

Finding the Main Idea

Paragraph: A group of sentences organized around a topic, a main idea about the topic, and details that support the main idea.

Topic: The overall subject of a paragraph.

Main Idea: A statement that tells the author's point about the topic. The main idea provides the message of a given paragraph or the argument that is being made about the topic.

Details: The specific information about the main idea or support for the main idea.

Main Idea = Topic + Author's Point about the Topic

How to Find the Topic

Ask yourself the question:

What or who is this paragraph about?

How to Find the Main Idea

Ask yourself the question:

What is the overall message or argument being made by the author about the topic of this paragraph?

How to Find Supporting Details

Turn the main idea into a question by asking *who, what, when, where, why, or how?* The answer will give a set of details.

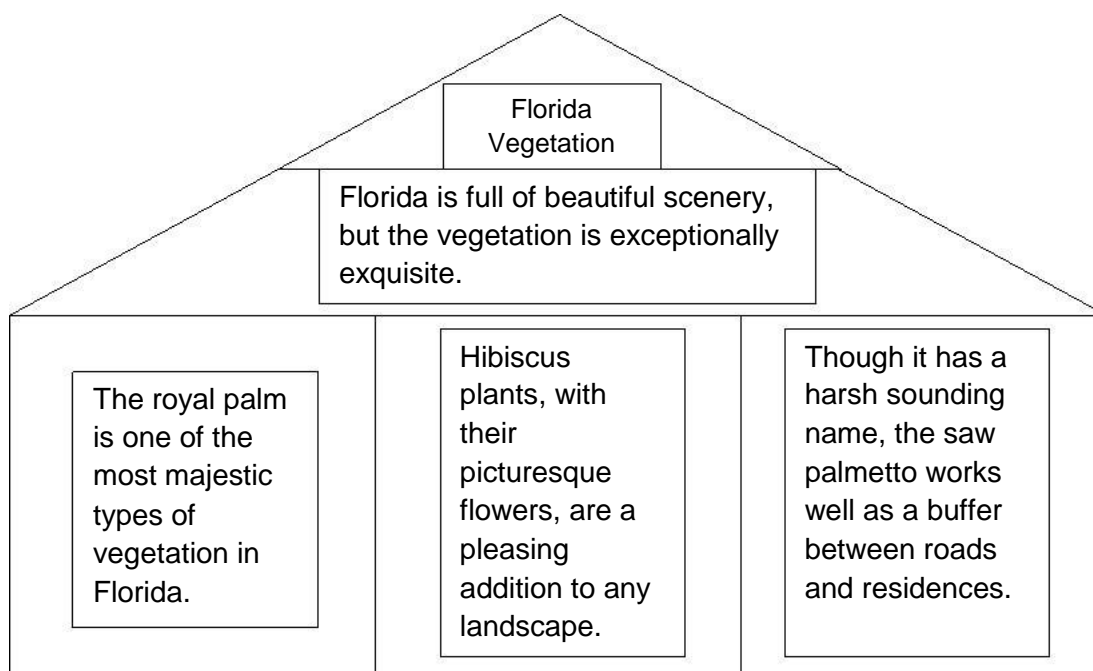
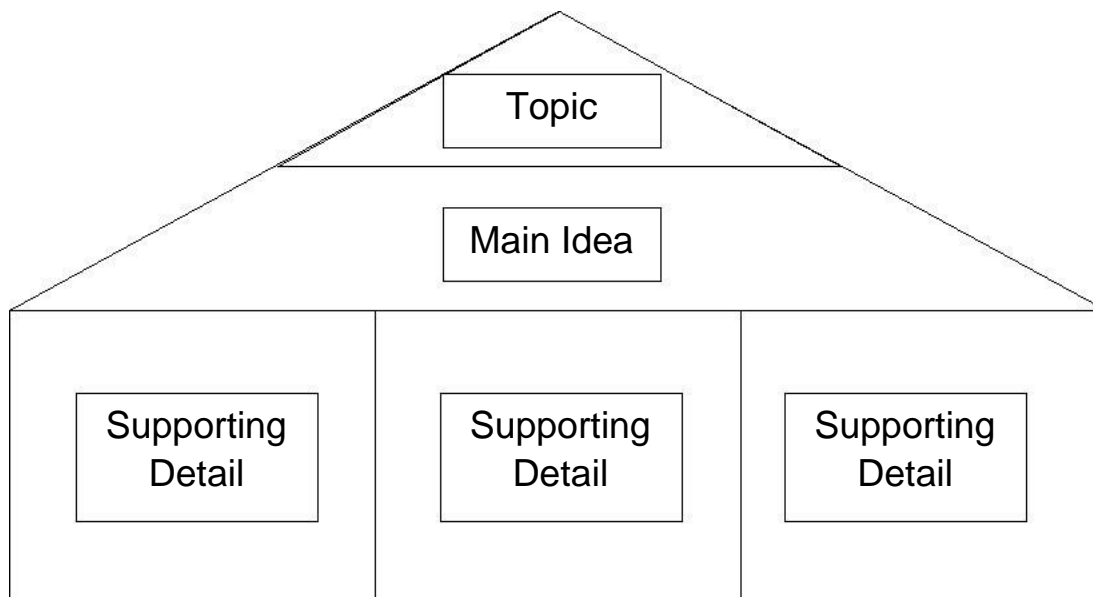
Hints

