

Reading skills on finding the topic and the main idea

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to discuss about finding the topic and the main idea. Reading power is intended for students of English as second language. In this article the four parts must be used concurrently, since each part focuses on a different aspect of reading instruction; Those parts are topics, topics of conversations, topics of paragraphs, and main ideas . Reading is important when you are learning a new language because reading helps you learn to think in the new language, reading helps you build a better vocabulary, reading makes you more comfortable with written English you can write better English if you feel comfortable with the language, reading may be the only way for you to use English if you live in a non-English speaking country, and reading can help if you plan to study in an English speaking country. Reading comprehension involves specific thinking processes. These are designed to provide focused instruction in the reading skills based on these processes. Greater awareness of the relation between cognitive process and reading skills will help you apply the skills when you are reading.

Keywords : second language, reading skills, topic, main idea

INTRODUCTION

There are many different reading skills. When you read you use many different skills. You need to work on them one at a time. Beatrice S. Mikulecky (2001) list the six important reading skills you will work on :

- a. Previewing. Before you start reading, find out something about what you will read. Then you can start thinking about the subject. You will be able to read faster and with more understanding.
- b. Asking questions as you read. This keeps your mind on what you read. Asking question helps you pay attention. It also helps you to remember what you read.

- c. Guessing what new words mean. It takes too much time to look up every new word. And if you stop, you may forget what you are reading. Use the whole sentence or paragraph to guess words.
- d. Finding the topic and the main idea. The topic and the main idea let you know what is important. To find the topic and the main idea, ask two questions : what is this about? What does the writer want to say about this?
- e. Understanding patterns in English. A pattern is a way of putting ideas together. If you find the pattern, you can understand more. You will also remember more.
- f. Using signal words. Some words are like signpost on a highway. They tell you what direction the writer is going. And they help you to follow the writer's ideas. Signal words also help you guess what you will read about.

Learning to think in English

You also need to work on understanding English sentences. Learn how to get the meaning of sentences. Find out how ideas follow each other in English.

How to think in English.

If you want to read English well, you must think in English. These exercises will help you. In this exercise, the last sentence is not finished. Below the exercise, there are four endings. Circle the best ending. As you work,

1. guess the meanings of new words
2. try to understand the way ideas work together in English.

Here is an example:

In the morning the language lab was full of people. Many students were waiting. Joe could not find a seat. He decided to come back later when the lab was

- a. busy
- b. closed
- c. more crowded
- d. less crowded

Why did Joe decide to come back later? **Because the lab was full.**

What is another word for "full"? **Crowded**

Joe wants a seat. So he must come back when the lab is not full.

What is another way to say " not full "? **Less crowded**

The correct answer is " **d, less crowded.** "

Reading faster

Learning to read faster

Reading is an important activity for you because every aspect of your life in academic atmosphere involves it (Miftah, 2013). Reading faster is very important because of the way your brain works. When you read slowly, your brain does not get enough information. You understand better when you read faster. Lack of comprehension is often a result of reading too slowly. The reason is simple : the short-term memory can only retain information for a few seconds. Students who read very slowly word by word often forget the beginning of a sentence by the time they reach the end. This, instruction in reading faster will improve comprehension

How to read faster

Why read faster?

Reading faster helps you to understand more. This may be surprising. But in fact, your brain works better when you read faster. Try reading this :

Many	students	are	surprised
when	teacher	tells	them
to	read	But	they
faster.	But	they	soon
that	find	out	that
they	understand	more	that
			way.

If you read slowly, you read one word at a time. You must remember many separate words. Soon you can get tired or bored.

But if you read faster, you can read groups of words together. Then you can think about ideas and not just single words. That is why you understand better and remember more.

Read the three short passages. Time yourself for each one. After each passage, there are comprehension questions. You will have two chances to answer them. The first time, do not look back at the passage. See how much you can remember. Then answer the questions again. This time you may look back if you need to.

Read Passage A.

