What is the main idea?

A paragraph is a group of sentences about one idea referred to as the main idea. It is the central point. It's the most important point of the paragraph. All the other details explain or expand the main idea. A paragraph without a main idea is just thoughts.

The main idea does two important things for a paragraph:

1. It gives the paragraph a purpose.
2. It helps the writer make a point.

PRACTICE EXERCISES

DIRECTIONS:

In these exercises, you will be asked to

1. Identify the central theme or topic which is the subject of the paragraph. It is written in a few words.

2. Answer the question about what the story mainly explains.

3. Write the main idea.

1. (A) One of the most unusual checks ever issued was made of steel. (B) The $1,500 check, which weighed over twelve pounds and was a foot high and two feet long, was issued in 1932 by an electrical company in Cleveland to the winner of an arc welding contest. (C) The endorsement was welded on the back and marked "paid" by the bank with a rifle, the word PAID being spelled out with bullet marks. (D) One is tempted to add that it was surely one check that would never bounce!

What is the central theme or topic?

a. checks  
b. a rifle cancelled check  
c. the $1,500 steel check

The story mainly tells...

a. how much an unusual checked weighed.  
b. what was one of the most unusual checks ever issued.  
c. who issued an unusual check.  
d. how an unusual check was marked paid.

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E= None
2. (A) There are many sports records that you're probably familiar with, especially in football and baseball, without having to consult one of the many fine sports reference books now available in libraries and bookstores. (B) Can you name the greatest defeat ever in college football? (C) The greatest defeat in college football happened on October 7, 1916; Georgia Tech beat Cumberland College by the incredible score of 222 to 0. (D) What a rout! (E) An added item of interest for the superstitious is the fact that the number thirteen turned out to be very lucky for Georgia Tech and very unlucky for Cumberland. (F) Thirteen different Tech players made touchdowns during the game.

What is the central theme or topic?
- a. sports record
- b. the greatest football defeat
- c. Georgia Tech plays Cumberland

The story mainly tells...
- a. why thirteen is an unlucky number.
- b. how Georgia Tech beat Cumberland College.
- c. what the greatest defeat in college football was.
- d. what thirteen different Tech players did.

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G=None

3. (A) How did England's civil war in the late 1400's come to be called the War of the Roses? (B) At that time, the King was too weak to protect his interests. (C) Two powerful noble families, the House of York and the House of Lancaster, saw a perfect opportunity to control the kingdom. (D) Each family tried to acquire support from lesser nobles throughout England. (E) One day, the leaders of both sides were strolling through the king's rose garden, arguing. (F) The Yorkist leader picked a white rose as his symbol; the Lancastrian leader, a red one, and the historic conflict then had its name!

What is the central theme or topic?
- a. War of Roses
- b. fighting to win
- c. Yorkist leader’s victory

The story mainly tells...
- a. who controlled England in the late 1400's.
- b. when the King of England was weak.
- c. how an historic English conflict got its name.
- d. how English leaders liked roses.

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G=None

4. (A) Throughout history, hats have been worn for many reasons, including protection, status, and even smuggling. (B) One of the most fascinating hat
designs kept the secret of buried treasure. (C) When the Spanish invaded Peru, the Incas had storehouses of gold and silver. (D) To keep their wealth out of Spanish hands, they buried it. (E) They wove markings that mapped the location of the buried treasure into hats. (F) These hats were passed down for generations. Unfortunately, only the original Inca leaders knew the secret woven codes. (G) So the valuable hats remained mysterious maps that could be worn but never followed.

What is the central theme or topic? 

- secret treasure hat
- reasons for hats
- hats

The story mainly tells... 

- why the Incas buried their treasure.
- how the Incas concealed the location of their buried treasure.
- why the Spanish invaded Peru.
- how popular hats are.

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H=None

5. (A) Why are mopeds becoming more popular? (B) In Europe and the Orient, the widely used moped (motor/pedal bicycle) is inexpensive, reliable, and supposedly, safer than cars. (C) Ordinary bicycles with a motor attached have been around for decades, but they've never really caught on. (D) Foreign manufacturers, especially in Europe, noticing the alarming gasoline and accident rates, have developed and refined mopeds over the past thirty years, meeting with enthusiasm everywhere. (E) The moped will not go fast; it is a low-performance machine. (F) But its exhaust emissions are slight. (G) Mopeds' engines are either over the front wheels or under the frame. (H) You can buy a moped for $300.

What is the central theme or topic? 

- mopeds in Europe
- why mopeds are popular
- how mopeds operate
- what it costs to own a moped

The story mainly tells... 

- where mopeds are popular.
- why mopeds are popular.
- how mopeds are operated.
- what it costs to own a moped.

Select the Topic Sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I=None

6. (A) Soap was the result of a curious accident which happened to the ancient Romans. (B) The poorer Romans used to burn animals as sacrifices on the altars of their gods. (C) Ashes and animal fat were left
behind after the ceremony. (D) The rains washed the fat and ashes into
the clay on Sapo Hill. (E) Roman women noticed that the clay from Sapo
Hill made the washing of clothes much easier. (F) The basic things in soap
are ashes and fat. (G) They were using soap without even realizing what it
was. (H) Soap was eventually named after Sapo Hill.

What is the topic?

a. Sapo Hill
b. creation of soap
c. Roman washing method

The story mainly tells...

a. why Roman women used clay to wash
clothes.
b. what soap is made of.
c. how soap first came to be used.
d. how soap got its name.

