

TEN STEPS TO ADVANCING COLLEGE READING SKILLS

Fifth Edition

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Chapter Two: Main Ideas

Recognizing the **main idea**, or **point**, is the most important key to good comprehension.

WHAT IS THE MAIN IDEA?

To find the main idea, or point, in a reading selection, ask yourself:

“What is the main point the author is trying to make?”

WHAT IS THE MAIN IDEA?



The **main idea**, or **point**, in this cartoon—that the man on the couch has problems—is well supported by the statements about his job, wife, friends, and dog.

WHAT IS THE MAIN IDEA?

Read this paragraph, asking yourself, “What is the author’s point?”

Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways. One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns. In addition, that same study showed that heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than non-TV watchers. It seems that the constant violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. Another study, of a group of children, found that TV violence increases aggressive behavior. Children who watched violent shows were more willing to hurt another child in games where they were given a choice between helping and hurting. They were also more likely to select toy weapons over other kinds of playthings.

Which general statement is supported by the other material in the passage?

- A.** Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment.
- B.** However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.
- C.** One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others.
- D.** They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns.

WHAT IS THE MAIN IDEA?

Explanation

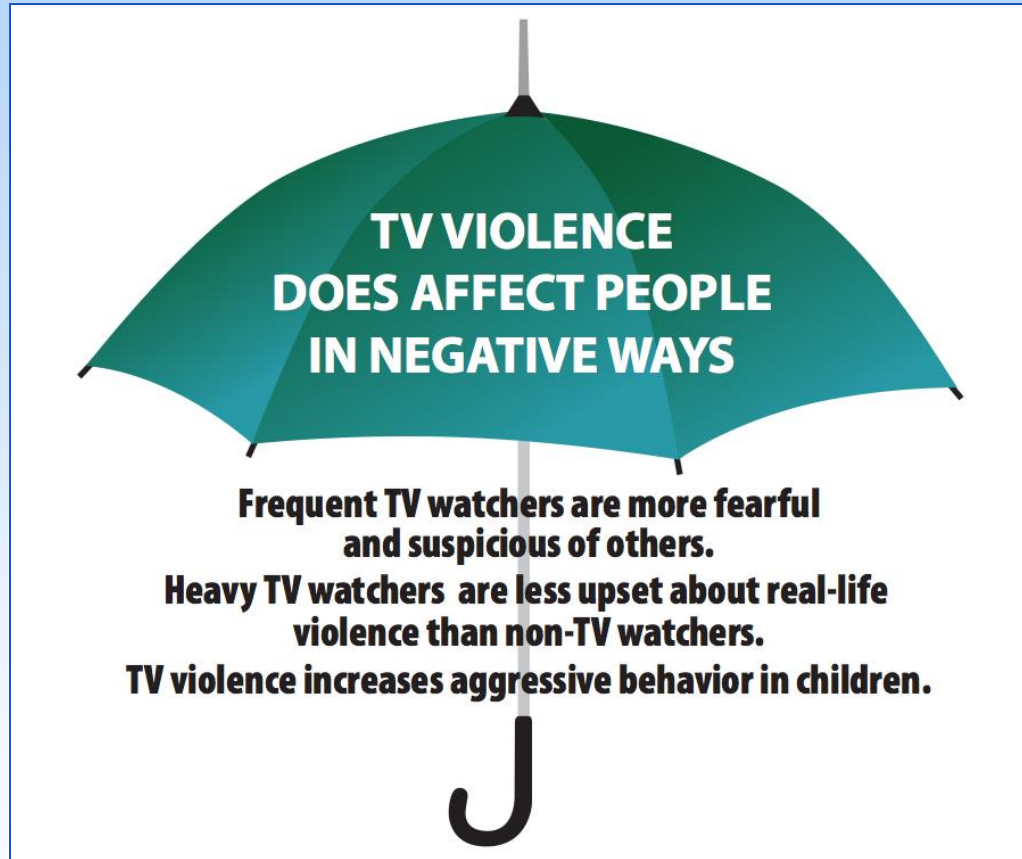
- A — The paragraph does not support the idea that TV violence is harmless. Sentence A introduces the topic of TV violence.
- B — This is a general statement. The rest of the passage goes on to describe three negative ways that TV violence affects people.
- C — This sentence is about only one study. It is not general enough to include the other studies cited in the paragraph.
- D — This sentence provides detailed evidence for the first supporting idea. It does not cover the rest of the paragraph.

Which general statement is supported by the other material in the passage?

- A.** Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment.
- B.** However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways.
- C.** One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others.
- D.** They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns.

