

## 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.

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.

#### 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.

**Birds That Hum**

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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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Do most of the details support the idea that "There are many interesting noises at the beach"?

- A no
- B yes

**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.
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3. 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.

**A Special Lady and an Amazing Bridge**

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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. **Monsters from the Deep**

The northern snakehead is a large, ugly fish with sharp teeth and a big mouth. Since the late 1990s, it has been living in rivers and lakes in the United States. The fish first came from Asia, and no one knows how it got into our waters. Now, the fish may be a real problem. Snakeheads eat other fish, and in the United States, they have no natural enemies. These fish can also breathe out of the water. Some people worry that young snakeheads, which can wriggle through mud, will move and spread among bodies of water.

People have been looking for answers to the problem before it becomes too big to handle. At first, people tried to poison the snakeheads. When people put poison in ponds or streams, however, all the fish, and not just the snakeheads, were killed. In rivers around Washington, D.C., people have started fishing for snakeheads. Few snakeheads have been caught in this way, and scientists are still wondering how snakeheads will affect native fish populations.

**What is this passage mostly about?**

- A** Scientists think snakeheads will help keep ponds clean.
- B** People enjoy catching and eating snakeheads.
- C** Snakeheads could cause problems for native fish populations.
- D** Snakeheads are harmless and will not hurt other fish.

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

- A** to express feelings about the ugly snakeheads
- B** to entertain readers with interesting stories about strange fish
- C** to inform readers about snakeheads
- D** to explain how snakeheads first arrived in the United States

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**What is the most important thing the author wants to convey?**

- A** Fishing for snakeheads is not helping to get rid of them.
- B** Snakeheads have no enemies in Asia and are taking over ponds there.
- C** No one knows how the snakehead fish got into U.S. waters.
- D** Snakeheads could have a major effect on fish populations in the United States.

4. **Shape Up!**

Everybody is talking about getting in shape these days. The problem is that too many people just talk and don't walk! Many people think they don't have time to get in shape. An hour of moving around seems like a long time, especially when you have homework and after-school activities to do. Most people just can't figure out where to find the time. The tips below may help you get started.

1. To really get in shape, you need to do an hour of moderate activity every day.
2. Moderate activities include walking quickly, jumping rope, swimming, or climbing stairs.
3. One way to get in a full hour is to break it down into parts, doing ten or twenty minutes of activity at a time.
4. Some people do better if they exercise with friends. Friends will keep you going, even if you don't feel like exercising one day.

**What is the passage mostly about?**

- A** making new friends
- B** how to find new activities
- C** choosing moderate activities
- D** how to get enough exercise

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What was this passage mainly written to do?

- A to instruct people on how to perform exercises properly
- B to give people advice about eating healthfully
- C to list the rules for a fitness center
- D to encourage people to exercise



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What is the main idea of this passage?

- A** A healthy diet is as important as exercise.
- B** Friends can help you meet your exercise goals.
- C** You should exercise in short bursts throughout the day.
- D** Daily exercise is important and can be fun.