Starting Time _____

A

Rosebud is a small town in New Jersey. It looks like many other towns in the United States. On main Street there is a post office and a police station. The drugstore and the library are down the street. There is also a shopping center. It has a supermarket and a department store. Rosebud is a quiet place, not very rich or poor. But the towns is growing. There are new houses every year. It is a popular place to live because it is near New York City. Many people live in Rosebud and work in New York.

Stop! Write the time you finished reading : _____

Turn the page and answer the questions. Do not look back.

Circle the best answer.

1. This passage is about
 - a. New York City.
 - b. towns.
 - c. Rosebud. N.J.
 - d. a quiet place.
2. Rosebud is
 - a. like many other American towns.
 - b. not like many other American towns.
 - c. a noisy place.
 - d. a large city.
3. Every year Rosebud
 - a. has fewer houses.
 - b. Is like other American towns.
 - c. has noisy streets.
 - d. has more houses.
4. Many people want to live in Rosebud because
 - a. it is growing.
 - b. it is a quiet place.
 - c. it is a near New York City.
 - d. it is not rich or poor.

Go back and answer the questions a second time. You may look back at the passage. Write the answers in the boxes at the right. Number correct : **1. c**
2. a 3. d 4. c .

Now read Passage B.

Starting Time _____

B

In the middle of Rosebud, N.J., near the post office, is the office of Dr. Sam Diamond. Everybody in town knows Dr. Diamond. He is a very good dentist. He's also a popular person. He likes to tell funny stories to his patients. They forget about their teeth when they listen to him. On the weekends Dr. Diamond likes to go to basketball game. Sometimes he also watches sports on TV. But his favorite activity fishing. Every Saturday in the summer, he gets up early in the morning. He and his friends spend the day fishing at Lake Massapog.

Stop! Write the time you finished reading : _____

Turn the page and answer the questions. Don't look back.

Circle the best answer.

1. This passage is about
 - a. a dentist.
 - b. what Dr. Diamond likes to do.
 - c. Dr. Sam Diamond.
 - d. fishing.
2. Dr. Diamond is popular because
 - a. everyone in town knows him.
 - b. he listens to his patients.
 - c. he tells his patients funny stories.
 - d. he likes to go fishing.
3. Fishing is Dr. Diamond's
 - a. job.
 - b. favorite activity.
 - c. dream.
 - d. patient.
4. Dr. Diamond likes to be
 - a. with people.
 - b. alone.

- c. quiet.
- d. a patient.

Go back and answer the questions a second time. You may look back at the passage. Write the answer in the boxes on the right. Number correct : **1. c**
2. c 3. b 4. a

Read Passage C.

Starting Time _____

C

Dr. Diamond is married to Susan Diamond. She is a scientist with a Ph.D in chemistry. She works in a laboratory in New York City. She and some other scientists are studying the air over the city. They want to find a way to make the air cleaner. Every morning, Susan takes the train to New York. She sees the dirty air. She also sees the dirty and garbage on the streets. She is glad she lives in New Jersey, and not in New York. The Diamonds' house has a back yard with trees and beautiful flowers. Susan's favorite activity is working in her garden.

Stop! Write the time you finished reading : _____
Turn the page and answer the questions. Don't look back.

Circle the best answer.

1. This passage is about
 - a. Dr. Diamond.
 - b. scientiests
 - c. the city and the country.
 - d. Susan Diamond.
2. Susan Diamond thinks New York
 - a. is a nice city.
 - b. is a clean city.
 - c. is a busy city.
 - d. has dirty air and streets.
3. Rosebud is
 - a. dirtier than New York.
 - b. cleaner than New York.
 - c. crowded.
 - d. not a good place to live.
4. Susan's favorite activity is
 - a. taking the train to New York City.

- b. working in the laboratory.
- c. working in the garden.
- d. New York City.

Go back and answer the questions a second time. You may look back at the passage. Write the answers in the boxes on the right. Number correct: **1. d**
2. d 3. b 4. c

Finding the topic and the main idea

I. TOPICS

One topic

A good reader always asks:

“ What am I reading about? ”

“ What is the topic? ”

Example :

a. Finding the topic :

Football	baseball	tennis	sports
skiing			

The topic is **sports**

The other words are names of sports

In each group of words, circle the topic. Try not to use the dictionary. If you don't know a word, guess the meaning.

