

The Paragraph

The paragraph! That's the working unit of both writer and reader. The writer works hard to put meaning into the paragraph; the reader works hard to take meaning out of it. Though they work at opposite tasks, the work of each is closely related. Actually, to understand better the job of the reader, one must first understand better the job of the writer. So, let us look briefly at the writer's job.

One Main Idea. To make their meaning clear, writers know that they must follow certain basic principles. First, they know that they must develop only one main idea per paragraph. This principle is so important that they know it backward too. They know that they must not try to develop two main ideas in the same paragraph.

The Topic Sentence. The next important principle they know is that each main idea can be stated in a topic sentence, and that such a sentence best serves its function by coming at or near the beginning of its paragraph. They know too, that the more clearly they can state the topic of a paragraph in the opening sentence, the more effective they will be in developing a meaningful, well-organized paragraph.

One word of warning to the reader: There is no guarantee that the topic sentence will always be the first sentence of a paragraph. Occasionally, a writer will start off with an introductory or a transitional sentence. Then, it is up to the reader to spot such a sentence and recognize it for what it is.

The topic sentence may be placed in several other positions in a paragraph. It may be placed in the middle, or even at the very end. If it appears at the end, though it may still be a topic sentence in form, in terms of function, it is more rightfully a *restatement*. Whenever the end position is chosen, it is chosen to give the restatement especial emphasis.

Finally, a paragraph may not have a topic sentence in it at all. Some writers purposely leave out such sentences. But, in such cases, inferring a topic sentence may not be as difficult as it may first appear. Here's why. Many such professional writers actually do write topic sentences, but on separate scraps of paper. They then place one of the scraps at the head of a sheet and use the topic sentence to guide their thoughts in the construction of the paragraph. With the paragraph written and the topic sentence having served its purpose, the scrap is discarded. The end result is a paragraph without a visible topic sentence, but the paragraph, nonetheless, has embedded in it all the clues that an alert reader needs for making an accurate inference.

Finding Meaning. Actually, there is nothing especially important in recognizing or inferring a topic sentence for its own sake. The important thing is that the reader use the topic sentence as a quick means of establishing a focal point around which to cluster the meanings of the subsequent words and sentences that he or she reads. Here's the double-edged sword again: just as writers use topic sentences to provide focus and structure for presenting their meaning, so the perceptive reader can use the topic sentence for focus and structure to gain meaning.

Up to this point, the reader, having looked secretly over the writer's shoulder, should have learned two exceedingly valuable secrets: first, expect only one main idea in each paragraph; and secondly, use the topic sentence to discover the topic of each paragraph.

Supporting the Main Idea. Now, there is more to a writer's job than writing paragraphs that consist of only bare topic sentences and main ideas. The balance of the job deals with developing each main idea through the use of supporting material that amplifies and clarifies the main idea and, many times, makes it more vivid and memorable.

To support their main ideas, writers may use a variety of forms. One of the most common is the example. Examples help to illustrate the main idea. Other supporting materials are anecdotes, incidents, jokes, allusions, comparisons, contrasts, analogies, definitions, exceptions, logic, and so forth.

To summarize, the reader should have learned from the writer that a textbook-type paragraph usually contains these three elements: a topic sentence, a main idea, and supporting material. Knowing this, the reader should use the topic sentence to find the main idea. Everything other than the main idea is supporting material used to illustrate, amplify, and qualify the main idea. So the reader must be able to separate the main idea from the supporting material, yet see the relationship between them.

To

The

In th
the t
detai

Subj

you
the r
com

I
some
will
ques
ing c

I
the s
I

On t
a pa
was
cent
all, y

Mai

self,
min
you

To the Student

The Six Types of Questions

In this book, the basic skills necessary for reading factual material are taught through the use of the following six types of questions: subject matter, main idea, supporting details, conclusion, clarifying devices, and vocabulary in context questions.

Subject Matter. This question looks easy and often is easy. But don't let that fool you into thinking it isn't important. The subject matter question can help you with the most important skill of all reading and learning: concentration. With it, you comprehend and learn. Without it, you fail.

Here is the secret for gaining concentration: After reading the first few lines of something, ask yourself, "What is the subject matter of this passage?" Instantly, you will be thinking about the passage. You will be concentrating. If you don't ask this question, your eyes will move across the lines of print, yet your mind will be thinking of other things.

By asking this question as you read each passage in this book, you will master the skill so well that it will carry over to everything you read.

