UNDERSTANDING THE MAIN IDEA

The main idea is the most important idea in a paragraph--it gives the paragraph meaning and direction. The main idea is usually stated in the topic sentence and is developed and made clear by supporting details throughout the rest of the paragraph. Generally, the subject of the topic sentence will be the central theme or topic of the entire paragraph; thus, it may be called the central theme or topic.

Locating the topic sentence is a major key to comprehension of a paragraph. The location in the paragraph of the topic sentence, or its absence, determines the structure pattern of a paragraph. There are four patterns of paragraph structure:

A. In the most common pattern of paragraph structure, the author begins with the topic sentence--a broad statement followed by supporting details. The diagram for this type paragraph is the inverted triangle ▽.

This pattern is illustrated in the following paragraph. The topic sentence= the main idea has been underlined to indicate its location.

Anxiety frequently expresses itself in two types of behavior known as obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are recurring thoughts that a person cannot seem to get out of mind. For example, a young man who thinks continuously about the possible death of his parents is suffering from an obsession. Compulsions, on the other hand, are recurring activities that a person must perform to avoid anxiety. A woman who insists on washing her hands every few minutes even though her hands are not dirty is showing compulsive behavior.

B. In the second most common kind of paragraph structure, the author uses supporting details to build to the topic sentence=main idea at the end of the paragraph. This format is often used when the author is trying to convince the reader to accept his point of view—he carefully leads the reader toward the main idea. The diagram for this type paragraph is the triangle △. The paragraph lists the supporting details as reasons leading to a conclusion which is the topic sentence.

This pattern is illustrated in the following paragraph. The topic sentence has been underlined to indicate its location.

Prior to his death, Julius Caesar had received several warnings that life was in danger, but he chose to ignore them because he doubted that there was anyone in Rome courageous enough to kill Caesar. He had come to think of himself as so important to the world's continued progress and well-being that he could not imagine anyone would dare make an attack on the great Caesar's life. Undoubtedly, his pride and arrogance contributed to his death.

TS=Topic Sentence      MI=Main Idea      SS=Supporting Sentence
C. In the third kind of paragraph structure, the author places the topic sentence in a position other than the first or last sentence in the paragraph. The paragraph is usually arranged with an introductory sentence followed by a topic sentence and then by supporting sentences. The diagram for this type of paragraph is a diamond. The topic sentence may be anywhere from the second sentence to the second from last sentence.

This pattern is illustrated in the following paragraph. The topic sentence has been underlined to indicate its location.

In World War II, the Nazis surrounded the Russian city of Leningrad and cut off the Russian's access to all supplies. During that time, the men and women of Leningrad suffered a tragedy that few who were not there could comprehend. Countless numbers of people starved to death and corpses piled up in the streets. Families were forced to eat once-beloved pets, and stories of cannibalism were whispered and believed. It took the men and women who lived through the siege months and, in some cases, even years to regain their former health.

D. In the fourth kind of paragraph structure, no one sentence contains the main idea; therefore, the readers must formulate their own topic sentence. This type of paragraph is a list of equally important statements. The diagram for this type of paragraph is a box. Readers must combine ideas in all the sentences of a paragraph to arrive at the main idea and create their own topic sentence.

This pattern is illustrated in the following paragraph. Note that no sentence is underlined.

In World War II while America was at war with Japan, more than 100,000 Japanese people living on the Pacific Coast were rounded up and put into special camps. During this same period, many Japanese were forced to give up their jobs because fellow employees were convinced that anyone who was Japanese must be on the side of the Axis powers. Families were forced out of their homes because constant threats made life unbearable. For some Japanese men and women, it was not even safe to be seen on the street because the color of their skin was liable to arouse hostile feelings.

Created Topic Sentence: The Japanese living in America were treated poorly during World War II.

There is no topic sentence in the preceding paragraph. Instead, the topic sentence has been inferred from reading the entire paragraph and summarizing the thoughts therein.
EXERCISE

The following paragraphs include the four types of paragraph structure. Three have topic sentences - either at the beginning, middle, or end - and one has none. Determine the structure of each paragraph by locating the topic sentence if there is one. Write the number of the topic sentence in the space provided, the letter indicating the structure of the paragraph as listed below, and draw the appropriate diagram.

