How Can I Locate the Main Idea?

Once you can find the topic, you are ready to find the main idea. The main idea is the point of the paragraph. It is the most important thought about the topic. To figure out the main idea, ask yourself this question: What is being said about the person, thing, or idea (the topic)?The author can locate the main idea in different places within a paragraph. The main idea is usually a sentence, and it is usually the first sentence. The writer then uses the rest of the paragraph to support the main idea.

Let's use the paragraph below as an example. First, find the topic; then look for the main idea.

  Summer is a wonderful time to spend at West Beach. It is a beach with light-

  colored, soft sand. The coastline goes on for a long way and many people enjoy walking

  along it. Children like to play in the surf and walk along the rocks that are visible at

  low tide. This is a fun beach for people of all ages.

      In this paragraph:

* the topic is West Beach
* the main idea (what the writer is saying about the topic) is that summer is a wonderful time at West Beach

Here is another example:

             The movie Apollo 13 was a blockbuster for the summer of 1995.

             It is an exciting story about space exploration. In the movie, the astronauts

             get in trouble while they are trying to return to Earth. People in the audience

             are on the edge of their seats waiting to see what happens. What makes it even

*more exciting is that it is a true story.*

In this paragraph:

* the topic is
* the main idea is

                       Most teenagers and young adults do not know what they want to do for the rest

                       of their lives. It is a big decision. There are a number of things you can do to narrow

                       the choices. For example you can take an interest test, do some research on your own

                       about a career, try volunteer work in the field in which you are interested, or "job-shadow",

                       in which you spend a day with a person who is working in a field that interests you. These

                       are just a few helpful ideas as you begin to choose a career.

      In this paragraph:

* the topic is
* the main idea is

                         The United States seems to be in love with the idea of going out to eat.

                        Because of this, a real variety of restaurants has come about specializing

                        in all kinds of foods. McDonald's is the king of a subgroup of restaurants

                        called fast-food restaurants. Chances are, no matter where you live, there

                        is a McDonald's restaurant near you. There are even McDonald's in the

                        Soviet Union. Now McDonald's is trying something new. It is called McDonald's

                        Express and there is a test site in Peabody, Massachusetts. It is part of a Mobil

                        gas station. This allows you to fill up with gas and fill up on food at the same time.

                        What will they think of next?

**In this paragraph:**

* the topic is
* the main idea is

*Hurricanes, which are also called cyclones, exert tremendous power. These violent storms are often a hundred miles in diameter, and their winds can reach velocities” of seventy-five miles per hour or more. Furthermore, the strong winds and heavy rainfall that accompany them can completely destroy a small town in a couple of hours. The energy that is released by a hurricane in one day exceeds the total energy consumed by humankind throughout the world in one year.*

**In this paragraph:**

* the topic is
* the main idea is

*Albert Einstein, one of the world’s geniuses, failed his university entrance examination on his attempt. William Faulkner, one of America’s noted writers, never finished college because he could not pass hid English courses. Sir Winston Churchill, who is considered one of the masters of the English language, had to have special tutoring in English during elementary school. These examples show that failure in school does not always predict failure in life.*

**In this paragraph:**

* the topic is
* the main idea is

*Synonyms, words that have the same basic meaning, do not always have the same emotional meaning. For example, the words ‘stingy” and “frugal” both mean “careful with money.” However, to call a person stingy is an insult, while the word frugal has a much more positive connotation. Similarly, a person wants to be slender but not skinny, and aggressive not pushy. Therefore, you should be careful in choosing words because many so-called synonyms are not really synonymous at all.*

**In this paragraph:**

* the topic is
* the main idea is