Let's see how this method works. Here is a short passage:

Do you want to be a good speaker? If so, then think before you speak, and think while you speak. Take care to pronounce words well. Do not speak your words too hastily. Use words your audience can understand. Do not speak in the same tone all the time. Cut out all mannerisms such as making the same gesture over and over again. Do not point or jab your finger at the audience. And don't forget to use your voice to express your feelings.

On finishing the first sentence your thought should have been something like, "Ah, a passage on speaking. Maybe I can pick up a few good tips." If it was, your head was in the right place. By focusing right away on the subject matter, you'll be concentrating, you'll be looking for something, your attitude will be superb, and best of all, you'll be understanding, learning, and remembering.

Main Idea. In reading anything, once you have grasped the subject matter, ask yourself, "What point is the writer trying to make?" Once you ask this question, your mind will be looking for an answer, and chances are that you will find one. But if you don't focus in this way, all things seem equal. Nothing stands out.

Try to find the main idea in the following passage by asking, "What point is the writer trying to make?"

A horseshoe means good luck. This is true in every country. The good luck comes partly because the shoe is made of iron, and also because its shape is like a crescent moon. It is very good luck to find a horseshoe by the side of the road. It is extra good luck if the shoe was thrown from the right rear leg of a grey mare. Horseshoes are usually hung over the outside doorways of houses.

A good answer is, "Horseshoes mean good luck." This passage is fairly easy to figure out because the first sentence is an excellent topic sentence.

The next example does not have a topic sentence. Nevertheless, the question "What point is the writer trying to make?" can still be answered. This time, think about the passage and come up with your own answer.

What will the newborn baby be like when it grows up? Friends and parents would like to know. Some people believe you can find out by placing a coin in the child's right hand. If the baby holds the coin tightly, it means that the child will grow up to save money. If it is held loosely, it means the baby will be generous. If the coin is dropped, the child will be a spender.

This passage may have required a bit more thought, for the correct answer is a summary type answer. Compare your answer with the following main idea statement: "Some people use a coin to try to find out a baby's future."

Supporting Details. In common usage, the word *detail* has taken on the unexpected meaning of "something relatively unimportant." But details are important. Details are the plaster, board, and brick of a building, while main ideas are the large, strong steel or wooden beams. A solid, well-written passage must contain both.

The bulk of a factual passage is made up of details that support the main idea. The main idea is often buried among the details. You have to dig to distinguish between them. Here are some characteristics that can help you see the difference between supporting details and main ideas.

First, supporting details come in various forms, such as examples, explanations, descriptions, definitions, comparisons, contrasts, exceptions, analogies, similes, and metaphors.

Second, these various kinds of details are used to support the main idea. The words themselves, supporting details, spell out their job. So when you have trouble finding the main idea, take a passage apart sentence by sentence, asking, "Does this sentence support something, or is this the thing being supported?" In other words,

you must not only separate the two, but also see how they help one another. The main idea can often be expressed in a single sentence. But a sentence cannot tell a complete story. The writer must use additional sentences to give you the full picture.

The following passage shows how important details are for providing a full picture of what the writer had in mind.

This book has provided us with a marvelous record of village life in the mountains of Lebanon 100 years ago. In one picture, we see women baking bread in clay ovens, their children looking on hungrily. On the next page there is a man dancing with a jar on his head at a village feast. Another sketch shows two women sitting on a rug chopping vegetables. In another drawing, a man is drinking from a clay jug. The water in the jug travels in a perfect arc from the spout to his mouth. In the villages people still drink water in this way.

Here we have the main idea in one sentence—the first sentence. Having stated the main idea, the writer goes on to give example after example of the “marvelous record.” These examples are supporting details.

Conclusion. As a reader moves through a passage, grasping the main idea and supporting details, it is natural for him or her to begin to guess an ending or conclusion. Some passages contain conclusions. Others do not. It all depends on the writer’s purpose. For example, some passages describe a process—how something is done. There is no sense in trying to draw a conclusion from such a passage.

There are two kinds of passages with conclusions. In one, the conclusion is stated by the author. In the other, the conclusion is merely implied by the author. That is, the author seems to have come to a conclusion, but has not stated it. It is up to you to draw that conclusion.

Look for the conclusion that is stated in the following passage.

A thunderstorm in the desert can bring surprises. Put yourself in this situation. A thunderstorm roars up in the distance to cool off your sun-baked car, and you head toward it, hoping for a few cool moments. You see the huge black cloud, the flashes of lightning, the black sheets of rain falling. Finally you are under the cloudburst, but you aren’t getting rained on. Not a drop reaches your car. You stop the car, get out, and look up. There, right above you, is the storm. Rain is pouring down toward you, but every bit of it evaporates before it gets close enough to wet you.

