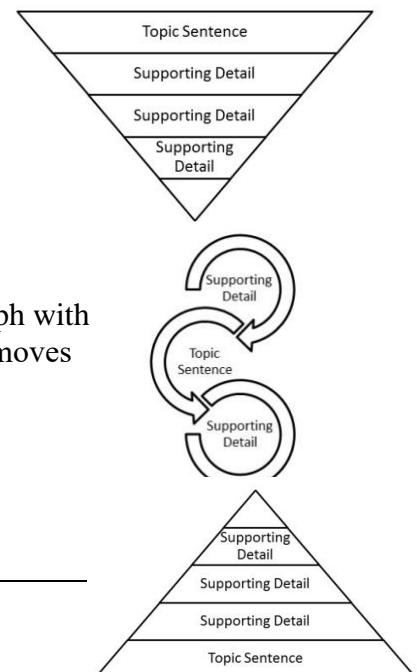
Topic + Point + Thought Pattern = Topic Sentence

The cooldown period is an important part of an exercise workout for several reasons.

Main Idea or Topic Sentence Placement

It is easy to identify a main idea or topic sentence that is directly expressed in the text. Main ideas are often found:

- at the beginning of paragraphs. The first sentence often explains the subject being discussed in the passage. The topic sentence is the one sentence that is general enough to include all the ideas in the paragraph. Therefore, a topic sentence that begins a paragraph or appears within the first few sentences of a paragraph signals a move from general ideas to specific ideas.
- in the middle of paragraphs. At times, an author begins a paragraph with details to stir the reader's interest in the topic. The flow of ideas moves from the specific to the general and back to the specific.
- in the concluding sentences of a paragraph. The main idea can be





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expressed as a summation of the information in the paragraph as well as a link to the information in the next paragraph. This allows the details to build up to the main idea and is sometimes called “climactic order.”

Implied Main Idea

The main idea is not always clearly stated. It is more difficult to identify a main idea when it is inferred or implied, but is strongly suggested by the supporting details. It can be implied through other words in the paragraph. An implied main idea can be found in several ways.

1. The topic
2. The supporting details: facts, examples, descriptions, and explanations given
3. The author’s thought pattern
4. The author’s purpose

Remember, the main idea must be broad enough to cover all the details in the paragraph without being so broad that it includes details not mentioned.

Determining Main Idea

If you are able to summarize the information in the passage in your own words, you have absorbed the correct main idea. To accomplish this goal, try the steps listed below after reading a short section of your textbook.

- Write a short summary in your own words about what you have read.
- Does your summary agree with this general topic?
- Does your summary contain the same ideas being expressed by the author?
- Could you write a headline (or textbook subheading) that would express your summary in less than five words?

If you are able to rephrase your choice of a topic sentence into a question and then determine if the passage answers your question, you have been successful at selecting a main idea.