

Basics of Reading Comprehension

Section 1.1 Main Idea and Details of a Paragraph



Introduction to Main Idea and Details

Have you ever read a passage or an article and then wondered, “What point is the author trying to get me to understand?” Everyone probably has wondered at one time or another. That “point” that you wondered about is the **main idea** or **central message** the writer is trying to get across to the reader. Determining the writer’s point is the first step to finding the main idea of a passage or article.

Details are the ideas that support the main idea of a piece of writing. Details provide the support for the main idea so that it is not just a bare statement that stands alone. To be believable, a passage must have details or examples to support the point the author is trying to make. Details provide the proof necessary for the main idea to be taken seriously. Details may include illustrations, descriptions, facts, reasons, statements, or examples.

Main Idea and Details of Paragraphs



A well-written paragraph will always have a main idea and several sentences to support it. When you read a passage, it will help you to understand it if you can pick out the main idea and details in paragraphs. To demonstrate understanding of these two skills, you need to find the main idea of a paragraph and then look at the other sentences to find the details to support the main idea.

The main idea of a paragraph is what the paragraph is mainly about. It can be stated directly in one of the sentences, or it can be implied. The main idea may be found anywhere in the paragraph, but it most frequently is found in either the first or last sentence in the paragraph. Titles, when present, usually give a clue to the main idea.

Stated Main Idea

Sometimes the main idea of a paragraph is stated in one of the sentences of the paragraph.

Example 1

A Choosy Yorkie Breeder

A friend of mine breeds and raises Yorkies. Although she raises them to sell, she is very particular about the kind of people who buy the dogs. Because her dogs are so small and weigh only between three and five pounds when they are fully mature, she does a background check on the prospective owners. She won’t allow people with young children to purchase the dogs because they are too fragile to be handled by children younger than ten years old.



Main Idea: What is the main idea of this paragraph?

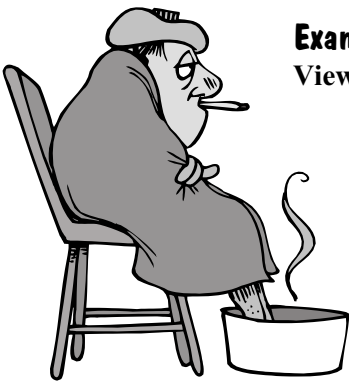
To answer this question, look for one sentence that sums up what the paragraph is about. The second sentence states what the writer is telling in the paragraph. *Although she raises them to sell, she is very particular about the kind of people who buy the dogs.* This sentence tells that she sells them but only to certain people. It is the **stated main idea**.

Author's Purpose and Viewpoint

Section 2.3 Author's Viewpoint

Authors usually slant their writing by their own beliefs. The reader may tell how the author feels about a subject by not only what the author says but also how he or she says it. Often a reader can determine the author's opinion about a subject by what the author writes.

The author's feelings and beliefs about a particular subject are generally referred to as his or her **point of view** or **viewpoint** on that subject. Because of his or her viewpoint on the subject, we know how he or she feels about what is discussed. The manner in which the author discusses a subject allows us to know if he or she is for or against the subject.



Example 1:

Viewpoint: Most experts agree that January is a long, cold month that often makes people miserable if they have to spend a lot of time inside and physically ill if they spend too much time outside.

This viewpoint is a combination of fact and opinion that shows the author's viewpoint on January. In the viewpoint above, would you say the author likes or dislikes January? Since the author in viewpoint 1 gives two negative aspects of January and uses words like *miserable* and *physically ill*, you might guess this author dislikes January.

Example 2:

Viewpoint: January is understandably the peak tourist month in the Colorado mountains. The ski conditions on the slopes are usually ideal, and the ski lodges have activities planned to meet the needs of singles, couples, and families alike.

This viewpoint is also a statement that mixes fact and opinion. From this statement, what would you say is the author's opinion on January? This author seems to have a favorable opinion of January because of ski season.



Practice

Read each excerpt and answer the questions on identifying the author's viewpoint.