The conclusion to this passage is that though it rains above the desert, the rain doesn’t reach the ground because it is evaporated by the hot, dry air.

In the next excerpt, the author strongly implies a conclusion, but does not state it directly.

Try to find the main idea in the following passage by asking, "What point is the writer trying to make?"

A horseshoe means good luck. This is true in every country. The good luck comes partly because the shoe is made of iron, and also because its shape is like a crescent moon. It is very good luck to find a horseshoe by the side of the road. It is extra good luck if the shoe was thrown from the right rear leg of a grey mare. Horseshoes are usually hung over the outside doorways of houses.

A good answer is, "Horseshoes mean good luck." This passage is fairly easy to figure out because the first sentence is an excellent topic sentence.

The next example does not have a topic sentence. Nevertheless, the question "What point is the writer trying to make?" can still be answered. This time, think about the passage and come up with your own answer.

What will the newborn baby be like when it grows up? Friends and parents would like to know. Some people believe you can find out by placing a coin in the child's right hand. If the baby holds the coin tightly, it means that the child will grow up to save money. If it is held loosely, it means the baby will be generous. If the coin is dropped, the child will be a spender.

This passage may have required a bit more thought, for the correct answer is a summary type answer. Compare your answer with the following main idea statement: "Some people use a coin to try to find out a baby's future."

Supporting Details. In common usage, the word *detail* has taken on the unexpected meaning of "something relatively unimportant." But details are important. Details are the plaster, board, and brick of a building, while main ideas are the large, strong steel or wooden beams. A solid, well-written passage must contain both.

The bulk of a factual passage is made up of details that support the main idea. The main idea is often buried among the details. You have to dig to distinguish between them. Here are some characteristics that can help you see the difference between supporting details and main ideas.

First, supporting details come in various forms, such as examples, explanations, descriptions, definitions, comparisons, contrasts, exceptions, analogies, similes, and metaphors.

Second, these various kinds of details are used to support the main idea. The words themselves, supporting details, spell out their job. So when you have trouble finding the main idea, take a passage apart sentence by sentence, asking, "Does this sentence support something, or is this the thing being supported?" In other words,

you must not only separate the two, but also see how they help one another. The main idea can often be expressed in a single sentence. But a sentence cannot tell a complete story. The writer must use additional sentences to give you the full picture.

The following passage shows how important details are for providing a full picture of what the writer had in mind.

This book has provided us with a marvelous record of village life in the mountains of Lebanon 100 years ago. In one picture, we see women baking bread in clay ovens, their children looking on hungrily. On the next page there is a man dancing with a jar on his head at a village feast. Another sketch shows two women sitting on a rug chopping vegetables. In another drawing, a man is drinking from a clay jug. The water in the jug travels in a perfect arc from the spout to his mouth. In the villages people still drink water in this way.

Here we have the main idea in one sentence—the first sentence. Having stated the main idea, the writer goes on to give example after example of the “marvelous record.” These examples are supporting details.

Conclusion. As a reader moves through a passage, grasping the main idea and supporting details, it is natural for him or her to begin to guess an ending or conclusion. Some passages contain conclusions. Others do not. It all depends on the writer’s purpose. For example, some passages describe a process—how something is done. There is no sense in trying to draw a conclusion from such a passage.

There are two kinds of passages with conclusions. In one, the conclusion is stated by the author. In the other, the conclusion is merely implied by the author. That is, the author seems to have come to a conclusion, but has not stated it. It is up to you to draw that conclusion.

Look for the conclusion that is stated in the following passage.

A thunderstorm in the desert can bring surprises. Put yourself in this situation. A thunderstorm roars up in the distance to cool off your sun-baked car, and you head toward it, hoping for a few cool moments. You see the huge black cloud, the flashes of lightning, the black sheets of rain falling. Finally you are under the cloudburst, but you aren’t getting rained on. Not a drop reaches your car. You stop the car, get out, and look up. There, right above you, is the storm. Rain is pouring down toward you, but every bit of it evaporates before it gets close enough to wet you.

The conclusion to this passage is that though it rains above the desert, the rain doesn’t reach the ground because it is evaporated by the hot, dry air.

In the next excerpt, the author strongly implies a conclusion, but does not state it directly.

In fact, what I've said adds up to this: if you wish to enjoy your holiday in the Middle East, I suggest that you simply make up your mind that although you can get your money's worth if you're careful, and can make excellent purchases if you take your time, there are few bargains to be had. This is true of carpets, anyway.

From the excerpt above, we can draw the conclusion that carpets cannot be bought cheaply in the Middle East.

