

What is a main idea?

The main idea is the central point or thought the author wants to communicate to readers. The main idea answers the question, “What does the author want me to know about the topic?” or “What is the author teaching me?” Often the author states the main idea in a single sentence. In paragraphs, a *stated main idea* is called the *topic sentence*. In an article, the stated main idea is called the *thesis statement*. When the author does not state the main idea directly, it is called an *implied main idea*. An implied main idea requires you to look at the specific statements in the paragraph and consider what idea they suggest.

Why is identifying the main idea important?

Finding the main idea is a key to understanding what you read. The main idea ties all of the sentences in the paragraph or article together. Once you identify the main idea, everything else in the reading should click into place. The rest of the reading is the evidence provided to support that main idea.

Finding the Main Idea

- **Find the topic first.** You have to know the topic before you can determine the main idea. Preview your text and ask yourself, “What or who is the article about?” or “What is the author teaching me about?” (For further help, see Identifying the Topic skill sheet.)
- **Ask yourself. “What does the author want me to know about the topic?” or “What is the author teaching me about the topic?”** You can answer this by finding the idea that is common to most of the text or what opinion all the parts support.
- **Use these clues to help find the main idea:**
 1. **Read the first and last sentences of the paragraph** (or the first and last paragraphs of the article). Authors often state the main idea near the beginning or end of a paragraph.
 2. **Pay attention to any idea that is repeated in different ways.** If an author returns to the same thought in several different sentences (or paragraphs), that idea is the main or central thought under discussion.
 3. **Look for a sentence that states the main idea.** This is the *stated main idea* or *topic sentence*.
 4. **Look for reversal transitions at the beginning of sentences.** These signal that the author is going to modify the previous idea. When a reversal transition opens the second sentence of a paragraph, there’s a good chance that the second sentence is the topic sentence and a stated main idea. Some samples of reversal transitions:

But	Nevertheless	Still
Conversely	Nonetheless	Unfortunately
Even so	On the contrary	When in fact
However	On the other hand	Yet
In contrast	Regardless	

5. **At times the main idea will not be stated directly.** This is called an *implied main idea*.
 - **Read all of the specific statements, not just the ones that open the paragraphs.**
 - **Think of a general statement that could sum up the specifics as effectively as any stated topic sentence.** As there will not be a topic sentence, you will have to write one. The main idea you write must be a complete sentence that contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought.
6. **Once you feel sure that you have found the main idea, test it.** Ask yourself if the sentence could act as a summary of the other sentences in the paragraph. Do the examples, reasons, and facts included in the reading explain or give evidence supporting the main idea you have in mind? If they do, then you are right on target. If they don’t, you may want to revise your main idea.

Paragraph 1: Stated Main Idea

What is motion? Consider a ball that you notice one morning in the middle of a lawn. Later in the afternoon, you notice that the ball is at the edge of the lawn, against a fence, and you wonder if the wind or some person moved the ball. You do not know if the wind blew it at a steady rate, if many gusts of wind moved it, or even if some children kicked it all over the yard. All you know for sure is that the ball has been moved because it is in a different position after some time passed. These are the two important aspects of motion: (1) a change of position and (2) the passage of time.

- **Find the topic first.** Ask: “What is this paragraph about?” In Paragraph 1, the first sentence asks, “What is motion?” The general topic is motion.
- **Ask yourself.** “What does the author want me to know about the topic?” What does the author want me to know about motion?
- **Read the first and last sentences of the paragraph.** The last sentence appears to answer the question “What is motion?” Does this mean that sentence is the stated main idea? Perhaps.
- **Once you feel sure that you have found the main idea, test it.** I read the paragraph to see if the last sentence could act as a summary of the other sentences and if the example explains the main idea. It does. The topic is motion and the paragraph describes a ball being moved over time. The other sentences repeat “moved” and “time.” The last sentence includes both of those ideas.

Stated main idea: “These are the two important aspects of motion: (1) a change of position and (2) the passage of time.”

Paragraph 1 is actually the start of an article. Not only is the sentence a stated main idea and the topic sentence of the paragraph, but it is also the thesis for an article that explains how position and time equal motion.