Mother	sister	uncle	aunt	family	father
grandmother	cousin	grandfather	brother		

The topic is **family**

The other words are names of family

b. Thinking of the topic

Write the topic

Example

knife fork spoon cup plate bowl glass dish
chopsticks

Topic : **kitchen equipment**

war hunger sickness poor people no jobs
too many people many people can't read

Topic : **world problems**

bridge road highway street tunnel
turnpike avenue

Topic : **places for driving**

Finding The Word That Does Not Belong

One word in each group does not belong with the others. Write the topic. Cross out the word that does not belong

Example

bicycle motorcycle ~~car~~ ship van bus
truck

Topic : **Ways to travel on land**

Two topics

Each list has words about two topics. Write two topics. Then write the words under the topics

Example

ladder	concert	opera
movie	stairs	TV
elevator	play	escalator

Topic 1

Ways to go up

ladder
elevator
stairs
escalator

Topic 2

Things to watch for fun

movie
play
opera
TV
Concert

II. TOPICS OF CONVERSATIONS

Read the conversation and answer the questions.

Example :

- A. Was it a girl or a boy ?
B. A girl. She's eight pounds and very healthy ?
A. When will they come home from the hospital ?
B. I'm going to bring the home tomorrow
A. You'll have to come for a visit. What a nice change for the neighborhood !

What are these people talking about ? **A new baby girl**

Where are they ? **Can't tell. Maybe at home**

Which words helped you guess the topic ? **Hospital eight pounds, girl or boy ?
bring them home**

Conversation 1

- A. I like the color.
B. So do I. Red is my favorite color.
A. How many miles does it have on it?
B. Only 30.000. They told me it belonged to an old lady. She didn't use it very much.
A. How 's the price?
B. It's really cheap.
A. Then I think you should get it.

What are these people talking about? **A new car**

Where are they? **A place where cars are sold**

Which words helped you guess the topic? **Miles, belonged to, use it, price, you should get it**

Conversation 2

A. I can't believe that this is my last day here.

B. You are leaving us today?

A. Yes. I am so nervous about this.

B. I am sure it will be fine.

A. I don't know. It will be so different.

B. I thought you wanted a change

A. Yes, I did. And I wanted more pay. But now I am not sure it was the right thing to do.

B. Stop worrying. Everything will be fine.

What are these people talking about? **Changing jobs**

Where are they? **At work**

Which words helped you guess the topic? **Last day, leaving, nervous, different, change, more pay**

Conversation 3

A. This is one of the reasons I hate working in a big city.

B. I know. Every day, it's the same thing.

A. This is terrible! We may be here all night! I hope we don't run out of gas

B. No. I think there is enough.

A. Let's turn on the radio. Maybe there is some good music.

B. Sorry, the radio is not working

A. I think I will take the train tomorrow!

What are these people talking about? **How traffic is a problem in the city**

Where are they? **In a car**

Which words helped you guess the topic? **Working in a big city, every day, late, run out of gas, radio.**

III. TOPICS OF PARAGRAPHS

The topic of a paragraph tells you what it is about. Ask yourself, "What is this paragraph about?"

EXAMPLE A

Mexico City is a popular place for tourists. Every year thousand of people go to Mexico City. They visit the old and beautiful buildings in this city. In the museums they learn about the history of Mexico. And in the restaurants they enjoy the spicy and delicious Mexican food.

What is the topic?

- a. Mexican food
- b. Mexico
- c. Mexico City

The right answer is **(c) Mexico City**. It tells what the paragraph is about.

(a) *Mexican food* is **too specific**. It is only one part of the paragraph.

(b) *Mexico* is **too general**. It includes many ideas that are not in the paragraph.

EXAMPLE B

The food in Mexico sometimes surprises tourists. It can be very, very spicy! Mexican cooks use a special kind of pepper. This pepper is so spicy it almost burns your mouth. But most people start to like the spices after a while. They learn to like Mexican food very much.

What is this paragraph about? Check (✓) the best topic.

Write "**too specific**" or "**too general**" after the other topics.