Looking for a conclusion puts you in the shoes of a detective. While reading, you have to think, "Where is the writer leading me? What's the conclusion?" And, like a detective, you must try to guess the conclusion, changing the guess as you get more and more information.

Clarifying Devices. Clarifying devices are words, phrases, and techniques that a writer uses to make main ideas, sub-ideas, and supporting details clear and interesting. By knowing some of these clarifying and controlling devices, you will be better able to recognize them in the passages you read. By recognizing them, you will be able to read with greater comprehension and speed.

Two literary devices that make a writer's ideas both clear and interesting are similes and metaphors. Both are used to make comparisons that add color and power to ideas. An example of a simile is "She has a mind like a computer." In this simile, a person's mind is compared to a computer. A simile always uses the words *like*, *as*, or *than* to make a comparison. The metaphor, on the other hand, makes a direct comparison: "Her mind is a computer." Because metaphors are shorter and more direct, they are more forceful than similes. Writers use them to capture your attention, touch your emotions, and spark your imagination.

The largest single group of clarifying devices, and the most widely used, are transitional or signal words. For example, here are some signal words that you see all the time: *first*, *second*, *next*, *last*, *finally*. A writer uses such words to keep ideas, steps in a process, or lists in order. Other transitional words include *in brief*, *in conclusion*, *above all*, *therefore*, *since*, *because*, and *consequently*.

Organizational patterns are also clarifying devices. One such pattern is the chronological pattern, in which events unfold in the order of time: one thing happens first, then another, and another, and so on. A time pattern orders events. The event may take place in five minutes or over a period of hundreds of years.

Vocabulary in Context. How accurate are you in using words you think you already know? Do you know that the word *exotic* means "a thing or person from a

foreign country?” So, exotic flowers and exotic dancers are flowers and dancers from a foreign country. Exotic has been used incorrectly so often and for so long that it has developed a second meaning. Most people use exotic to mean “strikingly unusual, as in color or design.”

Many people think that the words *imply* and *infer* mean the same thing. They do not. An author may imply, or suggest, something. The reader then infers what the author implied. In other words, to imply is to suggest an idea. To infer is to take meaning out.

It would be easy to see what would happen to a passage if a reader skipped a word or two that he or she did not know, and imposed fuzzy meanings on a few others. The result would inevitably be a gross misunderstanding of the author’s message. You will become a better reader if you learn the exact meanings and different shades of meaning of the words that are already familiar to you.

Answering the Main Idea Question

The main idea questions in this book are not the usual multiple-choice variety from which you must select the one correct statement. Rather, you are given three statements and are asked to select the statement that expresses the main idea of the passage, the statement that is too narrow, and the statement that is too broad. You have to work hard and actively to identify all three statements correctly. This new type of question teaches you the differences among statements that, at first, seem almost equal.

To help you handle these questions, let’s go behind the scenes to see how the main idea questions in this book were constructed. The true main idea statement was always written first. It had to be neat, succinct, and positive. The main idea tells who or what the subject of the passage is. It also answers the question does what? or is what? Next, keeping the main idea statement in mind, the other two statements were written. They are variations of the main idea statement. The too narrow statement had to be in line with the main idea, but express only part of it. Likewise, the too broad statement had to be in line with the main idea, but to be too general in scope.

Read the sample passage that starts below. Then, to learn how to answer the main idea questions, follow the instructions in the box. The answer to each part of the question has been filled in for you. The score for each answer has also been marked.

Sample Passage

Did you know you can predict weather by watching swallows? When swallows fly high, you can expect fine weather. But when they fly low, or close to the ground, rain is on the way. Swallows follow flies and gnats, which delight in warm currents of air. Warm air is lighter than cold air, and when the warm air currents are high in the sky, then there is less of a chance of rain. When the warm air is near the ground, then it is certain there will be rain.

Main Idea	1	Answer	Score
	Mark the <i>main idea</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<u>15</u>
	Mark the statement that is <i>too broad</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> B	<u>5</u>
	Mark the statement that is <i>too narrow</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> N	<u>5</u>
a.	By watching swallows, a person can predict rain or fair weather. [This statement gathers all the important points. It gives a correct picture of the main idea in a brief way: (1) watching swallows, (2) predicting rain, and (3) predicting fair weather.]	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<u>15</u>
b.	When swallows fly high, there is less chance of rain. [This statement is correct, but it is too narrow. Only part of the main idea is stated. The prediction for rain is left out.]	<input type="checkbox"/> B	<u>5</u>
c.	People can predict weather by watching birds in flight. [This statement is too broad. It is stretching the point by saying "by watching birds in flight." According to the passage, only one kind of bird, swallows, can let us know whether or not it will rain.]	<input type="checkbox"/> N	<u>5</u>

Getting the Most Out of This Book

The following steps could be called "tricks of the trade." Your teachers might call them "rules for learning." It doesn't matter what they are called. What does matter is that they work.

