



Reading On The Move

Hey, What's the Big Idea?!

Finding the Main Idea

A **paragraph** is a group of sentences about one **topic**. The topic can be a person, a place, or a thing. Each sentence tells something about the topic. Paragraphs break up stories and information into smaller pieces. That makes them easier to read. Below, the same story is written in two different ways. Look at, but don't read it. Which one looks easier to read?

It's summer. June. He thinks of the house. His house. His and his dad's. Of how he left it thirty minutes ago. Of how he keeps it spotless. Perfect. For when she comes back. He's got yellow rubber gloves for dishes, blue ones for hard cleaning like in the bathrooms. He owns two or three kinds of bleach and a vacuum with an engine like a sports car, which his dad willingly bought since Sean never asks for anything. Never, in fact, talks to his father unless absolutely necessary. He sits with the sun on his face and waits for Megan with her cap of red hair. Her freckles. Thousands of freckles.

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He sits with the sun on his face and waits for Megan with her cap of red hair. Her freckles. Thousands of freckles.

Every paragraph has a **main idea**. The main idea is what the paragraph says about the topic. It usually comes at the beginning of a paragraph, but not always. For example, the topic of the paragraph below is the season of autumn. The main idea is that autumn is the author's favorite time of year.

I love autumn. It's my favorite season of the year. There are days of bright sun in a clear blue sky. The leaves change color. Trees put on dazzling robes of yellow, orange, and red. Brown, dry leaves on the ground crunch and rustle when I walk through them. The warmth of the day quickly ends when the sun goes down. Nights are cool and soothing. The stars twinkle down at me, snug and warm in my bed. The busy summer has gone to sleep. It waits for its blanket of snow.

The entire paragraph describes autumn, so we know that is the *topic* of the paragraph.

The first two sentences clearly tell you that autumn is the author's favorite season of the year. This tells you the *main idea* of the paragraph.

Let's look at another example. Read the following paragraph. As you read, think about its *topic* and *main idea*.

Smoking is a bad habit. People who smoke can become very sick and die. Smoking is a leading cause of lung cancer. Lung cancer kills more people than any other cancer. Smoking hurts the people around smokers, too. Cigarette smoke contains poisons. It can cause heart disease and cancer in those who breathe it in. It can cause breathing problems in children. Smoking is not good for anyone.

What is the *topic* of this paragraph? _____

What is the *main idea* of this paragraph? _____

Underline the sentences that helped you decide the main idea.

- ✓ If you said that the *topic* of the paragraph is smoking, you are correct.
- ✓ The *main idea* of the paragraph is that smoking is not good for anyone, or that smoking hurts smokers and the people around them.
- ✓ You should have underlined the sentences, "*Smoking is a bad habit.*", "*People who smoke can become very sick and die.*", and "*Smoking is not good for anyone.*"

Now you try! Read the passage and answer the questions.

El Norte is a 1983 film by Gregory Nava. It is a sad story, but an important one. It shows what illegal immigrants go through – in their home countries and here in the United States. The film follows two teenagers from Guatemala. Enrique and Rosa's parents are killed. They leave their village to find a new life in America. Their journey is very hard and scary. Their new life in the United States is not happy. Rosa dies. Enrique is left to survive in his new country alone. *El Norte* is not a movie to watch for fun. It is a story that must be told. It should be watched for its truth.

1. What is the *topic* of this passage? _____

2. What is the *main idea* of the passage? _____

Read the passage and answer the questions.

Hurricane Irene is moving toward the United States. It is a very dangerous storm. It will probably hurt cities on the eastern coast. High winds could damage buildings and tear up trees. Heavy rain and huge ocean waves might cause floods. People in Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston are preparing for the worst. People on islands near North Carolina have left their homes and gone away to be safe. The damage from Hurricane Irene could be billions of dollars. Let's hope no lives are lost.

3. What is the *topic* of this passage? _____

4. What is the *main idea* of the passage? _____

Read the passage and answer the questions. This passage is longer. You may have to read it more than once.

Recycling is one way to help the Earth. It turns used items into new, useful things. Think about the garbage you throw away every week. Look at the list below. Put a check mark (✓) in front of every item you throw away.

___ plastic bottles

___ glass bottles

___ cardboard from
boxes

___ cans from soup,
vegetables, fruit, and
stew

___ boxes from cereal,
crackers, and pasta

___ plastic

containers from
take-out food

___ soda cans

___ newspapers

___ aluminum foil

All of these items can be recycled. They don't have to be thrown away. They can be turned into something else.

