

## Paragraph Reading

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### Main Idea

In this exercise, you will practice finding the main idea of a paragraph. Being able to determine the main idea of a passage is one of the most useful reading skills you can develop. It is a skill you can apply to any kind of reading. For example, when you read for enjoyment or to obtain general information, it is probably not important to remember all the details of a selection. Instead, you want to quickly discover the general message—the main idea of the passage. For other kinds of reading, such as reading textbooks or articles in your own field, you need both to determine the main ideas and to understand the way in which these are developed.

The main idea of a passage is the thought that is present from the beginning to the end. In a well-written paragraph, most of the sentences support, describe, or explain the main idea. It is sometimes stated in the first or last sentence of the paragraph. Sometimes the main idea is only implied. In a poem, the main idea is often implied rather than stated explicitly.

In order to determine the main idea of a piece of writing, you should ask yourself what idea is common to most of the text. What is the idea that relates the parts to the whole? What opinion do all the parts support? What idea do they all explain or describe?

Read the following paragraphs and poem quickly. Concentrate on discovering the main idea. Remember, don't worry about the details in the selections. You only want to determine the general message.

After each of the first five paragraphs, select the statement that best expresses the main idea. After paragraphs 6 and 7 and the poem, you will not see the multiple choice format. Instead, you will write a sentence that expresses the main idea in your own words.

When you have finished, your teacher may want to divide the class into small groups for discussion. Study the example paragraph carefully before you begin.

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#### Example

By the time the first European travelers on the American continent began to record some of their observations about Indians, the Cherokee people had developed an advanced culture that probably was exceeded only by the civilized tribes of the Southwest: Mayan and Aztec groups. The social structures of the Cherokee people consisted of a form of clan kinship in which there were seven recognized clans. All members of a clan were considered blood brothers and sisters and were bound by honor to defend any member of that clan from wrong. Each clan, the Bird, Paint, Deer, Wolf, Blue, Long Hair, and Wild Potato, was represented in the civil council by a councillor or councillors. The chief of the tribe was selected from one of these clans and did not inherit his office from his kinsmen. Actually, there were two chiefs, a Peace chief and War chief. The Peace chief served when the tribe was at peace, but the minute war was declared, the War chief was in command.\*

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\*From Tim B. Underwood, *The Story of the Cherokee People* (S. B. Newman Printing Co., 1961), p. 13.

Select the statement that best expresses the main idea of the paragraph.

- a. The Cherokee chief was different in war time than in peace time.
- b. Before the arrival of the Europeans the Cherokees had developed a well-organized society.
- c. The Mayans and the Aztecs were part of the Cherokee tribe.
- d. Several Indian cultures had developed advanced civilizations before Europeans arrived.

**Explanation**

- a. This is not the main idea. Rather, it is one of several examples the author uses to support his statement that the Cherokee people had developed an advanced culture.
- b. This statement expresses the main idea of the paragraph. All other sentences in the paragraph are examples supporting the idea that the Cherokees had developed an advanced culture by the time Europeans arrived on the continent.
- c. This statement is false, so it cannot be the main idea.
- d. This statement is too general. The paragraph describes the social structure of the Cherokee people only. Although the author names other advanced Indian cultures, he does this only to strengthen his argument that the Cherokees had developed an advanced culture.

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**Paragraph 1**

The first invention of human beings was the wheel. Although no wheel forms are found in nature, undoubtedly the earliest "wheels" were smooth logs which were used for moving weights over the earth's surface. No one recorded who he or she was or when it happened, but when the "first inventor" placed a wheel on an axle, people began to roll from one place to another. Records of this type of wheel have been found among Egyptian relics dating back to 2,000 B.C. and earlier. Chinese civilizations are credited with independent invention of the same mechanism. The wheel so fascinated the human mind that people have spent centuries building machines around it; yet in over 4,000 years its basic design has remained unchanged. All about us we see the spinning shafts, gears, flywheels, pulleys, and rotors which are the descendents of the first wheel. The roaring propeller of an aircraft engine, the whirling wheel of a giant steam turbine, and the hairspring of a tiny watch are examples of the rotary motion which characterizes our mechanical world. It is hard to conceive of continuous motion without the wheel.\*

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*Select the statement that best expresses the main idea of the paragraph.*

- a. The wheel is used today in industry and transportation.
- b. One of human beings' first inventions, the wheel, has remained important for 4,000 years.
- c. The basic design of the wheel has been changed to meet the needs of industrial society.
- d. Although we don't know exactly who invented the wheel, it is evident that the Egyptians and Chinese used it about 4,000 years ago.