- ✓ Boldfaced headings or titles may contain the topic and/or main idea
- ✓ First and last sentences in the paragraph are usually helpful
- ✓ Look for repeating words, these often indicate the topic

Remember

Topics, main ideas, and supporting details work together. The main idea tells the author's point about the topic, and the details offer support for the main idea.

The main idea is the overall idea of the paragraph. It is supported by details throughout the paragraph much like the frame of a house supports the roof.



Florida is full of beautiful scenery, but the vegetation is exceptionally exquisite. Shopping plazas, residential areas, and highway medians are often elaborately decorated with grand palm trees and tropical plants. Of the many types of vegetation found in Florida, one of the most majestic is the royal palm. Growing to nearly ninety feet tall, it towers over many shopping centers and hotels with splendor. Hibiscus plants, with their picturesque flowers, are a pleasing addition to any landscape. Adorned with pink, red, or orange flowers, the hibiscus sets a tropical scene to homes and businesses alike. Finally, the saw palmetto, though it has a harsh sounding name, works well as a buffer between roads and residences.

Main Idea Practice Exercises

Read the passages and answer the questions.

¹Fire ants are painful and destructive pests. ²The fire ant earned its name because of its venom. ³The insect uses a wasp-like stinger to inject the venom, which causes a painful burning sensation and leaves tiny, itching pustules. ⁴The ants will swarm over anyone or anything that disturbs their nests. ⁵In addition to causing pain, fire ants damage many crops by eating the plants and by protecting other insects that damage crops. ⁶Fire ants are attracted to soybeans, eggplant, corn, okra, strawberries, and potatoes.

1. What is the topic of the passage?
 - a. Ant bites
 - b. Fire ants
 - c. Farming
 - d. Pests
2. What does the author want you to know about the topic?
 - a. Fire ants have a wasp-like stinger.
 - b. Fire ants swarm.
 - c. Fire ants are pests to farmers.
 - d. Fire ants are painful and pesky.
3. Which sentence contains the main idea?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 4
 - d. 5

¹Rosa Parks was an African American woman who worked hard as a seamstress in a department store in the early 1960s. ²One day, tired from work, she refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and became a national hero. ³She was arrested and placed in jail for her refusal to move to the back of the bus, where African Americans were forced to sit in those days. ⁴The way she was treated garnered national attention. ⁵Some people say her refusal to give up her seat launched the civil rights movement. ⁶Rosa Parks proved that one brave person can make a difference.

