MAIN IDEA

By now you probably know that the ability to find or determine the MAIN IDEA of a written selection is an important reading skill. The main idea of a selection is the point the author is trying to make about his subject. It is the main idea sentence (often referred to as a topic sentence) that most, if not all, of the other sentences in the paragraph help to support, to clarify, to develop, or to further explain in order to make the main idea memorable, acceptable, and understandable to the reader. In an article or an essay, the main idea is usually the thesis statement. Thus, the supporting information helps to give a vivid picture of what the author wants to relate or the point he or she wants to make or prove to the reader. This supporting information for the main idea may come in the form of statistics, illustrations, examples, as well as simple facts and details.

Buried in or surrounded by all of this supporting information, like a treasure, is the main idea. The main idea may be directly stated in the paragraph (or reading selection) or it may be implied by the author. Although the stated main idea (or topic sentence) may occur anywhere in the paragraph, its most common occurrence is as the first sentence of the paragraph. Its second most common occurrence is as the last sentence of the paragraph. Another fairly common location for the main idea statement in a paragraph is following one or two sentences of introductory information.

If, on the other hand, the main idea is to be implied, the reader needs to try to understand how each supporting sentence relates to the others. He or she must add up the information supplied by the author to form a summary statement. This summary statement is the point that all or most of the information in the paragraph is supporting or helping to clarify.

**The true test of the main idea statement is to see if it answers the following two questions.

1. Who or what specifically is the central theme or topic of the paragraph or reading selection?
2. What is that person or object doing, or what is happening to the person or object? (In other words, what is being said about the central theme or topic of the reading selection?)

For further explanation and practice in understanding and finding the main idea, please refer to the Lab Comprehension Handouts B2.0, B2.1, B2.2, and B2.3.

CRITICAL THINKING AND MAIN IDEA

Now that you understand what the main idea is and how to find it in a paragraph, the remainder of this handout has been designed to challenge you to think critically about reading selections and the main idea supported by each. It will require a more sophisticated level of thinking, for you will be asked to think at several different levels to show that you understand and can differentiate the main idea from supporting details.
For each reading sample, three statements follow:

M One of the statements is the **MAIN IDEA STATEMENT** (M). It sums up the points made by the supporting sentences in the given reading selection.

B One of the statements is **TOO BROAD** (B) to be supported fully or completely by the details and facts in the given reading selection.

N Finally, one of the three statements is **TOO NARROW** (N) to be the main idea statement. It only tells the reader part of what the author wants to relate in the selection. It completely ignores some part or all of the two questions which must be answered by the main idea as noted on page 1 of this handout.

Read the following sample selection. The three statements given following the reading should be marked **M** for the main idea, **B** for the statement which is too broad or general to be the main idea, and **N** for the statement which is too narrow or too limited to be the main idea of the selection:

Emergency management is primarily directed toward protecting the patient from self injury during the epileptic seizure. If a padded bite block is available and can be placed between the teeth for protection against biting the tongue, it is recommended. Protect the patient's head at all times because skull fracture from striking the head on a hard surface is possible. Do not forcibly restrain the seizure activity. Nearby objects should be removed. Finally, having the patient lie on his or her side with a pillow or blanket under the head may prove helpful in achieving safety objectives during the seizure.

1. Special care should be taken while assisting a person experiencing an epileptic seizure.
2. Special care should be given to help the person experiencing an epileptic seizure to avoid injury.
3. A padded bite block, if it is available, should be placed between the teeth for protection against biting the tongue.

**Statement 1** should be marked **B** because it is too broad. Certainly not all of the possible care to be given an epileptic seizure victim is given in the reading.

**Statement 2** should be marked **M** for the main idea. All of the supporting statements relate what special care should be taken to assist the person suffering the seizure in order to help avoid injury.

**Statement 3** should be marked **N** because it neglects to mention the subject. That is, it does not explain what the special care is or what is being done by that special care to help the victim avoid injury during an epileptic seizure.
Now, test your critical thinking skills by finding the **MAIN IDEA (M)** and identifying the statement which is **TOO BROAD (B)** and the statement that is **TOO NARROW (N)** to be the main idea of the selection.

**Reading 1**
House dust, a common host to dust mites, helps to cause many allergic reactions in sensitive individuals. House dust is a mixture of things—particles from furniture and textiles, dirt, insects and insect parts and wastes, mold, bacteria, as well as animal and human dander, to name a few. Consequently, control of these mites and dust is important in controlling or reducing allergic reactions caused by these mites. While mites cannot be eradicated completely, the most important control of mites is to control the amount of dust in areas where the mites live—in carpeting, bedding, furniture, curtains, and other window coverings.

1. Allergy-causing house dust and mites can be found in many areas around the house.
2. Dust mites, which trigger many allergic reactions, feed on house dust found around the house.
3. The removal of house dust can help control allergic reactions caused by dust mites.