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\*Adapted from William P. Brotherton, *The Evolution of Speed* (Ryan Aeronautical Co., 1957), p. 2.

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**Paragraph 2**

At the University of Kansas art museum, investigators tested the effects of different colored walls on two groups of visitors to an exhibit of paintings. For the first group the room was painted white; for the second, dark brown. Movement of each group was followed by an electrical system under the carpet. The experiment revealed that those who entered the dark brown room walked more quickly, covered more area, and spent less time in the room than the people in the white environment. Dark brown stimulated more activity, but the activity ended sooner. Not only the choice of colors but also the general appearance of a room communicates and influences those inside. Another experiment presented subjects with photographs of faces that were to be rated in terms of energy and well-being. Three groups of subjects were used; each was shown the same photos, but each group was in a different kind of room. One group was in an "ugly" room that resembled a messy storeroom. Another group was in an average room—a nice office. The third group was in a tastefully designed living room with carpeting and drapes. Results showed that the subjects in the beautiful room tended to give higher ratings to the faces than did those in the ugly room. Other studies suggest that students do better on tests taken in comfortable, attractive rooms than in ordinary-looking or ugly rooms.\*

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*Select the statement that best expresses the main idea of the paragraph.*

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. People in beautiful rooms tend to give higher ratings to photographs of faces than people in ugly rooms.
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. The color and general appearance of a room influence the behavior and attitudes of the people in it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. The University of Kansas has studied the effects of the color of a room on people's behavior.
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. Beautifully decorated, light-colored rooms make people more comfortable than ugly, dark rooms.

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\*From Jeffrey Schrank, *Deception Detection* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 53.

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**Paragraph 3**

Teaching is supposed to be a professional activity requiring long and complicated training as well as official certification. The act of teaching is looked upon as a flow of knowledge from a higher source to an empty container. The student's role is one of receiving information; the teacher's role is one of sending it. There is a clear distinction assumed between one who is supposed to know (and therefore not capable of being wrong) and another, usually younger person who is supposed not to know. However, teaching need not be the province of a special group of people nor need it be looked upon as a technical skill. Teaching can be more like guiding and assisting than forcing information into a supposedly empty head. If you have a certain skill you should be able to share it with someone. You do not have to get certified to convey what you know to someone else or to help them in their attempt to teach themselves. All of us, from the very youngest children to the oldest members of our cultures should come to realize our own potential as teachers. We can share what we know, however little it might be, with someone who has need of that knowledge or skill.\*

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*Select the statement that best expresses the main idea of the paragraph.*

- a. The author believes that it is not difficult to be a good teacher.
- b. The author believes that every person has the potential to be a teacher.
- c. The author believes that teaching is a professional activity requiring special training.
- d. The author believes that teaching is the flow of knowledge from a higher source to an empty container.

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\*From Herbert Kohl, *Reading: How To* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 1.

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**Paragraph 4**

Albert Einstein once attributed the creativity of a famous scientist to the fact that he “never went to school, and therefore preserved the rare gift of thinking freely.” There is undoubtedly truth in Einstein’s observation; many artists and geniuses seem to view their schooling as a disadvantage. But such a truth is not a criticism of schools. It is the function of schools to civilize, not to train explorers. The explorer is always a lonely individual whether his or her pioneering be in art, music, science, or technology. The creative explorer of unmapped lands shares with the genius what William James described as the “faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way.” Insofar as schools teach perceptual patterns they tend to destroy creativity and genius. But if schools could somehow exist solely to cultivate genius, then society would break down. For the social order demands unity and widespread agreement, both traits that are destructive to creativity. There will always be conflict between the demands of society and the impulses of creativity and genius.\*

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*Select the statement that best expresses the main idea of the paragraph.*

- a. Albert Einstein and other geniuses and artists have said that schools limit creativity and genius.
- b. Schools should be designed to encourage creativity.
- c. Explorers can be compared to geniuses because both groups look at the world differently from the way most people do.
- d. Schools can never satisfy the needs of both geniuses and society as a whole.

