

READING

Identifying Main Idea

A main idea is the author’s controlling point about the topic. It usually includes the topic and the author’s attitude or opinion about the topic. To identify the main idea, ask yourself:

1. Who or what is the paragraph about? The answer is the **topic**. The topic can be stated in just a few words.
2. What is the author’s controlling point about the topic? The answer is the **main idea**. The main idea is stated in one sentence.

Topic + Point = Main Idea

The cool-down period is an important part of an exercise workout.

Often, but not always, the main idea of a paragraph is written as that paragraph’s **topic sentence**. A topic sentence is a single sentence that states the topic and words that qualify the topic by revealing the author’s opinion about the topic or the author’s approach to the topic. Topic sentences can also reveal the author’s thought pattern or organizational strategy.

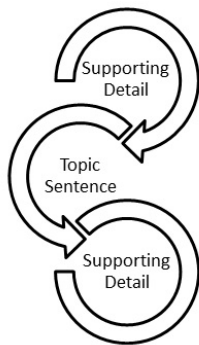
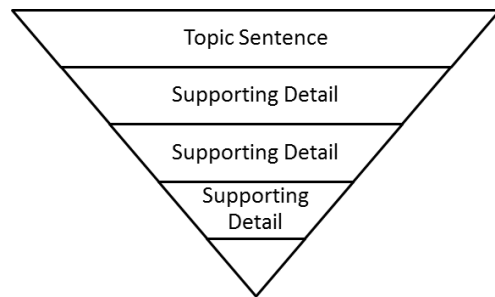
Topic + Point + Thought Pattern = Topic Sentence

The cool-down period is an important part of an exercise workout for several reasons.

Placement of Main Ideas/Topic Sentences

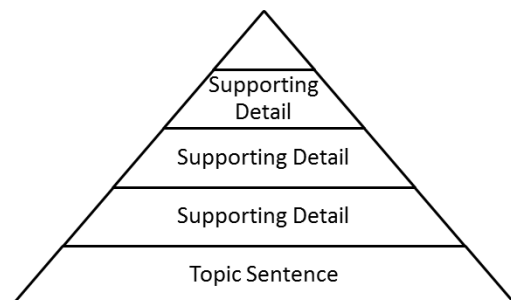
The topic sentence is the one sentence that is general enough to include all the ideas in the paragraph.

Therefore, a topic sentence that begins a paragraph or appears within the first few sentences of a paragraph signals a move from general ideas to specific ideas.



At times, an author begins a paragraph with details to stir the reader’s interest in the topic. The flow of ideas moves from the specific to the general and back to the specific.

Sometimes, an author waits until the end of the paragraph to state the topic sentence and main idea. This allows the details to build up to the main idea and is sometimes called “climactic order.”



Implied Main Idea

This is a main idea that is not stated directly, but is strongly suggested by the supporting details in the passage. Many paragraphs in college textbooks do not provide a topic sentence, instead using supporting details to imply the main idea. To determine the implied main idea, look at:

1. The topic
2. The supporting details: facts, examples, descriptions, and explanations given
3. The author's thought pattern
4. The author's purpose

Remember, the main idea must be broad enough to cover all the details in the paragraph without being so broad that it includes details not mentioned.

Read the sample paragraph below:

Egypt's **pyramids** are the oldest existing buildings in the world. These ancient tombs are also among the world's largest structures. The largest pyramid stands taller than a 40-story building and covers an area greater than that of ten football fields. More than 80 **pyramids** still exist, and their once-smooth limestone surfaces hide secret passageways and rooms. The **pyramids** of ancient Egypt served a vital purpose: to protect the pharaoh's bodies after death. Each **pyramid** held not only the pharaoh's preserved body, but also all the goods he would need in his life after death.

1. The **topic** of the paragraph is: pyramids
2. There are three groups of supporting details, discussing: age, size, and purpose
3. The author has organized the supporting details into "characteristics" or "traits" of the pyramids.
4. The author purpose seems to be trying to define a pyramid.
→ **Implied Main Idea: Pyramids are structures with several distinctive traits.**

You Try!

Cognitive therapy helps a person deal with negative or painful thoughts and behaviors. This therapy, a psychological treatment, was developed by a medical doctor, Aaron T. Beck, in the 1970s. First, a person seeks to change thinking patterns such as assumptions and core beliefs. Changes in feelings and actions will follow. To aid change, a person learns how to replace harmful thoughts and behaviors with positive coping tactics. Some of these tactics may include anger management and relaxation training.