

1. Main Idea

Every passage or paragraph has a **main idea**. The main idea is the most important idea in a passage or paragraph. A main idea may be stated clearly or suggested through supporting details.

In a paragraph, the main idea is usually stated in the first or last sentence. The sentence that clearly states the main idea is called the **topic sentence**. In longer passages, the topic sentence usually appears in the first paragraph. Then, the other paragraphs in the passage explore the main idea more fully.

2. Sometimes, a passage does not have a topic sentence or a clearly stated main idea. When the main idea is not clearly stated, the supporting details of a paragraph or passage suggest the main idea. All of the details in the passage should support or center around the same, single idea.

When the main idea of a passage is not clearly stated, we say the main idea is **implied**, or the passage has an **implied main idea**. All of the details in a passage without a topic sentence should be about the same idea. That idea is the implied main idea.

Poems and narrative stories often have implied main ideas, and you must carefully read the details to find the main ideas. The main idea of a story frequently involves a lesson learned, the exploration of a theme, or a general statement, or big idea, about life.

3. To find the **main idea** of a nonfiction passage, ask yourself these questions:

- What does each sentence in a paragraph talk about?
- Is there one sentence that tells about the whole passage?
- Is one sentence more important than the other sentences?
- If the main idea is NOT stated, what idea is hinted at by most of the details?

To find the **main idea** of a story, ask yourself these questions:

- What is the big idea at the center of the story?
- Do any of the characters learn an important lesson? If so, what is it?

4. Now, read a passage and practice finding the main idea.

Birds That Hum

What is that zipping around in the air? Is it a bird or a bee? If you were looking at a hummingbird, you might mistake the two. Hummingbirds are among the smallest birds in the world. One kind, the bee hummingbird, is only two inches long and weighs .07 ounces. These fascinating creatures have many interesting characteristics.

Hummingbirds get their name from the sound their wings make. Hummingbirds beat their wings at such a fast rate that their wings blur. Male ruby-throated hummingbirds beat their wings 70 times each second. Females beat their wings 50 times a second. Hummingbirds' special wings allow them to fly between 35 and 75 miles an hour. That's much faster than you could go on your bike.

Although ruby-throated hummingbirds live in the United States, they fly to warmer areas in the winter. The birds make a 500-mile flight to Mexico. The trip can take 20 hours. During the flight, the birds' wings may beat 2.7 million times!

5. What is the main idea of this passage?

Look again at the first paragraph.

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What is this paragraph about?

This paragraph is mostly about hummingbirds. It tells us hummingbirds are very tiny. The last sentence is a general statement about hummingbirds: "These fascinating creatures have many interesting characteristics." Because the last sentence of the paragraph says something general about hummingbirds, it is probably the topic sentence.

6. Let's test the sentence to make sure it is a topic sentence.

To test whether a sentence is a **topic sentence**, look at the rest of the passage. The topic sentence selected says, "These fascinating creatures have many interesting characteristics." If this is the topic sentence, then the rest of the passage should talk about the interesting characteristics of hummingbirds.

The rest of the passage talks about how fast hummingbirds can beat their wings and fly. It also talks about how some hummingbirds fly hundreds of miles to Mexico. These are some interesting facts. This means we chose the correct topic sentence. After reading the topic sentence, you could say the main idea of the passage is "hummingbirds have many interesting characteristics."

7. Author's Purpose

An author always has a purpose, or reason, for writing. An author will have one of these purposes:

- to inform, or give readers information
- to persuade readers to do or agree with something
- to express their own thoughts or feelings
- to entertain readers by telling a story

Knowing the author's purpose can help you when you read. A writer whose purpose is to inform, will give you many facts about a topic. You can learn from those facts as you read.

8. Let's try to figure out the author's purpose.

Read the passage below one more time.

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Although ruby-throated hummingbirds live in the United States, they fly to warmer areas in the winter. The birds make a 500-mile flight to Mexico. The trip can take 20 hours. During the flight, the birds' wings may beat 2.7 million times!

9. Why do you think the author wrote this passage?

Knowing the main idea of a passage can help you figure out the author's purpose. Think about the main idea of **Birds That Hum**. The main idea of the passage is "hummingbirds have many interesting characteristics." The passage talks about some of the things that make hummingbirds interesting. Because this passage gives you information, you can tell the author's purpose is to inform.

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Now, try to work through the next problems step by step.

1. Now, let's practice answering questions about main ideas and author's purpose.

This passage is a poem. As you read it, look for clues to the implied main idea.

All Washed Up

Well, I'm a million years old and all washed up.
 One minute, I was sitting on the ocean floor.
 Next thing, here I am, another pebble on the shore.
 There's so much happening—
 Sunshine and seagulls,
 Sandcastles, waves crashing.
 I was used to the quiet.
 The ocean is silent, blue, and deep.
 Sometimes, you hear a whale murmur
 Or the rumble of a ship.
 But mostly it's just whoosh, whoosh—
 The sound of tide and flow and drift.

