

Understanding Topics and the Main Idea

English 213-01 and 213-02
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Being an Effective Reader

- Our principal goal in becoming effective readers:
 - maximize our comprehension while reading

READING CLOSELY

- In order to improve your reading comprehension skills, you must **read closely**. As you read, you must **put together the ideas stated in each sentence**, realizing that together **these sentences are leading up to one principal thought** that as a paragraph they want to convey.


- In the same way, **each paragraph** conveys a **central idea** that **together with the other paragraphs** in the selection, give us **the principal message** of that selection.

The Goal

- As you read then, your primary goal is to find out what the paragraph and/or selection is about.
- At the paragraph level, you want to understand the **main idea**.
- For the entire selection, you want to understand the **central theme**.


THE TOPIC

- In order to determine the central theme or main idea, you must first determine the **GENERAL TOPIC** that is being talked about
 - The person, place, object or idea under discussion (who or what)
 - Many times it is referred to repeatedly
 - It can be one word or a phrase
 - It should not be too specific (detailed) nor too general (broad)




Activity 1: Determining the Topic

Read the following selection. Then choose the topic.




Thomas Edison is rightly famous for his genius as an inventor. Among other things, Edison helped bring us electricity, phonographs, and motion pictures. What he is less known for is his role in inventing the electric chair. In 1887, the New York State legislature was busily searching for a method of execution other than hanging. Having heard stories of people who were accidentally electrocuted and died, a member of the legislature wrote to Edison asking for help in the search for a more humane method of execution. Edison wrote back that he thought 1000 volts of electricity would be relatively quick and painless. He then participated in a series of experiments on dogs, cats, cattle, and even a horse to prove his point. Edison's intention, however, was not to take credit for inventing the electric chair. On the contrary, he wanted New York State to use a generator made by his competitor, Westinghouse. Edison hoped the general public would be fearful of Westinghouse products once they knew that, in Edison's words, prisoners were being "Westinghoused" to death.




The topic of the selection is:

- A. Thomas Edison
- B. The genius of Thomas Edison
- C. Edison's inventions
- D. Edison's rivalry with Westinghouse
- E. Edison and the electric chair




Activity 2: Finding Topics

- Complete the following exercises in Steps to College Reading (STCR):
 - Pages 148- 151, ex. 5.1
 - 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9
 - Pages 152 163, ex. 5.2
 - 1, 3, and 5
- Be prepared to explain your answers!




The Main Idea

- Once you have determined the general topic, you must find the **author's idea about the topic**. This is the **main idea**.
- Remember that the main idea holds the paragraph together, so each sentence should relate to it and help build the paragraph's meaning.




The Main Idea (cont.)

- The main idea can be **clearly stated** by the writer within the paragraph. Where?
 - In the first sentence
 - In the middle of the paragraph
 - In the last sentence
- When it is clearly stated, the main idea is also known as the **topic sentence**.




The Main Idea (cont.)

- When stating the main idea in your own words, it should be in the form of a complete sentence (main idea statement=MIS).
- The formula is:
 - MIS= Topic + Author's idea about the topic (controlling idea)




Activity 3: Stating the Main Ideas

- Complete the following exercises in Steps to College Reading (STCR):
 - Pages 164 165, ex. 5.4
 - 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9
- Be prepared to explain your answers!



The Main Idea (cont.)

- The main idea can also be **implied**. When the main idea is implied, **you** must put it together by **drawing on information throughout the paragraph** (the major supporting details such as examples, facts, statistics, reasons etc.)
- Remember to state the main idea in a complete sentence!
 - MIS= Topic + Controlling Idea




Activity 4: Stating the Main Idea

- Read the following paragraph. Then determine whether the main idea is stated or implied.




Every game from the latest multimedia games to old favorites like cards and chess can be played on home computers. Home computers are used to balance family finances, to complete banking transactions, and even to do the grocery shopping. Those computers which are equipped with a modem allow users to go "online" to "chat" with others - that is, people can have a conversation on the computer about anything from being in love to getting medical advice. And of course students use home computers to type up school reports, to research their papers for classes and even to do the calculations for math homework.

What is the main idea?




Activity 5: Implied Main Ideas

- Complete the following exercises in Steps to College Reading (STCR):
 - Pages 189 192, ex. 6.3
 - 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9
- Be prepared to explain your answers!



Additional Practice


- Read and do exercises that will help you find the main idea. First read about finding the topic, and then read about the main idea.
- Access these two websites:
 - The Reading Room
<http://elearn.mtsac.edu/amla/readingroom>
 - Reading Resources
<http://users.dhp.com/~laflemm/reso/Introrr.html>



The Reading Room

<http://elearn.mtsac.edu/amla/readingroom>

- When you access this site, first click on the link: Getting Started: The Directions.
- Next click on Reading Skills: Finding the Main Idea.
- Finally, go to Reading Practice and choose from the review exercises.



Reading Resources

<http://users.dhp.com/~laflemm/reso/Introrr.html>

- In this site, you will read more about finding the main idea.
- Click first on Topics. Write down your answers as you work through the exercise. Check with the Answer Key at the bottom of the page.
- Then click on Main Ideas. Read and do the exercises.