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Making Sense of Reading - How to Locate Main Idea/Claim in a Text

Definition: A main idea is the main point or topic that the writer of an essay or story is trying to make. Sometimes main ideas are also called ***thesis statements***. Since main ideas sum up the writer's ideas, they are usually only a few sentences long.

Purpose: Why should we care about main ideas? Because they are the key to ***good reading comprehension***. If you can't find the main idea of an essay, that means you are having trouble understanding it and remembering it, which means that you'll have trouble taking a quiz, writing an essay, or discussing the material.

How to Find Them: In basic terms, main ideas consist of two parts:

- 1) the topic
- 2) the author's opinion on the topic

How long should they be? Because they sum up the writer's ideas, main ideas are usually only a few sentences long (depending on how long the writing is).

For example, read the following paragraph to better understand this:

Spanking is a poor way to shape a child's behavior. For one thing, the spanking will result in feelings of anger and frustration. The child, then, will not learn anything positive from the punishment. In addition, the spanking may actually lead to more bad behavior. Having learned that hitting is okay, the child may attack smaller children. Finally, spanking teaches children to hide certain actions from their parents. Once out of their parents' sight, children may feel they can get away with bad behavior.

Think about what the topic of this paragraph is (to find the topic ask: "Who or What is this topic about?").

Think about what the author's opinion of this topic is. Here are some opinion clue words:

Opinion Clues

- ▶ Always/Never
- ▶ Awful/Wonderful
- ▶ Beautiful/Ugly
- ▶ Better/Best/Worst
- ▶ Delicious/Disgusting
- ▶ Definitely
- ▶ Enjoyable/Horrible
- ▶ Favorite
- ▶ For/Against
- ▶ Good/Bad

Put the topic and opinion together and you have the main idea!

Check-In Quiz:

1. What is a Main Idea?

2. What are two questions you can ask to find a Main Idea?

3. What is the purpose of finding a Main Idea?

Practice finding the topic and then the main idea in the following paragraph:

Extrasensory perception or ESP is an area that fascinates people. However, ESP is not documented by any convincing evidence. For instance, it would seem that ESP would be an excellent way of winning games of chance, such as are played at gambling casinos. But casino owners in Las Vegas and Atlantic City report no problem with “psychics” winning great sums of money. For another thing, although great publicity is generated when a psychic seems to help police solve a crime, the value of such help has never been scientifically proven. Psychics' tips are usually worthless, and a case is solved through traditional police work. And while audiences may be amazed at the feats of “mind readers,” the fact is that mind readers use simple psychological tricks to exploit their audience's willingness to believe.

1. What is the topic of this paragraph?
 - A. Psychics
 - B. ESP is not documented by any convincing evidence.
 - C. Crimes are solved by police work, not psychic tips.

Type your answer here: _____

Practice finding the topic and then the main idea in the following paragraph:

In response to customers' bitter complaints about long lines, banks are trying new ways to shorten the wait or at least to make it more pleasant. One bank provides coffee and cookies to customers who can munch while they wait. Other banks show action movies on a large movie screen. One daring bank in California will pay a customer five dollars if he or she must wait more than five minutes for service. Still, other banks offer the most obvious solution of all--they simply hire more bank tellers.

1. What is the topic of this paragraph?

- A. Waiting in line
- B. Waiting in bank lines
- C. Hiring more bank tellers

Type your answer here: _____

Final Questions:

1. What is the main idea of a paragraph? Is it "general" or "specific" information?

2. Is there a sentence(s) in each paragraph that tells you what the main idea is or will be?

Type Two Questions You Have (to discuss with a tutor):

1.

2.