

MAIN IDEAS AND TOPIC SENTENCES

A paragraph usually has a single *main idea*. This main idea is what the paragraph is about. Sometimes the main idea is stated in a single sentence called the *topic sentence*. A topic sentence can be placed anywhere in a paragraph—at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end. In the following paragraph, the topic sentence comes at the beginning.

Besides state flags, most states have other symbols as well. For example, many states have state birds and state flowers. Several have state colors and state grasses. Milk is the state drink of more than ten different states. One state, Maine, even has a state cat. It is the Maine coon cat.

A paragraph that relates a series of events, tells part of a story, or gives a description often does not have a topic sentence. Read the following paragraph. It has no topic sentence, but it does have one main idea—what ancient Mayan manuscripts looked like.

The manuscript was covered with line drawings of people and mythical creatures. The pictures were arranged in different scenes. A series of dots and dashes appeared among the pictures. These dots and dashes stood for numbers.

EXERCISE 1 Identifying Main Ideas and Topic Sentences

Each of the following paragraphs has a main idea. On the lines after each paragraph, write the main idea in your own words. Then look for a topic sentence. If the paragraph has one, underline it.

1. In fifth grade, Pilar started playing the piano. In sixth grade, she appeared in a play. This spring she was the goalie on our soccer team. She also loves to write stories and draw cartoons. Pilar is definitely a person of many talents.

Main Idea: _____

2. Salim looked up at the heavy rope and frowned. Climbing it could be difficult. He hesitated a moment and then clamped his hands on the rope. Next, he pulled himself up a few inches and locked his legs around the rope. "That wasn't too bad," Salim thought. Then he reached up another few inches and grasped the rope. Again, he pulled. Slowly, he rose toward the top of the gymnasium.

Main Idea: _____

3. Many important food crops were first grown in the Americas. Maize, or corn, was first grown in Mexico. Later, Christopher Columbus introduced it to Europe. Potatoes originated in Peru, Chile, and Bolivia, and Spaniards took them to Europe in the 1500s. Other foods from the Americas include tomatoes, chili peppers, and peanuts.

Main Idea: _____

4. Many Spanish girls have names that are also words in the Spanish language. My first name, *Milagros*, means "miracles" in Spanish. The name *Soledad* means "solitude," and the name *Dolores* means "sorrows." *Esperanza*, which is my best friend's name, means "hope."

Main Idea: _____

UNITY AND COHERENCE**UNITY**

A paragraph has *unity* when all the sentences tell about the main idea. Read the following paragraph, and notice how the sentences work together.

Even though stars seem to twinkle, they actually give a steady light. This light is affected as it passes through earth's atmosphere. The movement of hot and cold air creates ripples in the atmosphere. These ripples cause the starlight to flicker. On earth the star appears to be twinkling.

Every sentence tells something about why stars seem to twinkle. Suppose you added a sentence about how pretty certain stars are. That sentence would not fit into the paragraph. It would destroy the unity.

EXERCISE 2 Identifying Sentences that Destroy Unity

Each paragraph below has one sentence that destroys the unity of the paragraph. Find that sentence, and draw a line through it.

1. Shogi is much more fun to play than chess. In chess, each game piece has one rank. In other words, a castle is always a castle. At a museum I saw a chess set that had castles shaped like real fortresses. In shogi a game piece can be promoted. It can gain greater powers as the game goes on. Game pieces in chess leave the game if they are captured. In shogi they can return to the game. However, they return to serve the other player and battle against their old owner.
2. This city has a wonderful system of public transportation. The buses are clean and inexpensive, and they are reliable. They run on time, and they have ramps for wheelchairs. Within the downtown area, bus rides are free. Outside of this area, passengers can use season tickets instead of money. The subways work as well as the buses do. They are also clean and easy to use. The subways and buses run all night long, so people have no need to use their cars. The city's parks and museums are also exceptional.

COHERENCE

A good paragraph has *coherence*. In other words, all the ideas in a coherent paragraph are connected. One way you can create coherence is to use transitional words and phrases to connect ideas. The following chart lists some common words and phrases used to make transitions.

Comparing and Contrasting Ideas	also, although, and, another, but, however, instead, similarly, too, yet
Showing Cause and Effect/Narration	as a result, because, consequently, for, since, so, so that, therefore
Showing Time/Narration	after, at last, before, finally, first, next, often, then, until, when
Showing Place/Description	above, around, before, beneath, beside, down

The following paragraph has coherence. The writer has used transitional words to show how the details in the paragraph are related.

After lunch our guide drove the jeep down a hot, dusty road that ran through the middle of the wildlife park. Soon we came to a large, open, grassy area—the savannah. In the distance, a pride of lions was sleeping beneath an acacia tree. Beside one of the female lions, we could see two small cubs. These were the first lions I had ever seen in the wild.

EXERCISE 3 Identifying Transitional Words and Phrases

Underline the transitional words and phrases in the following paragraph. Use the chart above as a guide.

With a few simple steps, you can make a healthful, nutritious omelet. First, chop some vegetables, such as green peppers and onions. Next, separate the whites from the yolks of three eggs. Place the whites in a medium-sized bowl, and whip them. Then pour the egg whites into a pan coated with a little olive oil. Cook them for a minute or two. Finally, add your chopped vegetables and fold half of the egg-white mixture over them. Cook the omelet thoroughly.