WHAT IS THE MAIN IDEA?

The Main Idea as an “Umbrella” Idea



- The main idea is the author's **general point**.
- The other material of the paragraph **fits under the general point**.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

- To recognize the main idea of a passage, you must **think as you read**.
- Here are three strategies that will help you find the main idea:
 - 1** Look for **general versus specific** ideas.
 - 2** Use the **topic** to lead you to the main idea.
 - 3** Use **key words** to lead you to the main idea.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

1 Look for General versus Specific Ideas

In the list of words below, which three items are **specific ideas**, and which item is the **general idea**?

- A. dishonesty
- B. greed
- C. bad qualities
- D. selfishness

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

1 Look for General versus Specific Ideas

Specific ⇒ **A.** dishonesty

Specific ⇒ **B.** greed

General ⇒ **C.** bad qualities

Specific ⇒ **D.** selfishness

Explanation

Bad qualities is the **general idea**. It includes three **specific** types of bad qualities: dishonesty, greed, and selfishness.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

1 Look for General versus Specific Ideas

Look again at the paragraph on TV violence. Notice that the *general idea* is supported by *specific ideas*.

Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. However, we now know that **TV violence does affect people in negative ways.** [↔ **general idea**] One study showed that **frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others.** [↔ **specific idea**] They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns. In addition, that same study showed that **heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than non-TV watchers.** [↔ **specific idea**] It seems that the constant violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. Another study, of a group of children, found that **TV violence increases aggressive behavior.** [↔ **specific idea**] Children who watched violent shows were more willing to hurt another child in games where they were given a choice between helping and hurting. They were also more likely to select toy weapons over other kinds of playthings.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

- The **topic** is the general subject of a reading selection.
- Knowing the **topic** can help you find the writer's **main point** about that topic.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

- To find the topic of a selection, ask yourself:
Who or what is the selection **about**?
- After you find the topic, ask yourself:
What **main point** is the author making about the topic?

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

Recently a family of four were found dead in their suburban home in New Jersey—victims of carbon monoxide. Such cases are tragically common. Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons. To begin with, it is created in the most ordinary of ways—by the burning of wood, coal, or petroleum products. Once created, this gas is impossible to detect without instruments; it is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Also, carbon monoxide mingles with and remains in the air rather than rising and being carried away by the wind. Then, when people unsuspectingly breathe it in, it chokes them, taking the place of the oxygen in their blood. Furthermore, it can do its lethal work in very small quantities: anyone exposed to air that is just 1 percent carbon monoxide for even a few minutes will almost certainly die.

What is the **topic** of the paragraph?

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

Recently a family of four were found dead in their suburban home in New Jersey—victims of **carbon monoxide**. Such cases are tragically common. **Carbon monoxide** is deadly for many reasons. To begin with, it is created in the most ordinary of ways—by the burning of wood, coal, or petroleum products. Once created, this gas is impossible to detect without instruments; it is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Also, **carbon monoxide** mingles with and remains in the air rather than rising and being carried away by the wind. Then, when people unsuspectingly breathe it in, it chokes them, taking the place of the oxygen in their blood. Furthermore, it can do its lethal work in very small quantities: anyone exposed to air that is just 1 percent **carbon monoxide** for even a few minutes will almost certainly die.

What is the **topic** of the paragraph?

Carbon monoxide

Explanation

Everything in the paragraph is about the topic of carbon monoxide. Notice how many times the term is used in the passage.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

Recently a family of four were found dead in their suburban home in New Jersey—victims of carbon monoxide. Such cases are tragically common. Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons. To begin with, it is created in the most ordinary of ways—by the burning of wood, coal, or petroleum products. Once created, this gas is impossible to detect without instruments; it is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Also, carbon monoxide mingles with and remains in the air rather than rising and being carried away by the wind. Then, when people unsuspectingly breathe it in, it chokes them, taking the place of the oxygen in their blood. Furthermore, it can do its lethal work in very small quantities: anyone exposed to air that is just 1 percent carbon monoxide for even a few minutes will almost certainly die.

What is the **main idea** of the paragraph?

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

Recently a family of four were found dead in their suburban home in New Jersey—victims of carbon monoxide. Such cases are tragically common. **Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons.** To begin with, it is created in the most ordinary of ways—by the burning of wood, coal, or petroleum products. Once created, this gas is impossible to detect without instruments; it is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Also, carbon monoxide mingles with and remains in the air rather than rising and being carried away by the wind. Then, when people unsuspectingly breathe it in, it chokes them, taking the place of the oxygen in their blood. Furthermore, it can do its lethal work in very small quantities: anyone exposed to air that is just 1 percent carbon monoxide for even a few minutes will almost certainly die.

