Making Sense of Reading: How to Locate Main Idea/Claim in a Text

Main Idea Exercises

**Definition:** A main idea is the main point or topic that the writer of an essay or story is trying to make. Sometimes main ideas are also called *thesis statements*. Since main ideas sum up the writer’s ideas, they are usually only a few sentences long.

**Purpose:** Why should we care about main ideas? Because they are the key to *good reading comprehension*. If you can’t find the main idea of an essay, that means you are having trouble understanding it and remembering it, which means that you’ll have trouble taking a quiz, writing an essay, or discussing the material.

**How to Find Them:** In basic terms, main ideas consist of two parts:
1) The topic
2) The author’s opinion on the topic

**How long Should They Be?** Because they sum up the writer’s ideas, main ideas are usually only a few sentences long (depending on how long the writing is).

**For example:** Read the following paragraph to better understand this:

Spanking is a poor way to shape a child’s behavior. For one thing, the spanking will result in feelings of anger and frustration. The child, then, will not learn anything positive from the punishment. In addition, the spanking may actually lead to more bad behavior. Having learned that hitting is okay, the child may attack smaller children. Finally, the spanking teaches children to hide certain actions from their parents. Once out of their parents’ sight, children may feel they can get away with the bad behavior.

What is the topic of this paragraph? (To find the topic ask: “Who or What is this topic about?”)

What is the author’s opinion of this topic?

Put those two together and you have the main idea!

**Check-In Quiz:**

1. What is a Main Idea?

2. What are two questions you can ask to find a Main Idea?

3. What is the purpose of finding a Main Idea?

*After completing this quiz, check-in with a tutor to make sure you got the right answers and to ask any questions you might have.*
Directions:
1. Read the paragraph and answer the questions
2. After finishing, write down two questions or concerns you had while doing this activity.
3. Check-in with a tutor

Practice finding the topic and then the main idea in the following paragraphs:

Extrasensory perception, or ESP, is an area that fascinates people. However, ESP is not documented by any convincing evidence. For instance, it would seem that ESP would be an excellent way of winning at games of chance, such as are played at gambling casinos. But casino owners in Las Vegas and Atlantic City report no problem with “psychics” winning great sums of money. For another thing, although great publicity is generated when a psychic seems to help police solve a crime, the value of such help has never been scientifically proven. Psychics’ tips are usually worthless, and a case is solved through traditional police work. And while audiences may be amazed at the feats of “mind readers,” the fact is that mind readers use simple psychological tricks to exploit their audiences’ willingness to believe.

1) What is the topic of this paragraph? (Circle what you think the answer is.)
   A. Psychics
   B. ESP is not documented by any convincing evidence.
   C. Crimes are solved by police work, not psychics tips.

In response to customers’ bitter complaints about long lines, banks are trying new ways to shorten the wait or at least to make it more pleasant. One bank provides coffee and cookies so customers can munch while they wait. Other banks show action movies on a large video screen. One daring bank in California will pay a customer five dollars if he or she must wait more than five minutes for service. Still other banks offer the most obvious solution of all—they simply hire more bank tellers.

1) What is the topic of this paragraph? (circle the answer.)
   A. Waiting in line
   B. Waiting in bank lines
   C. Hiring more bank tellers

Bonus Questions:
1) Is a main idea “general” or “specific” information?

2) Is there a sentence(s) in each paragraphs that tell you what the main idea is or will be?

Two Questions You Have:

1.

2.