A. Topic sentence at the beginning

B. Topic sentence at the end

C. Topic sentence in the middle

D. No topic sentence; main idea must be inferred and the topic sentence created.

For example:

(1) For years, parents of autistic children have blamed themselves for producing children who cannot escape the world of fantasy. (2) But new research suggests that the disease may have less to do with parental error and far more to do with genetic inheritance. (3) The chromosomes that determine sex are called X and Y. (4) In some cases, the X chromosome may be abnormal or "fragile," and there appears to be a link between a fragile X chromosome and the appearance of autism. (5) Although scientists are not yet convinced that a genetic defect is the crucial element in all cases of the disease, they are almost positive it plays a significant role in many cases.

In the above paragraph, the main idea is that autism in children may be the result of genetic inheritance. The first sentence introduces the topic or central theme. The second sentence which is introduced with “But” is the topic sentence. The rest of the sentences support the topic sentence. The answer, therefore, is as follows:
Select the main idea:

a. Autism is a fatal disease.
b. Research states autism is the result of genetic inheritance.
b. The X chromosome may be abnormal.

The answer is b.

II. (1) Less than twenty years ago, cancer victims might hope to live normal lives, but few actually survived. (2) Today most patients with Hodgkin's disease, a rare but devastating form of cancer, survive. (3) Before chemotherapy was invented, children with leukemia were condemned to death. (4) Today, more than
50 percent are completely cured by the use of drugs. (5) Recently, chemotherapy has been used to fight lung cancer, and sometimes it succeeds. (6) Interferon, a relatively new weapon against cancer, has managed to help slow the growth of tumors in patients whose illness is already in the advanced stages.

Circle the correct answer:

I. Topic Sentence: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, none
   Paragraph Structure: A, B, C, D
   Diagram: △ △ ◊ □

Select the Main Idea:

b. Hodgkins disease is a form of cancer.
c. Today’s cancer treatments have helped cancer victims survive.

III. (1) The moon, like the sun, has always been a source of wonder and fascination; and, like the sun, many myths surround it. (2) Very young children, for example, still talk of the man in the moon and cling to the idea that the moon is made of green cheese. (3) Furthermore, many adults are convinced, although science has yet to prove them correct, that the moon affects their temperament and it is claimed that emotional outbreaks are more frequent during the time when the moon is full. (4) According to the beliefs of some primitive tribes, the moon is the source of life and women can only bear children when they have been touched by its rays.

Circle the correct answer:

I. Topic Sentence: 1, 2, 3, 4, none
   Paragraph Structure: A, B, C, D
   Diagram: △ △ ◊ □

Select the Main Idea:

a. The moon is mystical.
b. There are many myths about the moon.
c. There are many ideas about the sun and the moon.
IV. (1) As early as 1908, Thomas Alva Edison shot a picture of Frankenstein, and a film about a man-made monster, The Golem appeared prior to World War I. (2) Throughout the twenties, a number of German directors produced some classic horror films, among them Nosferatu, a brilliant interpretation of Bram Stoker's "Dracula." (3) By 1930, the German horror film was in decline, and Hollywood producers discovered that the public would pay to be frightened. (4) In 1930, Tod Browning directed Dracula, a box-office buster. (5) The history of horror films is almost as long as the history of film itself.

Circle the correct answer:

I. Topic Sentence: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, none
Paragraph Structure: A, B, C, D
Diagram: ▼ △ ◊ □

Select the Main Idea:

a. The Golem is a great movie.
b. Dracula is very popular.
c. The history of horror films is as long as film itself.

ANSWERS

I. Topic Sentence: 3
Paragraph Structure: C
Diagram: ◊
Main Idea: B

II. Topic Sentence: None
Paragraph Structure: D
Diagram: □
Main Idea: C

Inferred Main Idea:

Today’s cancer treatments have helped cancer victims survive.

III. Topic Sentence: 1
Paragraph Structure: A
Diagram: ▼
Main Idea: B

IV. Topic Sentence: 5
Sentence Structure: B
Diagram: △
Main Idea: C