What is the **main idea** of the paragraph?

Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons.

Explanation

The third sentence states a general idea that sums up what the entire paragraph is about. It is an “umbrella” statement under which all the other material in the paragraph fits.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

2 Use the Topic to Lead You to the Main Idea

Recently a family of four were found dead in their suburban home in New Jersey—victims of carbon monoxide. Such cases are tragically common. **Carbon monoxide is deadly for many reasons.** [↔ **topic sentence**] To begin with, it is created in the most ordinary of ways—by the burning of wood, coal, or petroleum products. Once created, this gas is impossible to detect without instruments; it is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Also, carbon monoxide mingles with and remains in the air rather than rising and being carried away by the wind. Then, when people unsuspectingly breathe it in, it chokes them, taking the place of the oxygen in their blood. Furthermore, it can do its lethal work in very small quantities: anyone exposed to air that is just 1 percent carbon monoxide for even a few minutes will almost certainly die.

The sentence that states the main idea is known as the **main idea sentence** or the **topic sentence**.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

- Sometimes an author announces the main idea by using **key words**.
- One group of key words is **list words**. List words tell you that a **list of items** will follow.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

The main idea in the paragraph about carbon monoxide was stated like this:

Carbon monoxide is deadly for *many reasons*.

The expression *many reasons* suggests that the paragraph may be about specific reasons that carbon monoxide is deadly. The **list words** *many reasons* help you identify the main idea.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Here are some common words that often announce a main idea:

List Words

several kinds (or ways) of
three advantages of
various reasons for

several causes of
five steps
a number of effects

some factors in
among the results
a series of

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Here are some common words that often announce a main idea:

List Words

several kinds^s (or ways^s) of
three advantages^s of
various reasons^s for

several causes^s of
five steps^s
a number of effects^s

some factors^s in
among the results^s
a series^s of

Notice that each has a word that ends in **s**. The plural suggests that the supporting details will be a list of items.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

- Another type of key word is the **addition word**.
- It is generally used right before a supporting detail.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Here are some common words that often introduce supporting details and help you discover the main idea:

Addition Words

one	to begin with	also	further
first (of all)	for one thing	in addition	furthermore
second(ly)	other	next	last (of all)
third(ly)	another	moreover	final(ly)

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Reread the paragraph about TV violence. As you do, pick out the **addition words** that alert you to supporting details. Also note the **list words** that suggest the main idea.

Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in negative ways. One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns. In addition, that same study showed that heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than non-TV watchers. It seems that the constant violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. Another study, of a group of children, found that TV violence increases aggressive behavior. Children who watched violent shows were more willing to hurt another child in games where they were given a choice between helping and hurting. They were also more likely to select toy weapons over other kinds of playthings.

RECOGNIZING A MAIN IDEA

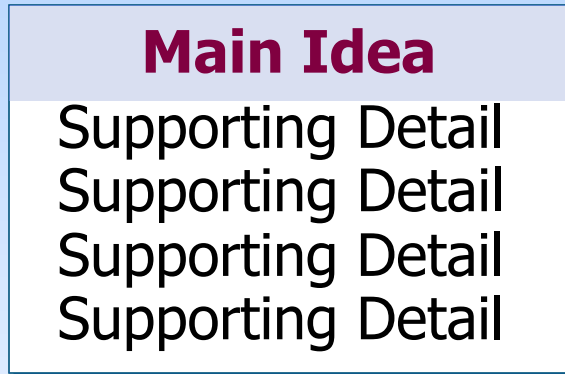
3 Find and Use Key Words to Lead You to the Main Idea

Each new supporting detail is introduced by an **addition word** or **words**. The **list words** *negative ways* suggest the supporting details will be a list of negative ways TV violence affects people.