What will happen next?
 I guess I'll just sit here and wait.
 I'm used to waiting.
 I'm a million years old and all washed up again.

What is the main idea of this passage?

- A. Spending time at the beach can be fun.
- B. There are many interesting noises at the beach.
- C. Pebbles are very old and get moved around often.
- D. The beach is a beautiful place.

Do most of the details support the idea that "Spending time at the beach can be fun"?

- A yes
- B no

2. Look at the choices again.

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4. Read this passage.

A Special Lady and an Amazing Bridge

When visitors arrive in New York, they are greeted by the Statue of Liberty. In California, visitors can see the Golden Gate Bridge. Both the bridge and the statue took years to build, and both are symbols of the United States.

The Statue of Liberty was built as a sign of friendship. The people of France wanted to honor the United States as the country turned one hundred years old. In 1875, artist Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi began work on the statue. Ten years later, it was ready. Its 225 tons of metal were shipped to New York. On her base, Lady Liberty rises 305 feet in the air and has welcomed visitors to the United States for more than one hundred years.

The Golden Gate Bridge was built in the 1930s. The bridge is about one mile long. Its two towers are each 746 feet high. Two powerful cables hold the bridge above the water. The bridge took more than four years to build.

What was this passage mainly written to do?

- A. to tell readers in California how to find the Golden Gate Bridge
- B. to explain what inspired the design for the Statue of Liberty
- C. to provide information about the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge

Is the author's purpose to tell readers in California how to find the Golden Gate Bridge?

- A no
- B yes

5. Let's look at the choices again.

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What was this passage mainly written to do?

- A. to tell readers in California how to find the Golden Gate Bridge
- B. to explain what inspired the design for the Statue of Liberty
- C. to provide information about the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge

Is the author's purpose to explain the inspiration for the design of the Statue of Liberty?

- A yes
- B no

6. Let's look at the choices one more time.

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Is the author's purpose to provide information about the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge?

- A yes
- B no

Now, work these practice problems on your own.

1. **A Heroic Sled Dog**

Alaska is not an easy place to live. The weather can be harsh and cold. People in Alaska often rely on dogs to help them with their work. One Alaskan dog became well known for the work he did.

Balto was a sled dog born in 1923, in Nome, Alaska. His job was to deliver supplies to men working in the mines. Then, in late January 1925, a deadly sickness broke out in Nome. The medicine doctors needed to stop the sickness was 1,000 miles away. Trains could carry the medicine only part of the way. Sled dogs had to carry the medicine more than 600 miles. Balto was one of those sled dogs. Fierce snowstorms and cold slowed the dogs. The trail became covered in snow and ice, but Balto knew the way. He led a team for nearly 20 hours. Balto's team made record time and brought the medicine to waiting doctors. Balto became so famous, a statue was built in his honor in New York City.

What is this passage mostly about?

- A** how to care for sled dogs in harsh weather
- B** the most famous sled dog race that takes place in Alaska
- C** the harsh weather that people must face in Alaska
- D** an Alaskan sled dog that performed a heroic feat

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What lesson do you learn from this passage?

- A** Preparation gives you the greatest advantage.
- B** Sled dogs are the best type of dog to own.
- C** Alaska is a great place to live.
- D** Bravery and determination can help you rise above great odds.

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What is the author's purpose in writing this passage?

- A to inform readers about a brave sled dog
- B to warn readers about a dangerous sickness
- C to persuade readers to visit Alaska
- D to express feelings about the beauty of Alaska

4. **One Writer's Block**

Jenny had to write a report for her social studies class. Her report was about how women won the right to vote in the United States. Jenny had spent plenty of time in the library. She had taken many notes and knew all about her topic. Despite this, she could not get started writing.

Her older sister, Alicia, said, "Jenny, you've got writer's block. You have ideas, but you can't get them on paper. Let me help."

Alicia told Jenny to sit down. "Now," said Alicia, "tell me what you learned while you were looking up facts about women's rights."

Jenny was out of breath when she finished telling all she knew. Then, she felt disappointed. She had given Alicia a great deal of information but had not written anything down. She still didn't know how she would start her report.

Then, Alicia said, "Do you think I would let you waste all of that good writing?" She handed Jenny a tape recorder. Alicia had recorded all of Jenny's words.

What is the most important thing the author wants to convey in this story?

- A Sometimes you need to try an unusual approach to solve a problem.
- B The best writers spend a great deal of time doing research in the library.
- C You don't need to take notes in order to write a report.
- D Having a friend's help makes writing a report easier.

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What is the main idea of this story?

- A** Writing can be hard work, but there are many different ways to get it done.
- B** Sometimes you can take too many notes for a report.
- C** Sisters make great friends when you're in trouble.
- D** Getting the right to vote was one of the most important events for women in the twentieth century.

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What was this passage mainly written to do?

- A** to entertain readers with a story about a girl with writer's block
- B** to express feelings about writing reports
- C** to share tips for writing reports
- D** to persuade readers to write their reports on time