- a. Mexican cooks _____
- b. Mexican food _____
- c. Food _____

The right answer is **(b) Mexican food**.

(a) *Mexican cooks* is **too specific**. The whole paragraph is not about Mexican cooks.

(c) *Food* is **too general**. It can include many kinds of food that are not in the topic.

Choosing the best topic

Read paragraph. Ask yourself. "What is this about?"

Make a check after the best topic. Write "**too specific**" or **too general**" after the other topics

1

On American television there are many ads about kinds of soap. They show soap for washing clothes. They also show soap specially for washing dishes. Some ads show soap only for washing floors. Other ads are about soap for washing cars. Television ads show soap for washing people too. Often the ads tell about special soap for washing your hair. Other soap is just for taking care of little babies. American television seems very interested in cleaning!

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. soap in the United States | too general _____ |
| b. soap for washing in the house | too specific _____ |
| c. ads for soap on American TV | topic _____ |

2

The evening news on television is very popular with many Americans. They like to find out what is happening in the world. On television they can see real people and places. They believe it is easier than reading the newspaper. Many people think television makes the news seem more real. The television news reporters sometimes tell funny stories and even jokes. This makes the news about wars and crime seem less terrible.

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| a. why news programs have funny stories | too specific |
| b. why Americans like television news | topic |
| c. what is happening in the world | too general |

3

In the United States there are two kinds of television stations. One kind is commercial. About 841 of the television stations in the United States are commercial stations. These stations are businesses. They show ads to make money. The other kind of television station is public. These stations do not show any ads. They get some money from the government. They also get money from the people who watch public stations.

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| a. the two kinds of television stations in the U.S. | topic |
| b. public television stations | too specific |
| c. television in the United States | too general |

Write the topic for all three paragraphs. **Television in the United States**

Thinking of the topic

Write the topics. Be sure they are not too specific or too general.

1

Fog is really a low cloud near the ground. Fog and clouds are made of many little drops of water. These drops stay in the air because they are so small. You cannot see each drop. But fog can make it hard to see other things. It can be dangerous if you are driving, for example. Sometimes where there is a lot of fog you cannot see the road. Sailors also have trouble when there is fog. Boats may get lost and hit rocks or beaches in the fog.

Topic **Fog**

2

When there is a heavy rain storm, you sometimes see lightning. It is a very bright light in the sky. In the past people thought the reason was religious. They thought it came from an angry god. In the 1700s Benjamin Franklin found out lightning was electricity. Storms with lightning really are electrical storms. But scientists today still do not know everything about lightning. They do not know exactly what it comes from. And they never know where and how it will hit the earth.

Topic **Lightning**

3

All clouds are made of many little drops of water. But not all clouds are alike. There are three kinds of clouds. Cirrus clouds are one kinds. These are made of ice drops. They look very soft and light. Another kind of clouds is called a cumulus cloud. They are very large and deep and flat on the bottom. We usually see cumulus clouds on warm summer days. And finally there are stratus clouds, which cover the whole sky. These clouds make the sky gray and the sun does not shine at all.

Topic **Kinds of clouds**

Write the topic for all three paragraphs. **Weather**

IV. MAIN IDEAS

Helping students identify the main idea of any text when teaching students about main idea, scaffold your instruction. Students need to first learn how to identify the concrete and literal before they can determine the inferential. Here's a series of skills to slowly work through with your readers.

1. First, help students identify key words (**nouns** and **verbs**) found within a single sentence. What is the sentence about ?
2. Then, guide students to be able to identify key words (**nouns, verbs, and adjectives**) in a single paragraph. What is the paragraph about ?
3. Eventually reveal short passages that each have a literal topic sentence. (Be sure to find examples that have the topic sentence in various positions in the paragraph).
4. Now it's time for the big step. Moving from the literal to the inferential. Have students determine the implied main idea within a single paragraph
5. The slowly increase the length of the passage from one paragraph to multiple paragraphs, each time asking students to determine the implied main idea.

Note: There is no sense reading longer texts if students can not infer main idea in shorter ones.