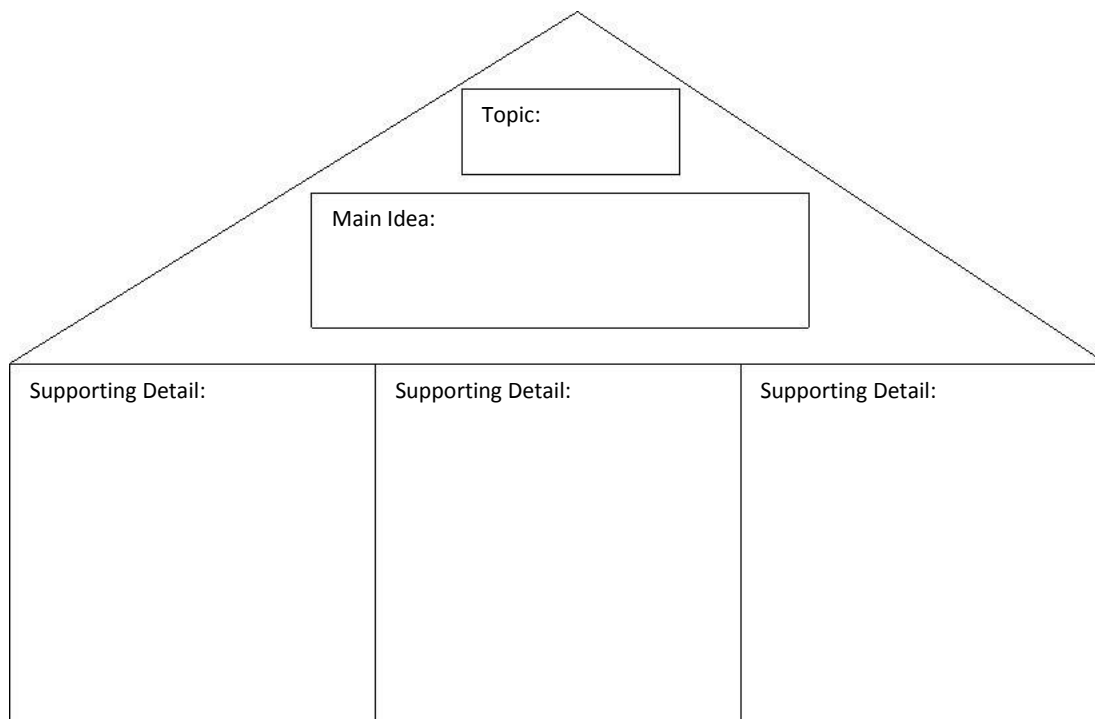
4. What is the topic of the passage?
 - a. Rosa Parks
 - b. Civil Rights
 - c. Brave People
 - d. National Heroes
5. What does the author want you to know about the topic?
 - a. Rosa Parks was a hard working woman.
 - b. Brave people deserve special attention.
 - c. Stubborn people always get their way.
 - d. Brave people can make a difference.
6. Which sentence contains the main idea?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 5
 - d. 6

1Few of us could swim in the ocean comfortably after seeing filmmaker Steven Spielberg’s terrifying movie *Jaws*. 2In his hit movie *E.T. the Extraterrestrial*, Spielberg created a sweet, funny film about a being from outer space. 3In 1985, he gave us *The Color Purple*, a moving picture about a black family in the South that earned him a Best Director nomination. 4Steven Spielberg has created some of the most successful and popular films of the 1970s and 1980s.

- 7. Sentence 1 is a
 - a. Main Idea
 - b. Supporting Detail
- 8. Sentence 2 is a
 - a. Main Idea
 - b. Supporting Detail
- 9. Sentence 3 is a
 - a. Main Idea
 - b. Supporting Detail
- 10. Sentence 4 is a
 - a. Main Idea
 - b. Supporting Detail

Read the following passage. Fill in the chart using information from the paragraph.

