

## MAIN IDEAS AND SUPPORTING DETAILS

### DEFINITION OF A PARAGRAPH

- A group or *specifically* and *intentionally* related sentences; a *thought unit*; sentences that revolve around a *single idea* and is a writer's attempt to develop an idea or part of an idea.

#### Organization of a Paragraph

1. Statement of the main idea.
2. Elaboration of the main idea and supporting details.
3. Restatement of the main idea-summary of main ideas or conclusions.

### TOPIC

The **topic** is the subject that the selection is about. The main idea can usually be located if you can determine what the topic is. To find the topic of a selection, ask the simple question, “**Who or what is the selection about?**”

EXAMPLE: *Consumers concerned about the hazards or noise can reduce noise pollution in many ways. They can purchase noisy products such as garbage disposals and lawn mowers with reduced noise levels. They can also use sound-absorbing materials in their home. Carpeting can be installed instead of hard flooring, and cork and fabric can be used in rooms that tend to be noisy. Also, people can become less noisy themselves. They can learn to avoid shouting, to close doors without slamming them, and to play radios, TV sets, and stereos at moderate levels.*

TOPIC OF THIS PARAGRAPH: noise pollution or noise pollution in the home.

### MAIN IDEA

- **Chief point** an author is making about a topic. It sums up the author's primary message.

Topic Sentence: Statement of the main idea. It is the statement under which all other material in the paragraph – examples, reasons, facts, details and other evidence – can fit.

EXAMPLE: (refer to above example)

Notice that all information is after the first sentence is about ways to reduce noise pollution. The first sentence is the most general –

it states that there are ways to reduce noise pollution. It summarizes the other statements in the paragraph.

### Location of the Topic Sentence

Topic sentences are usually in the **first sentence** of the paragraph, but not always. They may also be located **within the paragraph** or at the **end of the paragraph**. They may even appear **twice** – at the **beginning** and at the **end**.

**EXAMPLE: WITHIN A PARAGRAPH** – Preceded by one or more introductory sentence that may relate the main idea to the previous paragraph, arouse the reader’s interest or give background for the main reason.

The physical complaints of neurotics – people who are overly anxious, pessimistic, hostile, or tense – were once largely ignored by physician. Many doctors believed that the frequent complaint of neurotic were exaggerations. However, new research shows that neurotics are, fact, more likely to have physical problems. Specifically, researchers found neurotics stand a grater chance of having five particular ailments: arthritis, asthma, ulcers, headaches, and heart disease. In addition, there is evidence that people who are pessimistic in their teens and twenties are more likely to become ill or die in their forties.

**Main idea:** Third sentences. The two sentences before the topic sentence introduce the question of the physical health of neurotics. The topic sentence gives the writer’s main ideas on the topic. The last two sentences develop the main idea by giving specific details of the relevant research.

**EXAMPLE: END OF THE PARAGRAPH**-Previous sentences build up to the main idea.

*A study at one prison show that owning a pet can change a hardened prison inmate into a more caring person. Another study discovered that senior citizens, both those living alone and those in nursing homes, became more interested in life when they were given pets to care for. Even emotionally disturbed children have been observed to smile and react with interest if there is a cuddly kitten or puppy to hold. Animals, then, can be a means of therapy for many kinds of individuals.*

**EXAMPLE: BEGINNING AND END OF THE PARAGRAPH**

*We are on our way to becoming a cashless, checkless society, a trend that began with the credit card. Now some banks are offering “debit cards” instead of the credit cards. That costs of purchases made with these cards are deducted from the holder’s bank account instead of being added the a monthly bill. And checking accounts, which are mainly used for paying bills, are going electronic. Now some people can make computer transactions over their pushbutton phones*

*to pay bills by transferring money from their account to the account of whomever they owe. Soon we may be able to conduct most of our business without signing a check or actually seeing the money we earn and spend.*

### Topic Sentences That Cover More Than One Paragraph

Sometimes, you find a topic sentence that provides a main idea for more than one paragraph. This occurs when the author feels that the development of the main idea may be too lengthy for one paragraph.

### MAIN IDEAS THAT ARE INFERRED

- Sometimes a selection lacks a topic sentence but that does not mean that it lacks a main idea. The author simply lets the details of the selection suggest the main idea. You must figure out the implied idea by deciding the points of all the details.

#### EXAMPLE:

*In ancient times, irrational behavior was considered the result of demons and evil spirits taking possession of a person. Later, Greeks looked upon irrational behavior as a physical problem – caused by an imbalance of body fluids called “humors” – or by displacement of an organ. In the highly superstitious Middle Ages, the theory of possession by demons was revived. It reached a high point again in the witch-hunts of eighteenth-century Europe and America. Only in the last one hundred years did true medical explanations gain wide acceptance and were categories of illnesses changed.*

No sentence is a good topic sentence that covers all other sentences. We must ask ourselves, “**What is the main point the author is trying to make up with these details?**” “**Does all or most of the material support this idea?**” In this case, the details show that *people have explained mental illness in man different ways over the years*. Although this is not stated, it is a broad enough summary to include all other material in the paragraph—it is the main idea.

### SUPPORTING DETAILS

- A paragraph contains facts, statements, examples-specifics which guide us to a full understanding of the main idea. They clarify, illuminate, explain, describe, expand and illustrate the main idea and are *supporting details*.

#### Determining Supporting Details

1. Decide which details help to further the story line.
2. Decide which details help you to understand the main idea.
3. Answer question raised by the main idea (*who, what when, why or how*).

### Types of Supporting Materials

1. **COMPARISONS** in which one thing is shown to be like another.  
EXAMPLE: Skilled college students are like the unskilled students in their desire for a diploma.
2. **CONTRASTS** in which one things is shown to differ from another.  
EXAMPLE: Skilled students are different from unskilled students in that they use a method to read a textbook.
3. **STATISTICS**  
EXAMPLE: 75 percent of the students who do not attend class regularly receive grades of C or worse.
4. **GRAPHS**  
EXAMPLE: Figure 9-1 is one type of graph.
5. **QUOTATIONS** from authorities  
EXAMPLE: Professor Smity admits, “I tell students they don’t need to attend my class if they don’t want to. I know, however, that if they don’t come, they won’t pass.”
6. **VIVID DESCRIPTIONS**  
EXAMPLE: The students took the exam from the professor’s hand, quickly looked at the grade, gave a sigh or relief and began to smile.

### Major and Minor Details

There are two kinds of supporting details-*major* and *minor*. The main idea and its major supporting details form the basic framework of paragraphs. The **major details** are the primary points that support the main idea. Paragraphs often contain **minor details** as well. While the major details explain and develop the main idea, they, in turn are expanded upon the **minor supporting details**.

EXAMPLE: Main Idea and Major Detail

Studies reveal that people’s first names can have an influence on them. Some names reflect on people in a positive way. However, other names can have a negative impact.

EXAMPLE: **Main Idea** and Major and Minor Detail

**Studies reveal that people’s first names can have an influence on them.** Some names reflect on people in a positive way. For example, one survey showed that American men consider them name *Susan* to be ver sexy. And participants in a British study thought *Tony* to be the name of someone very friendly. However, other names can have a negative impact. In one study, for instance, teachers gave lower grades to essay supposedly written by boys

named Hubert and Elmer than to the very same essay when they credited to boys with more popular names. Another study found girls with unpopular names did worse on IQ and achievement tests than girls with more appealing names.

FROM: TENS STEPS TO ADVANCING COLLEGE READING SKILLS by John Langen and Lynn Jenkins, p. 14-37.