Recycling reduces the amount of garbage.

That saves land and

energy. It also means cleaner air and water. Recycling just one glass bottle saves enough energy to light a lamp for four hours.

Americans throw away a lot of steel every year. It is enough to make all of the American-made cars.



Making cans for cold drinks takes a lot of energy. Recycling saves 95% of that energy. Using recycled paper to make new paper saves 70% energy.



This symbol means that something can be recycled. The next time you start to throw away glass or plastic, look for that symbol.

Your nearest recycling center will welcome any glass, plastic, metal, and paper you have. Your community and the planet will thank you.

5. What is the *topic* of this passage? _____

6. What is the *main idea* of the passage? _____

Circle the answer that best completes the sentence.

7. The topic of this passage is

- a. glass and plastic bottles
- b. recycling
- c. saving the Earth

8. The main idea of the passage is

- a. Recycling reduces the amount of garbage from everyday items and helps the planet.
- b. People produce a lot of garbage.
- c. Recycling turns old things into new products.

Now that you can identify *topic* and *main idea*, it is time to identify **details**. Details give us more information about the main idea. Let's look at the first example again. We already know that the *topic* of the paragraph below is the season of autumn. The *main idea* is that autumn is the author's favorite time of year. What *details* helped us understand the main idea?

I love autumn. It's my favorite season of the year. There are days of bright sun in a clear blue sky. The leaves change color. Trees put on dazzling robes of yellow, orange, and red. Brown, dry leaves on the ground crunch and rustle when I walk through them. The warmth of the day quickly ends when the sun goes down. Nights are cool and soothing. The stars twinkle down at me, snug and warm in my bed. The busy summer has gone to sleep. It waits for its blanket of snow.

All of the underlined sentences in the passage above are details that support the main idea. The author gives reasons why he/she loves autumn. Let's break it down:

- The whole passage is about the season of autumn, so that is the *topic*.
- The *main idea* is stated in the first two sentences: "*I love autumn. It is my favorite season of the year.*"
- Reasons, or *details*, why the author loves autumn:
 - Sunny and bright days with clear blue skies.
 - Leaves change colors to yellow, orange, and red.
 - Brown, dry leaves crunch and rustle while walking through them.
 - The day's warmth ends when the sun goes down, so nights are cool and soothing allowing the author to be snug and warm in bed while looking at the twinkling stars.

Read the following paragraph. As you read, think about the *details* that support the *main idea*.

Smoking is a bad habit. People who smoke can become very sick and die. Smoking is a leading cause of lung cancer. Lung cancer kills more people than any other cancer. Smoking hurts the people around smokers, too. Cigarette smoke contains poisons. It can cause heart disease and cancer in those who breathe it in. It can cause breathing problems in children. Smoking is not good for anyone.

- The *topic* of the paragraph is *smoking*.
- The *main idea* of the paragraph is that *smoking is not good for anyone, or that smoking hurts smokers and the people around them*.

Underline the *details* that support the main idea. The first detail is underlined for you.

Write the details in your own words below:

Now try one you haven't read before! Read the passage below and answer the questions on the next page.

Farms Today

Today, farms in our country produce more food than ever before. But there are fewer farms now than there were years ago! How can this be?

There are many kinds of farms in our country. Some farms produce only one big crop. That crop may be wheat, cotton, sugarcane, or something else. All these crops are plants that grow in the soil.

On some farms, animals are raised. Milk cows are raised on dairy farms. Chickens and eggs are produced on poultry farms. In some places, there is not enough rain to grow anything but grass. In these grasslands, there are many ranches. Beef cattle and sheep are raised on the ranches.

Although there are many different types of farms across the country, most farms are different today from the way they used to be. As the cities in this country grew, more and more people were needed to work in new and exciting jobs. Where did these people come from? Many came from the farms. As the amount of farmers decreased, the need for help on the farms increased. Soon, machines were doing the jobs of several people.

9. What is the *topic* of this passage? _____

10. What is the *main idea*? _____

11. List two details that support the main idea: _____

← Answer Key

1. The film *El Norte*
2. *El Norte* is an important film showing what illegal immigrants go through to get to the United States.
3. Hurricane Irene
4. The main idea of the paragraph is the possible damage that Hurricane Irene may cause.
5. Recycling
6. Recycling reduces the amount of garbage from everyday items and helps the planet.
7. b.
8. a.
9. Farms today
10. Farms in our country produce more food than ever before but there are fewer farmers.
11. As cities grew, farmers left the farms to find new and exciting jobs. Machines make it possible for farmers to do the work of many farmers.