A main idea is important information that tells more about the overall idea of a paragraph or section of a text. The topic is the broad, general theme or message. It is what some call the subject. The main idea is the " key concept " being expressed. Details, major and minor, support the main idea by telling how, what, when, where, why, how, much, or how many. Locating the topic, main idea and supporting details helps you understand the point(s) the writer is attempting to express. Identifying the relationship between these will increase your comprehension.

The main idea of a paragraph is what that paragraph is about. The rest of the sentences are details that support the main idea. To find the main idea, ask yourself, "what is it about ?"

We have all seen the main idea questions on our reading comprehension tests, but sometimes, those questions are pretty difficult to answer, especially if you are not completely sure you understand what the main idea really is. But finding the main idea of a paragraph or longer passage of text, along with

making an inference, finding the author's purpose or understanding vocabulary words in context, is one of the reading skills important to master.

Doing so will help you succeed on the reading comprehension section of your next standardized test. Also, to develop increased reading comprehension it needs reading strategies (Erliana, 2011). Understanding what the main idea is and following a few simple steps will help you learn to identify it.

What is the main idea? The main idea of a paragraph is the point of passage, minus all the details. It is the main point or concept that the author wants to communicate to the readers about the topic. Hence, in a paragraph, when the main idea is stated directly, it is expressed in what is called the topic sentence. It gives the overarching idea of what the paragraph is about and is supported by the details in the paragraph. In a multiparagraph article, the main idea is expressed in the thesis statement. The main idea is what you tell someone when they ask what you did last weekend. You might say something like, "I went to the mall," instead of saying, "I got in my car and drove to the mall.

After I found a parking space near the main entrance, I went inside and got a coffee at Starbucks. Then, I went into several shoe stores looking for a new pair of kicks to wear next weekend when we go to the beach. I found them at Aldo's, but then I tried on sports for the next hour because I realized mine were all too small.

The main idea is the brief, but all encompassing summary. It covers everything the paragraph talks about in a general way, but does not include the specifics when an author does not state the main idea directly, it should still be implied, and is called an implied main idea. This requires that the reader look closely at the content at specific words, sentences, images that are used and repeated to deduce what the author is communicating. This may take a little more effort on the part of the reader.

Finding the main idea is critical to understanding what you are reading. It helps the details make sense and have relevance, and provides a framework for remembering the content.

How to find the main idea

Identify the topic

Read the passage through completely, then try to identify the topic. Who or what is the paragraph about? Summarize the passage.

After reading the passage through thoroughly, summarize it in your own words in **one sentence** that includes the gist of every idea from the paragraph.

A good way to do this is to pretend you have just ten words to tell someone what the passage is about.

Look at the first and last sentences of the passage.

Authors often put the main idea in or near either the first or last sentence of the paragraph or article.

Determine whether either of these sentences capture the main idea. Sometimes, however, the author will use what is called a reversal transition in the second sentence - words like but, however, in contrast, nevertheless, etc. That indicate that the second sentence is the main idea. If you see one of these words that negate or qualify the first sentence, that is a clue that the second is the main idea.

Look for Repetition of ideas

If you read through a paragraph and you have no idea how to summarize it because there is so much information, start looking for repeated words, phrases, ideas or similar ideas. Read this example paragraph :

A new hearing device uses a magnet to hold the detachable sound processing portion in place. Like other aids, it converts sound into vibrations. But it is unique in that it can transmit the vibrations directly to the magnet and then to the inner ear. This produces a clearer sound. The new device will not help all hearing -impaired people only those with a hearing loss caused by infection or some other problem in the middle ear. It will probably help no more than 20 percent of all people with hearing problems. Those people who have persistent ear infections, however, should find relief and restored hearing with the new device.

What idea does this paragraph consistently repeat? A new hearing device *What is the point about this idea? A new hearing device is now available for some hearing impaired people.* **And there is the main idea.**

Avoid main idea mistakes.

Choosing a main idea from a set of answer choices is different than composing a main idea on your own. Writers of multiple choice tests are often tricky and will give you distractor questions that sound much like the real answer. By reading the passage through thoroughly, using your skills, and

identifying the main idea on your own, though, you can avoid making these 3 common mistakes

- 1) Selecting an answer that is too narrow in scope;
- 2) Selecting the answer that is too broad
- 3) Selecting an answer that is complex but contrary to the main idea.