**Reading 2**
When lifting a heavy load, be sure to bend at the knees, not the waist. Be sure to keep your back upright and straight. Hold the load close to your body. If you must turn while supporting the load, turn with your feet—not from your waist. However, if the load is too heavy to lift, push, rather than pull, the heavy object to get it to the desired location.

1. Special care must be taken when handling heavy loads.
2. Lifting and moving heavy loads require certain body positioning.
3. Push objects to be moved if they are too heavy to lift safely.

**Reading 3**
While strains and sprains are somewhat different, the treatment of both is identical. A strain results from overstretching or overexerting some part of a muscle. A sprain results from an injury to the fibers of a ligament. Anyone suffering from a strain or a sprain should follow the **R.I.C.E.** treatment plan. **R** refers to the rest to be given to the injured area or a break in activity. **I** refers to the ice pack which should be applied to the affected area for intervals of 15 to 20 minutes. **C** stands for the compress or slight pressure which should be applied to the injured area to minimize swelling. Finally, **E** represents the elevation above the heart of the injured area to also help minimize swelling.

1. Strains and sprains both benefit from the R.I.C.E. treatment plan.
2. Strains and sprains require similar treatment.
Reading 4
According to a recent study reported in the February 23, 1994, edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, researchers observed the presence of cotinine—a form of broken-down nicotine—in the hair of newborn babies within 3 days of their birth. The 23 babies examined who were born to non-smoking mothers exposed to second-hand smoke during pregnancy showed measurable levels of cotinine. Until this study, researchers and doctors believed that if their patients didn’t smoke during pregnancy, their babies would escape the ill effects of nicotine. Furthermore, according to Dr. Gideon Koren, one of the investigators of this study conducted at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, some of the infants of the passive inhalers had cotinine levels as high as if their mothers had a daily habit of smoking 5-6 cigarettes.

Reading 5
Neurofibromatosis is a genetic condition of unknown cause affecting one and one half million people throughout the world, more than 100,000 in the United States. It may cause multiple tumors of the peripheral nerves and skin (cafe-au-lait) spots often mistaken for common birthmarks. Half of the cases are inherited, and the other half are the result of spontaneous mutations, happening for no known reason. The disorder occurs in both sexes and in all races and ethnic groups. Of the 400,000 babies born each year with neurofibromatosis, half of them will need surgery at some time during their lives. A quarter of these children will suffer serious and progressively worsening complications that can cause persistent pain, skeletal defects, deafness, blindness, learning disabilities, disfiguring and embarrassing tumors, as well as brain tumors. There is no known cure.

Reading 6
A depressive illness is a "whole body" illness, involving your body, mood, thoughts, and behavior. It affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself and the way you think about things. A depressive
illness is not a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with a depressive illness cannot merely "pull themselves together and get better." Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help over 80% of those who suffer from depression.

_______ 1. Depression, a mental disorder, often requires someone else’s help before improvement can take place.

_______ 2. Depression can affect many people from all socio-economic ranks.

_______ 3. Depression, a mental disorder, affecting one’s thoughts and actions, usually responds to proper treatment.

Reading 7
Cystic fibrosis, a hereditary disease, is the most common fatal genetic disease of Caucasians. Affected individuals secrete a thick mucus that clogs the airways of the lungs. These same secretions block the ducts of the pancreas and liver so that the few patients who do not die of lung disease die of liver failure. Cystic fibrosis is usually thought of as a children’s disease because few affected individuals live long enough to become adults. There is no known cure.

_______ 1. Cystic fibrosis is a fatal hereditary disease whose young victims die of lung disease or liver failure.

_______ 2. Cystic fibrosis is a fatal hereditary disease of children and young adults.

_______ 3. Cystic fibrosis is a fatal hereditary disease.

Reading 8
Although it has been referred to by several different names such as Minimal Brain Damage, Minimal Brain Dysfunction, and Hyperactivity, Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD is the current name used to refer to a syndrome characterized by poor attention, impulsivity, and overactivity. The primary difficulty seems to be the inability to focus attention on one task while not responding to other events in the environment. It is believed that some of the excessive activity levels often seen result from the attention deficit. Therefore, most interventions are directed toward increasing the level of attention. Currently, two diagnoses, ADD with hyperactivity and ADD without hyperactivity, are utilized. The only distinction is whether or not the child exhibits excessive motor behavior. Some children seem to be impulsive and unable to attend but do demonstrate high activity levels.

_______ 1. ADD is a brain disorder which interferes with a person’s ability to be attentive and learn.

_______ 2. Children with ADD often seem impulsive and over-active.

_______ 3. ADD is a kind of learning disorder.
ANSWERS:

READING 1.
1. B
2. N
3. M

READING 2.
1. B
2. M
3. N

READING 3.
1. M
2. B
3. N

READING 4.
1. M
2. B
3. N

READING 5.
1. B
2. M
3. N

READING 6.
1. N
2. B
3. M

READING 7.
1. M
2. N
3. B

READING 8.
1. M
2. N
3. B