Think About the Title. A famous language expert told me a "trick" to use when I read. "The first thing to do is to read the title. Then spend a few moments thinking about it."

Writers spend much time thinking up good titles. They try to pack a lot of meaning into them. It makes sense, then, for you to spend a few seconds trying to dig out some meaning. These few moments of thought will give you a head start on a passage.

Thinking about the title can help you in another way, too. It helps you concentrate on a passage before you begin reading. Why does this happen? Thinking about the title fills your head full of thoughts about the passage. There's no room for anything else to get in to break concentration.

The Dot System. Here is a method that will speed up your reading. It also builds comprehension at the same time.

Spend a few moments with the title. Then read quickly through the passage. Next, without looking back, answer the six questions by placing a dot in the box next to each answer of your choice. The dots will be your "unofficial" answers. For the main idea question (question one) place your dot in the box next to the statement that you think is the main idea.

The dot system helps by making you think hard on your first, fast reading. The practice you gain by trying to grasp and remember ideas makes you a stronger reader.

The Check-Mark System. First, answer the main idea question. Follow the steps that are given above each set of statements for this question. Use a capital letter to mark your final answer to each part of the main idea question.

You have answered the other five questions with a dot. Now read the passage once more carefully. This time, mark your final answer to each question by placing a check mark (✓) in the box next to the answer of your choice. The answers with the check marks are the ones that will count toward your score.

The Diagnostic Chart. Now move your final answers to the Diagnostic Chart that starts on page 209.

Use the row of boxes beside Passage 1 for the answers to the first passage. Use the row of boxes beside Passage 2 for the answers to the second passage, and so on. Write the letter of your answer to the left of the dotted line in each block.

Correct your answers using the Answer Key on pages 203–207. When scoring your answers, do not use an *x* for incorrect or a *c* for correct. Instead, use this method. If your choice is incorrect, write the letter of the correct answer to the right of the dotted line in the block.

Thus, the row of answers for each passage will show your incorrect answers. And it will also show the correct answers.

Your Total Comprehension Score. Go back to the passage you have just read. If you answered a question incorrectly, draw a line under the correct choice on the question page. Then write your score for each question on the line provided. Add the scores to get your total comprehension score. Enter that number in the box marked Total Score.

Graphing Your Progress. After you have found your total comprehension score, turn to the Progress Graph that begins on page 215. Write your score in the box under the number of the passage. Then put an x along the line above the box to show your total comprehension score. Join the x 's as you go. This will plot a line showing your progress.

Taking Corrective Action. Your incorrect answers give you a way to teach yourself how to read better. Take the time to study your wrong answers.

Go back to the questions. For each question you got wrong, read the correct answer (the one you have underlined) several times. With the correct answer in mind, go back to the passage itself. Read to see why the approved answer is better. Try to see where you made your mistake. Try to figure out why you chose a wrong answer.

The Steps in a Nutshell

Here's a quick review of the steps to follow. Following these steps is the way to get the most out of this book. Be sure you have read and understood everything in the "To the Student" section on pages ix–xvii before you start.

1. **Think About the Title of the Passage.** Try to get all the meaning the writer put into it.
2. **Read the Passage Quickly.**
3. **Answer the Questions, Using the Dot System.** Use dots to mark your unofficial answers. Don't look back at the passage.
4. **Read the Passage Again—Carefully.**
5. **Mark Your Final Answers.** Put a check mark (✓) in the box to note your final answer. Use capital letters for each part of the main idea question.

6. **Mark Your Answers on the Diagnostic Chart.** Record your final answers on the Diagnostic Chart that begins on page 209. Write your answers to the left of the dotted line in the answer blocks for the passage.
7. **Correct Your Answers.** Use the Answer Key on pages 203–207. If an answer is not correct, write the correct answer in the right side of the block, beside your wrong answer. Then go back to the question page. Place a line under the correct answer.
8. **Find Your Total Comprehension Score.** Find this by adding up the points you earned for each question. Enter the total in the box marked Total Score.
9. **Graph Your Progress.** Enter and plot your score on the graph that begins on page 215.
10. **Take Corrective Action.** Read your wrong answers. Read the passage once more. Try to figure out why you were wrong.