

What is the difference between a topic and a main idea?

Topic

The topic is the general subject of a paragraph or essay.
Topics are simple and are described with just a word or a phrase.

Main Idea

The main idea is a complete sentence; it includes the topic and what the author wants to say about it.
If the author states the main idea in his paragraph it is called a “topic sentence.”

Writing the Topic and Main Idea

Find the Topic

- Ask yourself, “Who or what is the paragraph (or article) about?” or “What is the author teaching me about?”
- Write a single word or phrase that answers who or what the paragraph is about. In your mind think, “The author is teaching me about ___” but only write down what you would put in the blank space.
- Never write complete sentence.

Correct

growing up in a small town

avoiding burglaries

Incorrect (These are complete sentences)

The author is teaching me about growing up in a small town.
Growing up in a small town is good.

You can avoid burglaries.
Avoid burglaries.

Find the Main Idea

- Ask yourself, “What does the author want me to know about the topic?” or “What is the author teaching me?”
- Look for a sentence that states the main idea. This is the *stated main idea* or *topic sentence*.
- At times the main idea will not be stated directly. This is called an implied main idea.
- Avoid detail. Think of a general statement that could sum up the specifics as effectively as any stated topic sentence.
- Your main idea will include the topic and the central point that the author expresses.

Topic: growing up in a small town

Correct Main Idea: There are several advantages to growing up in a small town.

Incorrect Main Idea: Safe neighborhoods is one reason small towns are good.
The incorrect main idea is a detail and doesn't sum up all of a paragraph.

Topic: avoiding burglaries

Correct Main Idea: People can avoid burglaries by taking certain precautions.

Incorrect Main Idea: How to avoid burglaries.
The incorrect main idea isn't a complete sentence.

Sample Topics and Main Ideas

Sample 1: Main Idea Stated in a Topic Sentence

¹Does watching violence on TV make people more prone to violence themselves? ²Obviously, TV violence has some negative effects. ³One study found that heavy TV watchers are more fearful of others. ⁴They try to protect themselves with guns, alarm systems, and security locks on doors. ⁵In the same study it was found that heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than are non-TV watchers. ⁶All of the violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. ⁷A recent study also found that TV violence increases aggressive behavior in kids and makes them more likely to select toy guns rather than other kinds of toys.

Topic: TV violence

Notice that the subject of the 1st sentence is repeated throughout the paragraph, and ALL sentences in the paragraph deal with “TV violence.”

Stated Main Idea: Obviously, TV violence has some negative effects.

Paraphrase of Main Idea: TV violence can have harmful results.

This paragraph has a stated main idea (topic sentence). Sentence 2 is a general summary statement of the topic (TV violence) and the author’s central point (negative effects). It is important to paraphrase by writing the main idea in your own words.

Sample 2: Implied Main Idea:

¹In ancient time, irrational behavior was considered a result of demons and evil spirits taking possession of a person. ²Later, Greeks looked upon irrational behavior as a physical problem—caused by an imbalance of fluids called “humors”—or by displacement of an organ. ³In the highly superstitious Middle Ages, the theory of possession by demons was revived. ⁴It reached a high point again in the witch-hunts of eighteenth-century Europe and America. ⁵Only in the last one hundred years did true medical explanations gain wide acceptance and were categories of illnesses changed.

Topic: irrational behavior or mental illness

Notice that the subject of the 1st sentence is repeated throughout the paragraph, and ALL sentences in the paragraph deal with “irrational behavior.” The mention of illness in the last sentence gives the reader a clue to infer that the paragraph is actually speaking of mental illness. Therefore, mental illness may be a better topic choice.

Main Idea: People have explained mental illness in many different ways over the years.

This paragraph does not have a topic sentence. The main idea is implied. In this case the details show how mental illness was explained over the years. This is a broad enough summary to include all the material in the paragraph. The main idea sentence includes the topic (mental illness) and what the author wants you to know (how it has been explained in the past and present).

Further explanation and activities for Identifying Cause and Effect Patterns can be found in the following texts:

Fleming, Loraine. *Reading for Results*, 12th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2014. (See pages 165-174, 182-203)

Fleming, Loraine. *Reading Keys*, 3rd ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. (See pages 91-100)

McWhorter, Kathleen T. *Reading Across the Disciplines: College Reading and Beyond*, 5th ed. San Francisco: Pearson Education, 2012. (See pages 71-84)