

COMPREHENSION SKILLS SERIES

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Understanding the
Main Idea

Making a Judgment

Understanding Characters

Comprehension Skills Series

Understanding the Main Idea ...when reading

CB-1

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Each Comprehension Skills Booklet is divided into four parts.

Part One clearly defines, explains, and illustrates the specific skill discussed.

Part Two offers an interesting and informative lesson presented in clear, readable language, using illustrations from the student's own experience. A simple preview technique is used regularly throughout Parts One and Two; it requires the student to anticipate and respond.

Part Three consists of a sample exercise with four questions. An explanation supporting the correct answers is given as well as reasons explaining where wrong answers are faulty. The sample exercise is designed to prepare the student for the work required in the following section.

Part Four contains 30 practice exercises with questions. Edward Fry's formula for estimating readability was used to grade the exercises. The passages begin at grade 7 and advance gradually to grade 13. The student is advised to complete the 30 practice exercises thoughtfully and carefully. He is also urged to consult his instructor if extra help is needed before proceeding to Part Four.

An optional tape cassette is available for each Comprehension Skills Booklet. The tapes add an audio dimension to the series and are especially helpful to students who need assistance in comprehending written material. The cassettes help by enlisting the student's listening-comprehension ability. All of the instructional matter and exercise paragraphs are recorded on the tape, permitting the student to listen as he reads along.

The Comprehension Skills Booklets and optional Cassettes offer a practical and solid program of reading comprehension instruction.

PART ONE

UNDERSTANDING MAIN IDEA

Preview Quiz 1



As a preview to what will be discussed in Part One, try to answer this question;

What is the most important element in any paragraph?

- ☐ a. An important message
- ☐ b. The main idea
- ☐ c. A strong opening

Begin reading Part One to discover the correct answer.

The purpose of this booklet is to help you understand better what a main idea is and how to recognize the main idea in different kinds of paragraphs.

Perhaps the best way to understand main idea is to think of it as the central idea, or the most important idea, in a paragraph. Simply stated, if there is no main idea in a paragraph, there is no paragraph. For example, the core is the most important part of an apple for it is the center around which the fruit grows. A candle provides a similar example. At its center is a wick without which there is no candle, just a lump of wax.

The same holds true for a paragraph. One sentence in a paragraph expresses the main idea; the other sentences explain, develop, or support it. If the main idea is eliminated, the paragraph loses purpose and direction; it is no longer a paragraph.

The main idea, therefore, is the most important idea and it gives the paragraph purpose and direction.

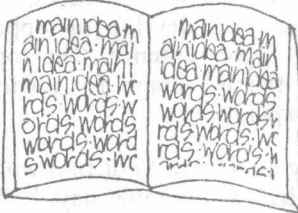
Every well-written paragraph has purpose and direction. The purpose may be to inform, define, explain, give directions, narrate an event, persuade, compare, contrast, etc. Its direction is usually single-minded: it seeks to focus on the main idea.

It is not necessary to memorize this definition. It is important, however, that you develop a general understanding of these concepts and transfer it to your reading and study.

PART TWO

FINDING THE MAIN IDEA

Preview Quiz 2



As a preview to what will be discussed in Part Two, try to answer this question:

Where is the main idea found in most paragraphs?

- ☐ a. In the first sentence
- ☐ b. In the middle of the paragraph
- ☐ c. In the last sentence

Begin reading Part Two to discover the correct answer.

This lesson will use and develop the information you have learned in Part One. Specifically, we will discuss how and where to find the main idea and how the paragraph is structured around it. Our emphasis will be on reading for main idea although concepts such as *basic unit of meaning* and *topic sentence* will also be explored.

A paragraph represents a basic unit of meaning. If this were not so, a letter to a friend or a job application could be written using one long paragraph, and an essay, a short story, or a novel could consist of one continuous paragraph. Obviously, this would be awkward and confusing. A paragraph, therefore, should express and develop one main idea. If a new main idea is introduced, it should be expressed and developed in a separate paragraph thus preserving each paragraph's basic unit of meaning.

A basic unit of meaning consists of one main idea explained and developed by minor ideas or supporting details.

The main idea of a paragraph is stated in what is called a *topic sentence*. A topic sentence expresses a concept whose full meaning and significance are developed and made clear by the supporting details.

More often than not, the topic sentence is the first sentence of a paragraph. It is followed by other sentences, containing supporting details, which explain, develop, or support the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. The topic sentence usually comes first in the paragraph for obvious reasons. The following example explains why:

You have had a long, hard day at school. Your first words as you open the door are, "I had a miserable day." This statement can be considered a topic sentence which expresses a main idea. You may then add supporting details which explain why your day was miserable. "My car wouldn't start this morning and I arrived late for an important exam. I'm sure the nervous state I was in will affect my grade. To top it off, Julie gave me the cold shoulder."

Newspaper articles follow the same design so that readers can look at the first few lines and decide if they want to continue with the story.

The following newspaper article is typical:

Topic	Africa—The fight against starvation in six West
Sentence	African nations is being hampered by the rainy season. Heavy rains are turning the dirt roads into muddy rivers. Relief will have to wait for a dry spell which seems nowhere in sight. The weather bureau is maintaining silence for fear of causing increased alarm.
Supporting Sentences	

The preceding paragraph can be represented by an upside-down or inverted triangle (∇) since it starts with a broad statement, the topic sentence, and continues with supporting sentences of diminishing importance.

Preview Quiz 3



As a preview to what will be discussed next, try to answer this question:

How does a knowledge of paragraph shapes help the reader?

- ☐ a. Shapes make the paragraph more attractive.
- ☐ b. Shapes show the location of the main idea.
- ☐ c. Shapes help us distinguish between good and poor writers.

Continue reading to discover the correct answer.

The following diagram might be useful:

Topic	Africa—The fight against starvation in six West African
Sentence	nations is being hampered by the rainy season.
Supporting	Heavy rains are turning the dirt roads into
Sentences of	muddy rivers. Relief will have to wait for
Diminishing	a dry spell which seems nowhere in
Importance	sight. The weather bureau
	is maintaining silence
	for fear of causing
	increased
	alarm.

Sometimes a topic sentence is located at the end of a paragraph. Positioning the topic sentence at the end of a paragraph is common practice whenever a difficult or unpopular idea is discussed or when the purpose of the paragraph is to persuade and convince. It seems that readers are generally more receptive to a new idea if the reasons for accepting the idea are presented first.

A paragraph whose topic sentence comes last can be represented by a regular triangle (Δ). Read the following paragraph carefully. Notice how the overall impact of the supporting ideas is calculated to convince the reader that the main idea expressed in the last sentence should be accepted.

Supporting
Sentences

Topic
Sentence

If the wind becomes gusty after a period of calm, you should seek shelter. The sky needs careful watching, too. Gradual darkening and "boiling" clouds should quicken your pace. Lightning and thunder are common enough storm indicators, but few people realize that the brightness of the lightning is not nearly as important as the number of lightning flashes. The signs of an oncoming storm are many, and a person's life may depend on his ability to interpret them.

Preview Quiz 4



As a preview to what will be discussed next, try to answer this question:

Which paragraph shape would be most suitable for a funny story?

- ☐ a. An upside-down triangle
- ☐ b. A regular triangle
- ☐ c. Neither of the shapes discussed so far

Continue reading to discover the correct answer.