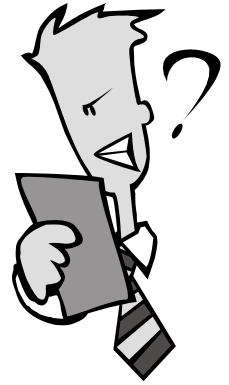
Boost Your Vitamin C

Dr. Linus Pauling is well-known for his research on the effects of high doses of vitamin C on human health and especially in combating cancer. Dr. Pauling recommended an intake of 1000 mg per day or more. The RDA, on the other hand, is set at only 60 mg per day. Dr. Pauling's work has been both praised and criticized. In the past, critics have claimed that Vitamin C in excess of 200 mg per day is excreted from the body and never absorbed into the blood plasma. Advocates of mega doses of Vitamin C, on the other hand, have insisted that the proof lies in the results that Dr. Pauling and others have obtained by using the high doses.

Recent studies show new support to the idea that Vitamin C is truly a super nutrient that can reduce asthma symptoms, decrease blood pressure, lower high cholesterol, and increase immunity. It has been shown to decrease the incidence of heart disease and decrease the risk of many cancers. There is also new evidence that shows the RDA amount is much too low for most people and that the body can indeed absorb more than 200 mg per day. Although government agencies and medical experts lag behind, there is indeed evidence for taking more than the recommended daily allowance of Vitamin C. For active individuals and those combating high levels of daily stress, taking several grams of Vitamin C per day may be the cheapest form of health insurance.

Reading Skills

Section 3.1 Context Clues



Encountering difficult words when we read is a problem we all face. Our teachers taught us to use a dictionary to learn the meanings of unfamiliar words, but what can we do if this is not possible? For example, many testing situations that we face do not allow us to use a dictionary, so we need to know how to decipher the meanings of words *without* using a dictionary. We can do this by looking at the words and phrases the author uses in the context.

The **context** of a particular word is the words and phrases the author uses around the word. The words and phrases around the difficult word helps to explain the meaning of the word in question. This process of examining the words and phrases around a difficult word is known as using **context clues**.

Example 1: Read the following excerpt from chapter one of *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington.

The slaves felt the *deprivation* less than the whites because their usual diet was corn bread and pork, and these could be raised on the plantation. Coffee, tea, sugar, and other articles the whites were accustomed to could not be raised on the plantation, and the conditions brought about by the war frequently made it impossible to secure these things, so the whites were often in great straits.

If you didn't know the meaning of the word *deprivation* by itself, you could most likely look at the rest of the passage to find its meaning. The second sentence tells what the whites wanted but could not get and also states why. From the rest of the passage, you can probably guess that *deprivation* means doing without something that is wanted or needed.

Practiced readers use context clues without even thinking about it; however, those of us who are just beginning to use them might find it helpful to review the different kinds of context clues. Becoming familiar with the different kinds of context clues can help us to improve both our reading and vocabulary skills. The six types of context clues are *definitions/descriptions, examples, synonyms, causes and effects, inferences, and comparisons/contrasts*.

Practice 1

A short description of each type of context clue is given below followed by an example. Read the description and example. Then write a short definition of the italicized word using the context clues.

1. **Definitions/Descriptions:** A difficult word may sometimes be followed by its definition or by a description that helps to define the word.

J.T. is an *entomologist*, a person who studies insects; his specialty is fire ants.

An entomologist is a _____

2. **Examples:** A difficult word may be followed by examples that give a clue as to what the word means.

Some often used *axioms* are "Waste not; want not," "Live and let live," and "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence."

An axiom is a _____

Conclusions and Predictions

Section 4.1 Drawing Conclusions



Drawing conclusions involves reasoning or thinking through a situation when all the facts are not given. Drawing conclusions means making inferences; it is like being a detective. You use clues to discover what has happened or what is true. You make inferences to draw conclusions every day whether it's something you read or something you see, hear, or experience.

Example 1: A fire truck, an ambulance, and two police cars pass you on the interstate with lights flashing and sirens wailing. Two miles later, traffic slows to a stand-still.