Summary

Finding the main idea can be challenging, but if you use the tools above and practice, you will be well on your way to the score you want on the verbal or reading sections of standardized tests.

The main idea tells you more about the topic. It tells you the writer's idea about the topic.

EXAMPLE

Bicycles are very popular today in many countries. Many people use bicycles for exercise. But exercise is only one of the reasons why bicycles are popular. Another reason is money. Bicycles are not expensive to buy. They do not need gas to make them go. They also are easy and cheap to fix. In cities, many people like bicycles better than cars. With a bicycle, they never have to wait in traffic. They also do not have to find a place to park. And finally, bicycles do not cause any pollution!

Topic: **Bicycles**

Write the topic beside the main idea of this paragraph.

- | | | |
|----|-------|-------------------------------------|
| a. | _____ | do not cause pollution. |
| b. | _____ | are better than cars. |
| c. | _____ | are popular today for many reasons. |

The correct answer is **(c) Bicycles are popular today for many reasons.** This is the writer's main idea about bicycles. All the information in the paragraph is about this idea

- (a) is not correct because it is too specific. It is only one part of the paragraph.
- (b) Is not correct because the paragraph is not about this. The paragraph does not say bicycles *are* better than cars. It only says that some people *like* bicycles better than cars.

Read this paragraph. Ask yourself, "What is the topic? What is the main idea?" Write the topic beside the best main idea.

1

It is important to bring the right clothes when you travel. If you are going to a cold country, you should bring warm clothes. Be sure you have a hat and gloves, too. If you are going to a hot country, you need different clothes. You do not want heavy or dark clothes. In hot weather, light clothes are best. If you are going to a city, you may need some nice clothes. You may want to go to a special restaurant or a concert. It is different if you are traveling by bicycle in the country. Then you will want comfortable clothes. But one rule is the same for all travelers. Do not bring too many clothes!

- a. -----for warm weather are light
- b. -----are important when you travel
- c. -----can be heavy

The correct answer is **(b). Clothes are important when you travel.** This is the writer's main idea about clothes. All the information in the paragraph is about this idea.

- (a) is not correct because it is too specific. It is only one part of the Paragraph
- (c) is not correct because the paragraph is not about this. The paragraph does not say clothes can be heavy

Read this paragraph. Ask yourself, "What is the topic? What is the writer's idea about the topic?" Choose the best main idea sentence.

2

Most Americans think of cats as pets. But not all cats are pets. Some cats help people and others are a problem. For example on farms and in old houses, cats can help. They kill small animals such as rats or mice. But sometimes, people do not want cats around. Some people like to watch birds in their yards. Cats may kill the birds or scare them away. Cats are also a problem in cities. In Rome for example, thousands of cats live in the streets and old buildings. They make a lot of noise and they are dirty and dangerous.

- a. Cats can be a problem
- b. Most Americans think of cats as pets
- c. Cats are not just pets

The correct answer is **(c) Cats are not just pets**

Read this paragraph. Ask yourself, " What is the topic? What is the writer's idea about the topic? " Then write the main idea sentence.

3

Not all newspaper ads are for selling things. Some ads are about people. The "Help Wanted" ads give information about jobs. All kinds of jobs are found in this part of the newspaper. There are ads for secretaries and electricians, doctors and professors. Another kind of ad about people is the " Personal" ad. These ads are not about work. They are written by people who are looking for friends. Sometimes these people are even looking for husbands and wives. Newspaper ads are a very good way to get people together.

Main idea

Main idea. **People use newspaper ads in many ways**

CONCLUSION

Topic is stated as a single word or phrase not a complete sentence. Topics of conversations talk between two or more people in which thoughts, feelings and ideas are expressed . A topic sentence is a sentence that captures the meaning of the entire paragraph or group of sentences. It tells what the passage is mainly about. A paragraph is a unit of writing in a larger body of work. Main idea is the most important or central thought of a paragraph or larger section of text, which tells the reader what the text is about.

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