Controlling Idea: Major and Minor Support

Explanation:
In many paragraphs the controlling idea in the topic sentence can be adequately supported by a series of statements or examples that require no additional explanation or proof, as in the following paragraph about the composer Richard Wagner. (The controlling idea has been underlined and the sentences are numbered for future reference.)

1 He was a monster of conceit. 2 Never for a minute did he look at the world, or at people, except in relation to himself. 3 He was not only the most important person in the world to himself; in his own eyes, he was the only person who existed. 4 He believed himself to be one of the greatest dramatists in the world, one of the greatest thinkers, and one of the greatest composers. 5 To hear him talk, he was Shakespeare, and Beethoven, and Plato, rolled into one.—Deems Taylor, Of Mice and Music

Since all the supporting sentences are major supports, parallel and on the same level, the paragraph can be outlined as follows:
1 (Topic Sentence) He was a monster of conceit.
2 (Major Support)
3 (Major Support)
4 (Major Support)
5 (Major Support)

Good paragraphs in magazines and books, as well as in your own essays, can be written with major supports only.

However, in paragraphs of greater complexity, some or all of the major support sentences may need one or more additional minor supporting sentences to clarify the meaning or to give additional facts, examples, or evidence.

Study the following paragraph, in which the controlling idea has been underlined and the sentences numbered for later discussion.

The Treaty of Versailles had three outstanding effects. 1 First, a League of Nations was formed. 2 By uniting, the member nations would keep peace among themselves and would aid one another if an attack came from an outside enemy. 3 Submitting their own disputes to the League Council for arbitration would reduce the possibility of armed conflict. 4 Further, the reduction of German military strength relieved the whole world of the threat of German aggression. 5 Commissions of control, appointed by the Allies, entered Germany and supervised the execution of the disarmament clauses of the treaty. 6 The Allies destroyed great stores of armaments, munitions, and war supplies and sent investigating teams into areas suspected of hiding or manufacturing such materials. 7 The Allies also dismantled Germany’s navy with the exception of a few ships and set about reducing naval personnel to 15,000 men. 8 And finally, Germany’s colonies became the spoils of various nations. 9 Her African holdings went to France and Great Britain. 10 Shantung, China, which Germany had seized, became a prize of Japan.
When the paragraph is outlined to show major and minor supports (by indenting the latter more deeply), we have the following analysis:

1 (Major Support)
   2 Minor Support
   3 Minor support
4 (Major Support)
   5 Minor Support
   6 Minor Support
   7 Minor Support
8 (Major Support)
   9 Minor Support
   10 Minor Support

Note that, for example, sentences 2 and 3 support sentence 1 directly and the controlling idea is the topic sentence indirectly. Sentences 1, 4, and 8 state the three outstanding effects, the controlling idea of the topic sentence… In the example paragraphs, the transitional words “first”, “further” and “and finally” signal the beginning of a new major support. In some paragraphs such easy-to-follow signals may not be given by the writer.

It is also possible that in very complex paragraphs some minor supports may have further minor supports of their own.

Exercises:

Exercise 1:

Below we have the numbered sentences of a paragraph. On a separate sheet of paper make an outline similar to the one above. Put the numbers of the sentences after the topic sentence (without changing the numbers), intended to show whether they are major or minor supports. If a given sentence is out of unity (that is, does not support the controlling idea of the topic sentence), do not include its number in the outline but list the number(s) separately below the outline. If you can, tell why you believe those sentences are out of unity.

Topic sentence: A new suburban mall, just outside the city’s limits, has three definite effects on the urban community.

1. First, it has a novelty that attracts not only the shoppers but the curious.
2. People enjoy just visiting the colorful, modern shops that line the covered concourse.
3. Seventy stores with their great variety of merchandise are easily and quickly accessible to all.
4. After a long day’s shopping, an entire family can visit one of the several restaurants or pizza shops in the mall without the frustration of central city parking.
5. Second, a new mall siphons off business from city stores.
6. Large stores like Sears and Macy’s often move from the downtown area to a new mall, luring customers with enlarged floor space and increased stocks and services.
7. A plethora of shoe stores, dress shops, boutiques, and bazaars under one roof gives shoppers wider choices in shorter time, no matter what the weather.

8. Places of entertainment, such as theaters, lounges, and transient attractions, on the main concourse draw customers from afternoon and evening social hours downtown.

9. With professional planning, stepped-up program of reconstruction, and modern landscaping, the central city in most communities could revive customer interests.

10. Third, the mall, being located outside the city limits, deprives the city of much needed revenues.

11. Sizable property taxes on the huge complex go to the country in which it is located.

12. People who work in the stores and offices, and in related services of the mall, pay no city income tax.

Exercise 2:

In this exercise only the topic sentence and the major supporting statements from an original paragraph are given; the minor supports have been deleted. Copy the topic sentence and each major support. Then supply two minor supports for each of the major supports:

Topic sentence: In the course of a day students do far more than just attend classes.

Major support: In order to maintain their health, they must exercise.
1. 
2. 

Major support: Because much of what they must learn in a course is not provided in the classroom, they are required to do outside assignments in the library.
1. 
2. 

Major support: finally, for the education beyond books, they participate in social and cultural activities.
1. 
2.
Answers:

Exercise 1:

Topic sentence: A new suburban mall, just outside the city’s limits, has three definite effects on the suburban community.

1. Major Support
2. Minor Support
5. Major Support
6. Minor Support
7. Minor Support
8. Minor Support
10. Major Support
11. Minor Support
12. Minor Support

Out of unity:

3 and 4 do not support the first major support (sentence 1) because they deal with convenience to the shoppers, not novelty.

9 does not support the second major support (sentence 5) because it deals not with the mall but with what the city might do to retain or get back some of its lost business.

Exercise 2:
Because answers may vary widely, the student should discuss them with an instructor or tutor of the Learning Lab.