

Finding the Main Idea

When looking for the main idea in a reading passage, ask yourself, “*What point is the author trying to make about this topic?*”

The main idea may be stated in an introductory sentence, but it may also appear within the passage or at the end. All of the details in the passage should relate to the main idea.

When choosing the main idea sentence on a multiple choice test, be aware that the incorrect responses will be one of the following:

1. The sentence is too broad, too general, or too vague to be acceptable.
 - a. *Example: Some people have problems.*
 2. The sentence is just a supporting detail, too narrow to cover the topic.
 - a. *Example: The oldest child was only fifteen when he had to go to war.*
 3. The sentence might misinterpret information within the passage.
 - a. *Example: People in general, as well as students, need part-time jobs.*
- *When taking a test, be alert for sentences that are too general or too specific.*

The correct response will be the main point the author wants to make about the topic and it will be supported by all the details in the passage.

REMEMBER: Sometimes one main idea sentence can cover several paragraphs in a passage. The author has added more paragraphs to further explain the details and examples.

Sample Passages

Read the following passages and locate the main idea. Check your answers on the last page.

Sometimes too much of a good thing can become a very bad thing indeed. In an earnest attempt to consume a healthy diet, dietary supplement enthusiasts have been known to overdose. Vitamin C, for example, long thought to help people ward off cold viruses, is currently being studied for its possible role in warding off cancer and other diseases that cause tissue degeneration.

Unfortunately, an overdose of vitamin C – more than 10,000 mg. – on a daily basis can cause nausea and diarrhea. Calcium supplements, commonly taken by women, are helpful in warding off osteoporosis. More than just a few grams a day, however, can lead to stomach upset and even kidney or bladder stones. Niacin, proven useful in reducing cholesterol levels, can be dangerous in large doses to those who suffer from heart problems, asthma, or ulcers.

1. The main idea expressed in this paragraph is
 - A. supplements taken in excess can be a bad thing indeed.
 - B. dietary supplement enthusiasts have been known to overdose.
 - C. vitamins can cause nausea, diarrhea, and kidney or bladder stones.
 - D. people who take supplements are preoccupied with their health.

Most children have an interest in learning to play a musical instrument at one point or another during their growing-up years. Parents need to take advantage of that urge to play when it appears. Some very small children become intrigued with music because they see their parents or their older siblings play. The Suzuki method of instruction capitalizes on that early willingness to learn by involving the parent and the child in the child's instructions. Elementary-aged youngsters often are exposed to stringed instruments or band instruments in their school music classes. Because kids like to do what other kids do, parents who are not musicians themselves can take advantage of both instruction and enthusiasm. It is at the middle school level, however, that peer pressure can really work to the benefit of parents who want to hear the sound of music around the house.

2. The most accurate expression of the central or controlling idea of this paragraph is
 - A. most children have an interest in learning to play a musical instrument during their growing-up years.
 - B. some very small children become intrigued with music because they see their parents or siblings play.
 - C. at various points, parents can take advantage of their children's desire to play a musical instrument.
 - D. middle-school children take delight at selecting and learning to play an instrument along with their friends.

Malcolm X occupied himself in jail by reading the dictionary, a pursuit resulting in his acquisition of a tremendous amount of knowledge embodied in an enormous vocabulary. One has only to turn to the pages of a dictionary to see why this is the case. For example, on page 317 of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, we find everything from *continental code* (which is defined as a form of Morse Code, minus dots and dashes, used outside North America) to *contract* (which is defined in numerous ways depending on whether it is used as a noun or verb). In between, we discover that continents, having shifted over time, contain geographical features including elevations from which their river systems originate, and slopes that become submerged, first gradually and then precipitously, at that point where the continent meets the

ocean and then drops to meet the ocean floor. On just one page, the *same* page, we also learn something about math, education, morphology, music, birth control – and on and on. As a source of knowledge, the dictionary is invaluable.

3. The main idea expressed in this paragraph is
 - A. Malcolm X occupied himself in jail by reading the dictionary.
 - B. The dictionary is an invaluable source of knowledge.
 - C. Dictionaries contain many definitions of each word.
 - D. The American Heritage Dictionary was the source of Malcolm X's knowledge.

Impressionism was “born” in 1874 when an art critic reviewed the exhibition of several artists at Nader’s photography studio in Paris. Very unimpressed with Monet’s 1872 printing entitled “Impression Sunrise,” the critic used the term impression and later the word *impressionist* derogatorily. The name stuck and was worn almost as a badge of honor by the artists who used methods and style similar to Monet’s, and Monet became known as the Father of Impressionism. One might think that this radical departure from the accepted norm rose full blown in Monet and that his comrades merely followed his lead. This oversimplification is natural for laypersons, but it is akin to saying Darwin discovered evolution, or Freud discovered the unconscious mind. While all three men are indisputably tied to the concepts with which we identify them, their true genius and claim to being discovered or “Father of . . .” lies more in their ability to synthesize rather than to create.

4. Which statement best expresses the central idea of this paragraph?
 - A. Monet became known as the Father of Impressionism after a critic reviewed an 1874 exhibition in Paris.
 - B. Monet’s genius, like that of Darwin or Freud, lies more in the ability to synthesize than in the ability to create.
 - C. Oversimplification is natural for the layperson viewing Monet’s art.
 - D. A derogatory name can sometimes be worn as a badge of honor as it was for Monet and his fellow artists.

ANSWER KEY

1. A

2. C

3. B

4. B