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WORKSHEET 2

The Topic Sentence

The **topic sentence** states the main idea of a paragraph. It can occur anywhere in a paragraph. Often it is either the first or second sentence. Sometimes a paragraph has no topic sentence, especially if it is a narrative paragraph that tells about a series of events. The reader has to add up the details to figure out what the main idea is.

Exercise Underline the topic sentence in each of the following paragraphs.

1. Reports of fabulous, unbelievable creatures have occurred throughout human history. The ancient Egyptians and Greeks told of a bird called the phoenix. They believed that this bird could burst into flames and then grow again from its own ashes. In the Middle Ages, books were written containing pictures of unicorns and dragons. During the Renaissance, sailors reported sighting sea serpents and mermaids. In our own century, people have reported seeing such fantastic creatures as the Loch Ness monster, Bigfoot, the Abominable Snowman, and the Ape Man of China.

2. In "Rumpelstiltskin," a young woman is given three chances to guess the title character's name. In "The White Snake," the hero has to perform three tasks in order to win the hand of a princess. In "Cinderella," the main character has three evil stepsisters. In the story of "Aladdin's Lamp," a genie gives Aladdin three wishes. As these examples show, the number three plays an important role in many traditional folk tales and fairy tales.

3. A computer recently defeated the world champion chess player. Computers can now imitate speech. They can also control robots that assemble cars in factories. In short, computers are now capable of doing many things that only humans could do in the past. No one knows what computers might be capable of in the future.

4. A chilly wind blew through the valley. Overhead, flocks of geese were winging their way south. The leaves on the trees had begun to change, flecking the mountainsides with red and orange, yellow and brown. On the forest floor, squirrels hurriedly gathered acorns for the coming winter. The calendar still said "summer," but nature was whispering "fall."

5. Watching educational television is a great way to add to the education you get at school. Networks such as TVOntario are supported by government and gifts from businesses, other organizations, and ordinary citizens. These networks broadcast programs that make science, history, geography, music, and art both informative and fun to watch for the whole family. If you've never seen *Inquiring Minds* and *Making Connections*, give them a try.

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Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

WORKSHEET 1

The Paragraph's Main Idea

Every paragraph must contain a *main idea*. The **main idea** is the idea around which the entire paragraph is organized. It is what the paragraph is about.

Exercise On the line provided, write the main idea of each paragraph below.

1. Summertime is coming, and the work is plentiful for teenagers. Surveying local newspapers and business owners, I've discovered that there will be a wide variety of jobs available for young workers. Teens who like to work around food should check the ice cream parlours and the sandwich shops. Those who want to be outdoors should try lawn-care services and recreational facilities. Some gift stores need help, too. Of course, grocery stores always need parcellers and stock people. Check local newspaper listings daily!

Main idea: _____

2. You take pay phones for granted, but until recently they've been impossible to use for persons with serious hearing impairments. How can a person with a serious hearing impairment call a taxi or call home when he or she is travelling? In a year-long experiment, pay phones with TDDs (telecommunication devices for the deaf) have been in train stations and airports. A TDD has a small screen and a computer-like keyboard that lets users type messages and receive responses. If the experiment is a success, pay phones equipped with TDDs will make life much easier for the millions of Canadians with hearing impairments.

Main idea: _____

3. Fantasies can come true. Ever since she was in junior high school and started thinking about college, Alexandra had dreamed about taking a course in writing poetry. She loved poetry and wrote poems constantly. She had imagined handing her college poetry teacher the first assigned poem. The teacher would read the poem and say, "That's the best beginning student poem that I've ever read! You should be in my advanced poetry writing class!" Well, Alexandra finished middle school and high school, writing poetry all the time, and began college. She enrolled in a beginning poetry writing class. She gave the teacher her first poem, and—you guessed it!—he said, "That's the best beginning student poem that I've ever read! Would you like to be in the advanced class?"

Main idea: _____

4. The ancient Mayan and Aztec peoples marked their calendars, too. Each civilization had 365-day calendars, divided into periods of 18 months. The calendars of both peoples also contained yearly ritual schedules that formed 52-year cycles. Yes, it sounds complicated compared to our way of calculating the calendar.

Main idea: _____

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WORKSHEET 5

Unity in Paragraphs

A paragraph has **unity** when all of its sentences are related to the main idea. Notice how the unrelated idea (which has been crossed out) destroys the unity of the following paragraph.

> Before 1786, many sailors drowned because their lifeboats could not survive rough seas. Then Lionel Lukin, a London coach builder, decided to build an unsinkable boat for rescue purposes. ~~Of course, coaches and carriages have now been replaced by the automobile.~~ Lukin invented a small boat with a hollow, watertight compartment. Today Lukin's basic concepts are used in building lifeboats, as well as pleasure boats, around the world.

