

A GUIDE TO THE MAIN IDEA



ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTER

BREMER HALL, ROOM 116

HAWKEYE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

MAIN IDEA

The main idea sentence (topic sentence) is a complete sentence which tells the main point of a paragraph or group of paragraphs. The rest of the sentences within the paragraph serve to support the topic sentence through details, examples, and explanations. By developing your ability to locate the main idea sentence, you increase your chances of focusing on the basic message.

How to Determine the Main Idea

Often, the topic sentence is a **generalization** which prepares you to understand the details and examples which follow. As a generalization, it serves as a category statement. The rest of the paragraph or section lists specific items to be found under that category. An example from the 70's:

With human beings, why does mothering often seem to come naturally to women but not to men? People, like monkeys, are influenced by early socialization experiences. These are the messages and experiences provided for us by other people to direct our growth in particular directions. Girls are frequently given caretaking roles to prepare them for the traditional feminine roles they will assume once they are adults. It is not surprising that many women seem to take to the mothering role “naturally” once they have children. If the Pittsburgh Steelers had all been urged into changing diapers and caring for younger siblings, or babysitting in their preteen and teen years, they, too, might “naturally” fit the mothering role.

Topic Sentence: With human beings, why does mothering often seem to come naturally to women but not to men?

Supporting Details: 1. Early socialization experiences

- a. Girls play with dolls to prepare them for female roles.
- b. Boys do not have these opportunities.

In this example, the first sentence indicates the general thrust of the passage. It prepares the reader to discover reasons why “mothering” seems to come more naturally to women. The rest of the paragraph presents specific reasons to support the topic sentence.

When used as a generalization, the topic sentence is usually found at the beginning of the paragraph or section.

Sometimes the main idea sentence tells the **point** the author is making. In this case, it usually appears as the last sentence in a paragraph or section and is preceded by details and examples. There are several reasons why the topic sentence may be placed in this position.

- a. The concept being presented may be difficult to understand. By giving details first, the author hopes to make the difficult idea more comprehensible.
- b. The idea being presented may be unpopular. It may be a different way of looking at an idea. The author hopes that the reader will “buy” this way of thinking about the topic by explaining it first.
- c. The author may be presenting a new way of performing a procedure other than the one(s) the reader is more used to. There is often a resistance to try things a new way. If reasons for using a

different procedure are discussed, the reader may be more open toward trying it.

An example of a passage which states the main idea last follows:

For years it was believed that our natural resources were free goods which, although wasted and exploited, would be replenished by nature. This nation did not recognize that it was destroying the ability of nature to maintain a balanced ecological system. Today many of our lakes and streams are too polluted to support plant and fish life. In strip-mine areas, the wasted land lies barren. Energy sources that took nature thousands of years to create are consumed within minutes. As indicated by these few examples, a realistic program of environment and energy conservation should be adopted by every business.

Topic Sentence: As indicated by these few examples, a realistic program of environment and energy conservation should be adopted by every business.

Supporting Details:

1. We believed our natural resources would be naturally replenished.
2. We failed to realize that we were destroying nature's balance.
3. Today waterways are too polluted to support life.

4. Strip-mined land is barren.
5. Energy is consumed too rapidly.

Sometimes the main idea sentence is **definitional**. In this case, the rest of the paragraph serves to embellish on the definition, providing examples of the word being defined or giving further details about the definition. An example follows.

A stereotype is a ready-made compartment for classifying people. If you use stereotyping, you find a premolded category in which to place the person. You assume that the person has all the characteristics you connect with people in that category. In a sense, then, stereotyping is a kind of simple filing system. You locate the pigeon-hole the person fits in, file the person in it, and you have a ready-made impression of the person.

Topic Sentence: A stereotype is a ready-made compartment for classifying people.

- Supporting Details:**
1. A pre-molded category.
 2. Assume a person has all characteristics of others in that category.
 3. Simple filing system.
 4. Pigeon-hole a person, file, and have ready-made impression.

Sometimes the topic sentence appears in the middle of a paragraph. Often it is placed there to create some variety in the material. It can become monotonous to read material that always has the main idea as the first sentence of paragraphs. For example,

A market is people—but people alone do not make a market. A car dealer would be unimpressed by news that 60 percent of a marketing class raised their hands in response to the question: “Who wants to buy a new Mazda RX7?” More pertinent would be the answer to this question: “How many of them have funds for the down payment?” A market requires not only people and willingness to buy but also purchasing power and authority to buy. A successful salesperson quickly learns how to pinpoint which individual in an organization or household has the authority to make particular purchasing decisions. Without this knowledge, too much time can be spent convincing the wrong person that the product or service should be bought.

Topic Sentence: A market requires not only people and willingness to buy but also purchasing power and authority to buy.

Supporting Details:

1. People alone do not make a market.
2. Wants alone do not make a market.
3. The salesperson must recognize who has the authority to buy.
4. Time can be wasted without this knowledge.

Sometimes a topic sentence covers two or more paragraphs, as in this example.

Until recently, several explanations have been cited for the lack of studies conducted on of women's prisons. In the first place, women constitute only 5 percent of the correctional population, and one-half of those women are in jails, not prisons. Presumably those in jails are incarcerated for lesser offenses than those in prisons. Consequently, it is not unreasonable to assume that researchers have paid little attention to female inmates because they are not considered to constitute the serious problems created by male inmates, two-thirds of whom are in prisons as opposed to jails.

Second, the relatively smaller population of women makes research difficult. The base is not as large, therefore it is not as easy to generalize as it is with data on male inmates, making it difficult to compare the various studies that are conducted.

Third, the lack of research on women prisons may be a function of who conducts the research. Most of the studies on the female offender have been conducted by women, and until recently, large numbers of women have not been trained in social science research methodology.

Fourth, some studies indicate that administrators of correctional facilities for women are more reluctant than those in men's prisons to permit researchers to enter the institution.

Topic Sentence: Several explanations have been advanced for lack of study, until recently, of women's prisons.

Supporting Details: 1. Women comprise only 5 percent of inmates; half of these are in jails rather than prisons.

a. Women are not considered as dangerous as male inmates.

b. Two-thirds of male inmates are in prisons rather than jails.

2. The small female prison population makes research difficult.

a. Samples are smaller.

1. It is difficult to generalize data.

2. It is difficult to compare studies.

3. Women have been the ones who have chosen to study women prisoners.

a. Until recently, few women were trained in social science research methods.

4. Administrators of prisons for women have been reluctant to permit research in their facilities.

Some paragraphs do not have topic sentences. In this kind of paragraph, the supporting details, as a whole, give you the main idea. Since the main idea is implied, it is necessary for you to discover what the details suggest and to put the main idea in your own words. Here is an example of a paragraph with an implied main idea.

As a college student, you have to go to class for several hours a day. While in class, you are expected to take many pages of lecture notes. When not in class, you are required to spend time reading some rather difficult textbooks. In addition, you have to put aside a few hours each day for the purpose of reviewing and studying course material in preparation for tests. On top of all this, you may be required to write research papers.

Topic Sentence: None

Supporting Details:

1. College students attend class several hours a day.
2. College students need to take many lecture notes.
3. Time needs to be spent reading difficult textbooks.
4. Time for studying and reviewing needs to be established.
5. Research papers may need to be written.

Implied Main Idea: Many educational demands are made on a college student's time.

Assignments

Exercise #1: Finding Topic Sentences in Textbooks

Directions: Select a page from one of your textbooks. For each of ten consecutive paragraphs, highlight the main idea sentence.