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\*From Jeffrey Schrank, *Deception Detection* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 100.

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**Paragraph 5**

Perhaps the most startling theory to come out of kinesics, the study of body movement, was suggested by Professor Ray Birdwhistell. He believes that physical appearance is often culturally programmed. In other words, we learn our looks—we are not born with them. A baby has generally unformed facial features. A baby, according to Birdwhistell, learns where to set the eyebrows by looking at those around—family and friends. This helps explain why the people of some regions of the United States look so much alike. New Englanders or Southerners have certain common facial characteristics that cannot be explained by genetics. The exact shape of the mouth is not set at birth, it is learned after. In fact, the final mouth shape is not formed until well after permanent teeth are set. For many, this can be well into adolescence. A husband and wife together for a long time often come to look somewhat alike. We learn our looks from those around us. This is perhaps why in a single country there are areas where people smile more than those in other areas. In the United States, for example, the South is the part of the country where the people smile most frequently. In New England they smile less, and in the western part of New York state still less. Many Southerners find cities such as New York cold and unfriendly, partly because people on Madison Avenue smile less than people on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia. People in densely populated urban areas also tend to smile and greet each other in public less than do people in rural areas and small towns.\*

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*Select the statement that best expresses the main idea of the paragraph.*

- a. Ray Birdwhistell can tell what region of the United States a person is from by how much he or she smiles.
- b. Ray Birdwhistell is a leader in the field of kinesics.
- c. Ray Birdwhistell says that our physical appearance is influenced by the appearance of people around us.
- d. People who live in the country are more friendly than people who live in densely populated areas.

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\*From Jeffrey Schrank, *Deception Detection* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 43.

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**Paragraph 6**

There is widespread fear among policymakers and the public today that the family is disintegrating. Much of that anxiety stems from a basic misunderstanding of the nature of the family in the past and a lack of appreciation for its resiliency in response to broad social and economic changes. The general view of the family is that it has been a stable and relatively unchanging institution through history and is only now undergoing changes; in fact, change has always been characteristic of it.\*

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*Write a sentence that expresses the main idea of the paragraph.* \_\_\_\_\_

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**Paragraph 7**

Enough is now known about the ancient Maya, those sophisticated artists and architects, astronomers and calendar keepers of South America, to realize that much remains to be learned before all the mysteries can be unraveled. Once considered peaceful stargazers, they are now suspected of being bloodthirsty and warlike. Dogged and brilliant scholars have wrestled with the problems for a century and a half. There has been a steady revision of ideas, regular expansion of the boundaries of knowledge, and there is certain to be more.†

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*Write a sentence that expresses the main idea of the paragraph.* \_\_\_\_\_

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\*Adapted from Maris Vinovskis, "Historical Perspectives on the Development of the Family and Parent-Child Interactions," in *Parenting Across the Life Span*, ed. Jane B. Lancaster, Jeanne Altman, Alice S. Rossi, and Lonni R. Sherrod (Aldine de Gruyter, 1987).

†Adapted from William Weber Johnson, "Two New Exhibitions Explore the Dark Mysteries of the Maya," *Smithsonian* 17, no. 2 (May 1986): 39.



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**Poem*****Fueled\****

Fueled  
by a million  
man-made  
wings of fire—  
the rocket tore a tunnel  
through the sky—  
and everybody cheered.  
Fueled  
only by a thought from God—  
the seedling  
urged its way  
through the thicknesses of black—  
and as it pierced  
the heavy ceiling of the soil—  
and launched itself  
up into outer space—  
no  
one  
even  
clapped.



*Marcie Hans*

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Write a sentence that expresses the main idea of the poem. \_\_\_\_\_

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\*Marcie Hans, "Fueled," from *Serve Me a Slice of Moon*, by Marcie Hans (Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, 1965).