Exercise In each of the following paragraphs, one sentence should make you say, "What's *that* doing there?" Find and cross through the sentence that destroys the unity of each paragraph. [Remember: In a unified paragraph, all details are directly related to the main idea or the sequence of actions.]

1. The disappearance of Amelia Earhart remains a mystery. Earhart, who was the first female pilot to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, crashed in the Pacific Ocean while attempting to fly around the world. She was born in Atchison, Kansas, in 1897. Some searchers believe that she survived the crash into the Pacific, because radio distress calls were received. An intensive search for the source of the signals was made. Searchers were not able to find her, however. Finally, the distress signals ceased. In spite of continued searches by airplane and ship, no clue to what became of Amelia Earhart has yet been found.

2. One reason the mountain bike is popular is that it's built to help the rider keep control even when riding it off paved roads. The extra-wide handlebars improve the rider's balance. Jeremy has a mountain bike, but he only rides on city streets. With its wide tires the mountain bike will roll right over small obstacles that would trip up the skinny tires of a racer. And because the tires are knobby, riders can keep going even if the ground is muddy or sandy. Most importantly, wide tires help riders keep their balance. Because of these features, mountain bike riders can go almost anywhere.

3. Helicopters can do a number of unusual things. For example, they can fly straight down. They can hover in one spot. They can fly backward, forward, and even sideways. Nicknames for helicopters include "whirlybirds" and "choppers." Helicopters can also fly in and out of small places.

4. Over the years the Loch Ness monster has been hunted in a number of ways. Once several men cruised the bottom of the loch, or lake, in a yellow submarine. Submarines are also used to explore the world's oceans. Another time a pilot repeatedly flew a tiny aircraft over the loch. A number of scientists searched for the monster from a raft equipped with lights and cameras.

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WORKSHEET 4

Using Facts and Examples

The main idea in a paragraph can be supported by *facts* or *examples*. A **fact** is a statement that can be proved true by directly observing or by checking a reliable reference source.

FACT: There are six official languages used at the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish.

OPINION: French is the most beautiful of those languages. [An opinion, like the one expressed in this statement, can't be proved.]

Examples are specific instances or illustrations of a general idea.

Cedar, fir, hemlock, pine, spruce, and yew are examples of evergreen trees.

Exercise A Read the following prewriting notes for a paragraph about other planets in our solar system. Cross out any facts that do not support the main idea. Then write a topic sentence to introduce the paragraph.

Mercury's surface temperature ranges from 427 degrees to –173 degrees Celsius.

The atmosphere of Venus contains deadly sulphuric acid, and the surface is hot enough to melt lead.

At the equator, the temperature on Mars may occasionally rise to 17 degrees Celsius.

Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, Uranus, and Pluto are too cold for life as we know it.

Mars was named after the Roman god of war.

The Viking space probes were launched in an effort to find life on Mars.

Topic sentence: _____

_____

Exercise B For each set of examples below, write a topic sentence that shows how the examples are related.

1. Gabon, in central Africa, received its independence in 1960. So did Somalia, in East Africa; Senegal, in West Africa; and Chad, in North Central Africa.

   _____

   _____

2. Corn, a type of grass, is eaten throughout North, Central, and South America. Rice, another grass, is a basic food throughout most of Asia. Oats, barley, millet, and wheat—all grasses—have been central to the European diet for tens of thousands of years.

   _____

   _____

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WORKSHEET 3

Using Sensory Details

Supporting sentences give specific details that explain or prove the main idea of the paragraph. One way to support a main idea is to use *sensory details*. These are words that appeal to one of the five senses—sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. Vivid sensory details help your reader clearly imagine what you're writing about.

Exercise A Read the following paragraph. Then complete the chart below, listing at least two details from the paragraph that appeal to each of the five senses.

When the Rotary Club held its annual summer picnic, our whole town turned out. The bandstand in the park was decorated with colourful banners and balloons. On the stage, a country band played traditional dance tunes to the beat of an old stand-up bass. Celia Winthrow, the town's mayor, sang for the band. In front of the bandstand, dancers hugged their partners and whirled them around. Tables on the lawn were piled high with food, and the breeze carried wonderful aromas—spicy patties, curried chicken, and roasted vegetables. People milled about or sat sipping lemonade on the grass, laughing, talking, fanning themselves against the heat, and swatting at flies.

Sight	
Hearing	
Touch	
Taste	
Smell	

Exercise B Choose one of the following topics or one of your own. Write the topic on the line provided. Then complete the chart with sensory details related to the topic. Include two details for each of the five senses.

POSSIBLE TOPICS: the most exciting movie I've ever seen
my favourite holiday kindergarten memories

Topic: _____

	Detail 1	Detail 2
Sight		
Hearing		
Touch		
Taste		
Smell		

COMPOSITION

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