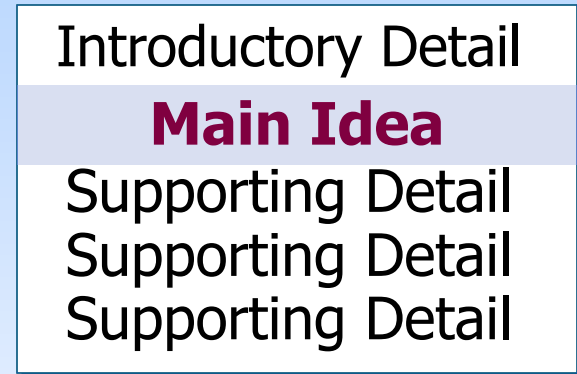
Many people feel that violence on television is harmless entertainment. However, we now know that TV violence does affect people in **negative ways** [↔ **list words**]. [addition word ⇒] One study showed that frequent TV watchers are more fearful and suspicious of others. They try to protect themselves from the outside world with extra locks on the doors, alarm systems, guard dogs, and guns. [addition words ⇒] In addition, that same study showed that heavy TV watchers are less upset about real-life violence than non-TV watchers. It seems that the constant violence they see on TV makes them less sensitive to the real thing. [addition word ⇒] Another study, of a group of children, found that TV violence increases aggressive behavior. Children who watched violent shows were more willing to hurt another child in games where they were given a choice between helping and hurting. They were also more likely to select toy weapons over other kinds of playthings.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the Beginning



or



In textbooks, the **main idea** is often stated **in the first or second sentence** of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph then supports the main idea with details.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the Beginning

As you read the paragraph below, look for the **main idea**.

For shy people, simply attending class can be stressful. Several strategies, though, can lessen the trauma of attending class for shy people. Shy students should time their arrival to coincide with that of most other class members—about two minutes before the class is scheduled to begin. If they arrive too early, they may be seen sitting alone or, even worse, actually forced to talk with another early arrival. If they arrive late, all eyes will be upon them. Before heading to class, the shy student should dress in the least conspicuous manner possible—say, in the blue jeans, sweatshirt, and sneakers that 99.9 percent of their classmates wear. That way they won't stand out from everyone else. They should take a seat near the back of the room. But they shouldn't sit at the very back, since instructors sometimes make a point of calling on students there.

Which sentence contains the main idea?

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the Beginning

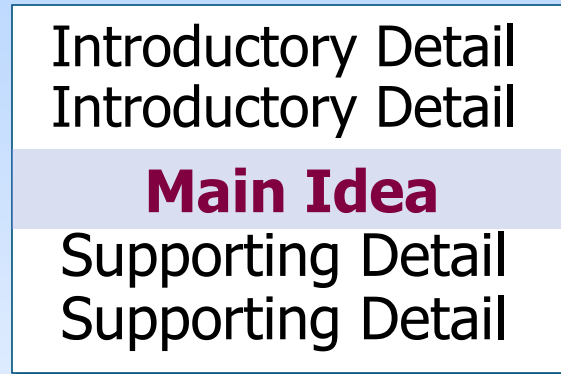
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Explanation

The first sentence introduces the topic: shy people in class. The second sentence contains the main idea. The remaining sentences support the main idea with examples of pain causing aggression.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea in the Middle



Sometimes the **main idea** appears **in the middle** of the paragraph.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea in the Middle

As you read the paragraph below, look for the **main idea**.

A television ad for a new sports car showed scenes of beautiful open country that suggested freedom and adventure. The car never appeared in the ad at all. An ad for a hotel chain showed a romantic couple in bed together. They were obviously on vacation and having a leisurely, romantic, sexy morning. As these ads suggest, advertisers often try to sell products and services by associating them with positive images rather than by providing relevant details about the product or service. An ad giving the car's gas mileage, safety rating, or repair frequency would be more important to a buyer, but it might not draw the viewer's interest as much as beautiful scenery. Similarly, details on the hotel's prices and service would be more informative than images of a glamorous vacation. But the romantic couple gets people's attention and associates the hotel in the viewers' minds with a good time.

Which sentence contains the main idea?

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea in the Middle

A television ad for a new sports car showed scenes of beautiful open country that suggested freedom and adventure. The car never appeared in the ad at all. An ad for a hotel chain showed a romantic couple in bed together. They were obviously on vacation and having a leisurely, romantic, sexy morning. **As these ads suggest, advertisers often try to sell products and services by associating them with positive images rather than by providing relevant details about the product or service.** An ad giving the car's gas mileage, safety rating, or repair frequency would be more important to a buyer, but it might not draw the viewer's interest as much as beautiful scenery. Similarly, details on the hotel's prices and service would be more informative than images of a glamorous vacation. But the romantic couple gets people's attention and associates the hotel in the viewers' minds with a good time.

The first four sentences introduce the topic of advertisers and provide specific examples of the main idea. The fifth sentence contains the main idea. The rest of the paragraph further develops the main idea.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the End



Sometimes all of the sentences in the paragraph will lead up to the **main idea**, which is presented **at the end**.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the End

As you read the paragraph below, look for the **main idea**.