1Reggae music is a complex mix of message and style. 2Originating in Jamaica in the 1960s, reggae evolved from folk music that protested racism and corruption. 3Reggae also has a religious side that is based on the Bible from the view of black culture. 4Some critics say that the serious messages of reggae are easier to accept because of its powerful dance beat.



Answers: 1. b, 2. d, 3. a, 4. a, 5. d, 6. d, 7. b, 8. b, 9. B, 10. a, Topic: Reggae Music, M.I.: Sentence 1, Supporting Details: Sentences 2, 3, & 4

More on Finding the Main Idea

How Can I Locate the Main Idea?

Once you can find the topic, you are ready to find the main idea. The main idea is the point of the paragraph. It is the most important thought about the topic.

To figure out the main idea, ask yourself this question: What is being said about the person, thing, or idea (the topic)?

The author can locate the main idea in different places within a paragraph. The main idea is usually a sentence, and it is usually the first sentence. The writer then uses the rest of the paragraph to support the main idea.

Let's use the paragraph below as an example. First find the topic, then look for the main idea.

Summer is a wonderful time to spend at West Beach. It is a beach with light-colored, soft sand. The coastline goes on for a long way and many people enjoy walking along it. Children like to play in the surf and walk along the rocks that are visible at low tide. This is a fun beach for people of all ages.

In this paragraph:

- THE TOPIC IS *WEST BEACH*
- THE MAIN IDEA (WHAT THE WRITER IS SAYING ABOUT THE TOPIC) IS THAT SUMMER IS A WONDERFUL TIME AT WEST BEACH

Here is another example:

The movie Apollo 13 was a blockbuster for the summer of 1995. It is an exciting story about space exploration. In the movie, the astronauts get in trouble while they are trying to return to Earth. People in the audience are on the edge of their seats waiting to see what happens. What makes it even more exciting is that it is a true story.

In this paragraph:

- THE TOPIC IS THE MOVIE *APOLLO 13*
- THE MAIN IDEA IS IN THE FIRST SENTENCE: *APOLLO 13 WAS A BLOCKBUSTER FOR THE SUMMER OF 1995*

While the main idea is usually in the first sentence, the next most common placement is in the last sentence of a paragraph. The author gives supporting information first and then makes the point in the last sentence.

Here's a paragraph we can use as an example. Try to locate the topic and the main idea.

Most teenagers and young adults do not know what they want to do for the rest of their lives. It is a big decision. There are a number of things you can do to narrow the choices. For example you can take an interest test, do some research on your own about a career, try volunteer work in the field in which you are interested, or "job-shadow", in which you spend a day with a person who is working in a field that interests you. These are just a few helpful ideas as you begin to choose a career.

In this paragraph:

- THE TOPIC IS *JOBS OR CAREER CHOICES*
- THE MAIN IDEA IS A FEW IDEAS TO HELP THE READER CHOOSE A CAREER

Finally, an author might put the main idea in the middle of a paragraph. The author will spend a few sentences introducing the topic, present the main idea, then spend the rest of the paragraph supporting it. This can make the main idea more difficult to find.

See if you can find the topic and main idea in the paragraph below.

The United States seems to be in love with the idea of going out to eat. Because of this, a real variety of restaurants has come about specializing in all kinds of foods. McDonald's is the king of a subgroup of restaurants called fast-food restaurants. Chances are, no matter where you live, there is a McDonald's restaurant near you. There are even McDonald's in the Soviet Union. Now McDonald's is trying something new. It is called McDonald's Express and there is a test site in Peabody, Massachusetts. It is part of a Mobil gas station. This allows you to fill up with gas and fill up on food at the same time. What will they think of next?

In this paragraph:

- THE TOPIC IS *MCDONALD'S*
- THE MAIN IDEA IS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PARAGRAPH, IN THE THIRD SENTENCE: *MCDONALD'S IS THE KING OF FAST FOOD*