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I= None

7. (A) In 1974, an eight-cent stamp was issued in honor of Sybil Ludington, a
young American heroine of colonial days. (B) In 1777, Sybil was sixteen
year old--daughter of a colonel in the American Revolutionary Army.
(C) When her father received a warning that the British were burning
Danbury, Connecticut, and marching toward New York City, (D) Sybil rode
through the dangerous countryside rousing volunteers to stop them. (E) She rode three times as far as the famed Paul Revere. (F) Her bravery
helped force the British to retreat to their ships that lay anchored in Long
Island Sound.

What is the central theme or topic?

a. Sybil Ludington, American heroine
b. stamps
c. Paul Revere’s ride

The story mainly tells...

a. why a stamp honors Sybil Ludington.
b. when the British burned Danbury, Connecticut.
c. how far Sybil Ludington rode.
d. why the British did not attack New York City.

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G= None

8. (A) The fictional Betty Crocker of General Mills was born out of necessity.
(B) Looking for a way to publicize its Gold Medal Flour, the company held a
puzzle contest. (C) The prizes were little pillows that looked like Gold
Medal Flour sacks. (D) Along with their entries, women asked many
questions about cooking and baking. (E) General Mills decided to answer
the queries. (F) It also felt that a woman’s name was needed to sign the
answers. (G) So General Mills used the last name--Crocker--of a recently
retired director, and added the homey, familiar first name of Betty.
What is the central theme or topic?  
a. General Mills  
b. Gold Medal  
c. the name Betty Crocker  

The story mainly tells...  
a. how General Mills made little pillows.  
b. how General Mills publicized its flour.  
c. how the name Betty Crocker was born.  
d. how Betty Crocker answered women's questions.  

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H= None

9. (A) The birth and growth of dress patterns make for an interesting story.  
   (B) As far back as 1769, for example, French tailors were taking body measurements with strips of paper.  
   (C) Then in the 1800's professional dressmakers, who up to this time worked only for wealthy women, decided to go public and popularize the use of dress patterns.  
   (D) By the 1850's, pattern sheets were included in many family magazines.  
   (E) Today, of course, all major women's magazines feature dress patterns, and one American company has made their production and sale to amateur dressmakers a major business.

What is the central theme or topic?  
a. fashion  
b. pattern sheets  
c. dress patterns  

The story mainly tells...  
a. when French tailors used paper for body measurements.  
b. when professional dressmakers first worked in public.  
c. how dress patterns developed.  
d. how magazines popularized dress patterns.

Select the topic sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F= None

10. (A) Since 1856, many "arkeologists" have searched the peak of 16,946 foot Mount Ararat in Turkey, believed to be the place where Noah's Ark landed after the Biblical flood.  
    (B) In 1955, Fernand Navarra found a piece of wood there which, he hoped, belonged to Noah's Ark.  
    (C) A laboratory declared this wood to be 5,000 years old, the approximate age of the Ark.  
    (D) This was considered the only tangible evidence of its existence to date.  
    (E) Although not everyone believes the Ark landed on Ararat, Ark-hunting continued until 1969, when the Turkish government barred explorers from climbing the mountain.  
    (F) "Arkeologists" will have to be satisfied with the Ark's age-old reputation.
What is the central theme or topic?

a. Turkish Government
b. Fernand Navarra
c. Noah’s Ark
d. who searched the peak of Mount Ararat

The story mainly tells...

a. where Noah’s Ark landed.
b. when Noah’s Ark landed.
c. why "arkeologists" searched the peak of Mount Ararat.
d. who searched the peak of Mount Ararat.

Select the Topic Sentence: A, B, C, D, E, F, G=None

The Answers

1. Central theme or topic
The story mainly tells.....

Topic sentence
A. One of the most unusual checks ever issued was made of steel.

2. Central theme or topic
The story mainly tells.....

Topic sentence
C. The greatest defeat in college football happened on October 7, 1916; Georgia Tech beat Cumberland College by the incredible score of 222 to 0.

3. Central theme or topic
The story mainly tells.....

Topic sentence
F. The Yorkist leader picked a white rose as his symbol; the Lancastrian leader, a red one, and the historic conflict then had its name!

4. Central theme or topic
The story mainly tells.....

Topic sentence
B. One of the most fascinating hat designs kept the secret of buried treasure.

5. Central theme or topic
The story mainly tells.....

Topic sentence
B. In Europe and the Orient, the widely used moped (motor/
6. Central theme or topic
   The story mainly tells.....
   Topic sentence
   pedal bicycle) is inexpensive, reliable, and, supposedly, safer than cars.
   b. creation of soap
   c. how soap first came to be used
   A. Soap was the result of a curious accident which happened to the ancient Romans.

7. Central theme or topic
   The story mainly tells.....
   Topic sentence
   a. Sybil Ludington, American heroine
   c. why a stamp honors Sybil Ludington.
   A. In 1974, an eight-cent stamp was issued in honor of Sybil Ludington, a young American heroine.

8. Central theme or topic
   The story mainly tells.....
   Topic sentence
   c. the name of Betty Crocker
   c. how the name Betty Crocker was born.
   A. The fictional Betty Corcker of General Mills was born out of necessity.

9. Central theme or topic
   The story mainly tells.....
   Topic sentence
   c. dress patterns
   c. how dress patterns developed.
   A. The birth of dress patterns make for an interesting story.

10. Central theme or topic
    The story mainly tells.....
    Topic sentence
    c. Noah’s Ark
    c. why “Arkeologists” searched the peak of Mount Ararat.
    A. Since, 1856, many “arkeologists” have searched the peak of 16,946 foot Mount Ararat in Turkey believed to be the place where Noah’s Ark landed after the Biblical flood.