What conclusions do you draw about this scenario?

You probably conclude that some sort of accident occurred ahead of you and has caused the interstate to be blocked. You probably also conclude that the fire truck, the ambulance, and two police cars that passed you earlier were headed to the accident scene. You don't know this for sure, but clues lead you to believe this to be true.

Example 2: You overhear a conversation at the varsity basketball game. Two fans from the opposing team are talking about one of the players.

“Chad is ready to play. The doctor gave him a clean bill of health. His shooting arm will be well-rested and better than ever!”

“He may be ready to play, but I don't think his shooting arm will ever be as good. You don't recover from something like that in only three weeks. Surgery is serious business.”

“You might be right. Come on, Chad! We need your arm!”

What conclusions do you draw from this conversation?

You probably conclude that Chad, a player on the opposing team, had surgery on his shooting arm, and after recovering for three weeks, he is going to play in tonight's game. You might also conclude that Chad is a top scorer and that his fans think his ability to score is needed to help win the game.

Sometimes an author does not state all the facts directly. We must use clues from the passage and/or what we may already know to “read between the lines” and understand what the author means.

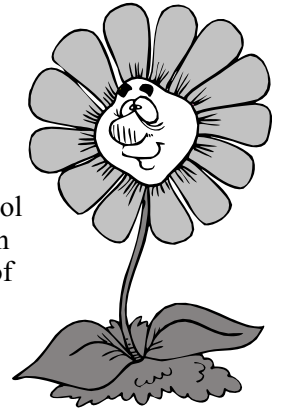
In order to make inferences and draw conclusions, first you must understand what is being clearly stated. The information that is stated gives you your clues. Read the following excerpt from “The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe.

Example 3: It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend. He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him, that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.

I said to him — “My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking today! But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts.”

Literary Elements

Section 5.7 Imagery



Imagery is a collection of word pictures that appeal to the reader. Imagery is an important tool used by an author and can include literary devices such as simile and metaphor. Imagery is an author's words used to build a picture in the reader's mind. Imagery appeals to one or more of the senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, feel) and is sometimes referred to as sensory imagery.

Example: Read "Spring" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. You may recognize this poem from Section 5.2.

Spring by Edna St. Vincent Millay

- 1 To what purpose, April, do you return again?
- 2 Beauty is not enough.
- 3 You can no longer quiet me with the redness
- 4 Of little leaves opening stickily.
- 5 I know what I know.
- 6 The sun is hot on my neck as I observe
- 7 The spikes of the crocus.
- 8 The smell of the earth is good.
- 9 It is apparent that there is no death.
- 10 But what does that signify?
- 11 Not only under the ground are the brains of men
- 12 Eaten by maggots,
- 13 Life in itself
- 14 Is nothing,
- 15 An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.
- 16 It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,
- 17 April
- 18 Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers

This poem is full of sensory imagery.

Which of the following excerpts from the poem shows sensory imagery that appeals to the readers sense of feeling?

- A. The sun is hot on my neck . . .
- B. The smell of the earth is good.
- C. Eaten by maggots,
- D. . . . like an idiot, babbling . . .

Answer A, "hot on my neck" appeals to the reader's sense of feeling, so it is the correct answer. Answer B, "smell of the earth is good" appeals to the reader's sense of smell, not feeling. Answer C, "Eaten by maggots" gives a vivid, visual image which appeals to the reader's sense of sight. Answer D, "like an idiot, babbling" gives the reader a sense of sound.

This poem has a great deal of sensory imagery. Why does the author use this sensory imagery? The poet wants to paint a picture for the reader so that the reader feels and understands the author's feelings and attitude. In this way, the author uses the sensory imagery to create a mood in the poem and also to express a tone. The poet uses words and phrases like *what purpose*, *beauty not enough*, *brains of men eaten by maggots*, *life . . . is nothing*, *empty cup*, *uncarpeted stairs*, *idiot*, *babbling*, and *strewing* to paint a picture and to stir emotion.