Only about 1 percent of insect species are destructive to crops and property. Nevertheless, this small group causes several billion dollars of damage each year in the United States alone. Harmful insects include household pests, such as termites; crop and livestock pests, such as boll weevils; and hosts of disease-causing organisms, such as mosquitoes infected with parasitic protozoa. Many insects, on the other hand, are beneficial to human society. Some insects pollinate fruit trees, flowers, and many field crops. Bees produce honey and beeswax, silkworms form cocoons from which silk is spun, and lac insects provide the raw material for commercial shellac. Some kinds of insects are natural enemies of destructive insects. For example, the larvae of certain wasps feed on caterpillars that destroy plants. Clearly, insects are both harmful and beneficial to human society.

Which sentence contains the main idea?

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the End

Only about 1 percent of insect species are destructive to crops and property. Nevertheless, this small group causes several billion dollars of damage each year in the United States alone. Harmful insects include household pests, such as termites; crop and livestock pests, such as boll weevils; and hosts of disease-causing organisms, such as mosquitoes infected with parasitic protozoa. Many insects, on the other hand, are beneficial to human society. Some insects pollinate fruit trees, flowers, and many field crops. Bees produce honey and beeswax, silkworms form cocoons from which silk is spun, and lac insects provide the raw material for commercial shellac. Some kinds of insects are natural enemies of destructive insects. For example, the larvae of certain wasps feed on caterpillars that destroy plants. **Clearly, insects are both harmful and beneficial to human society.**

The first three sentences provide details about destructive insects. The next five sentences provide details about beneficial insects. The last sentence states the main idea, that insects are both harmful and beneficial.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the Beginning and the End



Sometimes an author will state the **main idea** **near the beginning** of the paragraph and then emphasize it by **restating it later** in the paragraph.

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the Beginning and the End

Read the paragraph and look for the **two main idea sentences**.

An important result of medical advances is an increase in the number of conditions thought to be of medical concern. In the not-to-distant past, birth and death usually occurred at home. Family members and friends were there or close by. Now most people are born and die in a hospital, surrounded by bright lights and expensive machines. People who were addicted to alcohol or drugs were once considered sinful or lacking in willpower. Now they are considered “sick.” Problems that used to be accepted as part of life—baldness, wrinkles, small breasts, sleeplessness—are now deemed proper matters for medical attention. Some criminologists have even defined antisocial behavior as a medical problem. Lawbreakers of all kinds, from the shoplifter to the mass murderer, may potentially be labeled “sick.” Because of current medical knowledge, what were once thought to be problems of life or of character are now considered medical issues.

Which two sentences contain the main idea?

LOCATIONS OF THE MAIN IDEA

Main Idea at the Beginning and the End

An important result of medical advances is an increase in the number of conditions thought to be of medical concern. In the not-to-distant past, birth and death usually occurred at home. Family members and friends were there or close by. Now most people are born and die in a hospital, surrounded by bright lights and expensive machines. People who were addicted to alcohol or drugs were once considered sinful or lacking in willpower. Now they are considered “sick.” Problems that used to be accepted as part of life—baldness, wrinkles, small breasts, sleeplessness—are now deemed proper matters for medical attention. Some criminologists have even defined antisocial behavior as a medical problem. Lawbreakers of all kinds, from the shoplifter to the mass murderer, may potentially be labeled “sick.” Because of current medical knowledge, what were once thought to be problems of life or of character are now considered medical issues.

The main idea—because of medical advances, more problems are considered medical issues—is expressed in different words in the first and last sentences.

MAIN IDEAS

The Central Point

- Just as a paragraph may have a main idea, a longer selection may have a **central point**.
- The central point in a longer selection is also known as a **central idea** or **thesis**.
- You can find a central point in the same way you find a main idea—by identifying the topic and then looking for the supporting material.

MAIN IDEAS

A Final Thought



Whether we are readers, writers, listeners, or speakers, the “heart” of clear communication is the main idea, or point, and the support for the main idea.

CHAPTER REVIEW

In this chapter, you learned the following:

- Recognizing the main idea is the most important key to good comprehension. The main idea is a general “umbrella” idea under which fits all the specific supporting material of the passage.
- Three strategies that will help you find the main idea are to 1) look for general versus specific ideas; 2) use the topic (the general subject of a selection) to lead you to the main idea; 3) use key words—verbal clues that lead you to the main idea.
- The main idea often appears at the beginning of a paragraph, though it may appear elsewhere in the paragraph.

The next chapter—Chapter 3—will sharpen your understanding of the specific details that authors use to support and develop their main ideas.