Paragraph 2: Reversal Transitions

Enormous energy, enthusiasm, and organization drove the reform efforts in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much of it a result of social crises and political movements in the United States. But the “age of reform,” as some scholars have called it, was not an American phenomenon alone. It was part of a wave of social experimentation that was occurring through much of the industrial world. “Progressivism” in other countries influenced the social movements in the United States. And American reform, in turn, had significant influence on other countries as well.

- **Look for reversal transitions at the beginning of sentences.** In Paragraph 2, the second sentence begins with “But” and signals that the author is modifying the previous idea. There’s a good chance that the second sentence is the topic sentence and a stated main idea. To test this, I read the third sentence. Since it supports the second sentence, I have found my main idea.

Stated main idea: But the “age of reform,” as some scholars have called it, was not an American phenomenon alone.

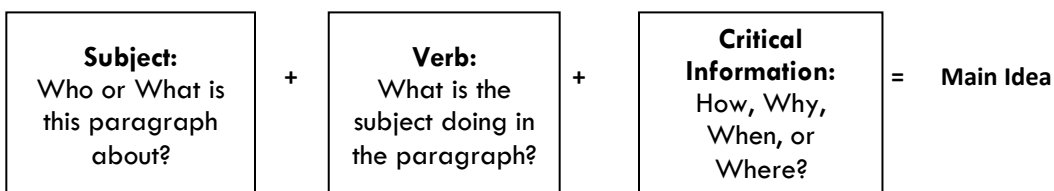
If Paragraph 2 were the introduction for an article, as the reader, I could use this thesis to predict that the remaining paragraphs will describe how and where the “age of reform” occurred.

Paragraph 3: Implied Main Idea

The very name of our country, the United States of America, suggests both unity and division. To the modern citizen, it is the unity that counts, with Americans generally thinking of themselves living in one country divided mainly by geography. But there was a time when many Americans thought in distinctly different terms. In 1774 when John Adams spoke of "our country," he meant Massachusetts. Even Thomas Jefferson took a while to move beyond his own region of birth and in his early years, "my country" usually meant Virginia to him. Consider, too, the original heading for the Declaration of Independence, which was described as "The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America." As Daniel Boorstein has written in *The Americans*, "An unsuspecting historian a thousand years hence might assume...that the Declaration brought into being thirteen new and separate nations...." In 1787 Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut participated in making plans for a federal government that would have power over the entire country. However, his words suggest that his head and heart were at war with each other. Like many others, Ellsworth knew that the states should strive for unity. Yet for him, it was his home state that inspired the strongest patriotic feeling, as he publicly declared "my happiness depends as much on the existence of my state government, as a new-born infant depends upon its mother for nourishment." Ellsworth was not alone in those sentiments.

At times the main idea will not be stated directly. This is called an implied main idea.

- **Identify the topic.** The first sentence in Paragraph 3 introduces "United States of America" as suggesting "unity and division." A preview of the paragraph shows "state," "unity," and "country" repeated throughout. My general topic is state unity.
- **Ask yourself. "What does the author want me to know about the topic?"** What does the author want me to know about state unity?
- **Read all of the specific statements, not just the ones that open the paragraphs.**
- **Be aware of transitions that show relationships or a reversal.** My eye is drawn to the reversal transition "But" in the third sentence. It states "there was a time when many to Americans thought in distinctly different terms." What was the thought and when was that time?
- **Pay attention to any idea that is repeated in different ways.** The author gives several examples of founding fathers and their love of their states.
- **Think of a general statement that could sum up the specifics as effectively as any stated topic sentence.** As there is no topic sentence, you will have to write one. The main idea you write must be a complete sentence that contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought.



- **Once you feel sure that you have found the main idea, test it.**
 - Ask yourself if the sentence could act as a summary of the other sentences in the paragraph.
 - Be sure that none of the sentences contradicts your general statement.
 - Do the examples, reasons, and facts included in the reading explain or give evidence supporting the main idea you have in mind?
- **Implied Main Idea: Early in the history of the United States, many Americans were more devoted to their own home states than the idea of a common country.**

Further explanation and activities for Identifying the Main Idea can be found in the following texts:

Fleming, Loraine. *Reading for Results*, 12th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2014. (See pages 182-201, 217-254)

Fleming, Loraine. *Reading Keys*, 3rd ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. (See pages 100-103, 121, 277, 381-383)

McWhorter, Kathleen T. *Reading Across the Disciplines: College Reading and Beyond*, 5th ed. San Francisco: Pearson Education, 2012. (See pages 71-83)