The Main Idea

What is the Main Idea?

The main idea of a passage is the most important point the author is trying to make, or the “gist” of the writing. This is the reason the paragraph or essay exists. This should be able to be stated in one sentence.

Topic vs. Main Idea

The topic is a word or phrase that describes the subject or general category of a group of ideas. Frequently, the topic is used as the title of the passage. In contrast, the main idea is a complete sentence that states the topic AND adds the writer’s focus or opinion on the topic. For instance, the topic could be “smoking” and the subject could be: “Carbon monoxide poisoning is one of the major dangers of smoking.”

Finding the Main Idea

In order to locate the main idea, ask yourself, “What is this paragraph or essay really about? What is the author’s purpose or thesis here?”

Sometimes the main idea is stated in a topic sentence. In a paragraph, this is often, but not always, the first sentence. It is then followed with supporting details that develop, explain, or support the main idea. This type of pattern is the easiest in which to identify the main idea.

At other times, the main idea is located at the end of a paragraph, with supporting ideas leading up to it. This is often used in more controversial subjects, when reasoning is given first in order to make the reader more receptive to the main topic.

Main ideas may also be found in the middle of a paragraph, although this is less common than the other two. This type of paragraph would have an introduction first, then the main idea, followed by supporting sentences.

At times the main idea is not directly stated but implied. In this type of paragraph, the reader must consider together the major details and supporting details and make an inference about the overall meaning.