

The Main Idea of a Paragraph

A writer groups several sentences together to create a paragraph. These sentences work together to form a complete thought, called the **main idea**. Often one sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. It is called the **topic sentence**.



The first sentence in the following paragraph is a topic sentence. It tells readers that the paragraph will be about simple ways to prepare a home for a power failure. You will notice that the writer has not included details about anything other than this topic.

It is not hard to prepare your home for a power failure.

Keep a few flashlights handy. Make sure that they have fresh batteries. Keep a supply of candles and matches in case the power is out for a while. Use a battery-operated alarm clock, or make sure that your plug-in clock has a battery back-up.

The topic sentence is general enough to allow for several examples. It is also narrow enough to limit what the writer can describe—just preparations for a power failure.

Circle the letter beside the main idea of each paragraph. Underline its topic sentence.

- Charles got great news from the palm reader. She said that he would enjoy good health for a very long time. She predicted that his marriage might go through a rocky period. However, it would remain strong. She revealed that if he took risks in his career, they would surely pay off. She even saw great wealth in his future.
 - Palm readers are always correct in their predictions.
 - The palm reader gave Charles great news.
 - The palm reader said that Charles would be rich someday.
- Pickled foods can be found in all parts of the world. Korea is famous for kim chee, which is pickled cabbage. Chinese cooking uses pickled eggs and ginger. In Mexico you can find pickled jalapenos. In the American South you'll see pickled beans, okra, and onions. And inside your hamburger bun, of course, lies a pickled cucumber.
 - Korean cooks make kim chee, which is pickled cabbage.
 - You can find pickled foods in all parts of the world.
 - All foods around the world are pickled.

B Practice

Read each paragraph below. Choose its topic sentence from among the five lettered sentences. Write the letter of the topic sentence on the blank line.

A For the U.S. soldiers in the Old West, bad food was the real enemy.

B Liza and laundry just don't mix.

C When you travel with your baby, you'll be packing many things into your car.

D The covered wagons that pioneers used were crowded, to say the least.

E Penelope is a devoted soap opera fan.

1. _____ She works nights so that she is able to see the soaps during the day. When she can't be home, she sets her VCR to record them. She subscribes to several soap opera magazines. She and her friends have long discussions about what the characters are doing. She even named her pets after soap opera stars!
2. _____ Their diet was made up almost solely of salted meat, beans, potatoes, and coffee. They hardly ever had fruits or vegetables. Rations arrived at the forts rotten and moldy. More soldiers died due to poor diet than were killed in frontier battle.
3. _____ Her T-shirts and sweat-socks are all pink because she washes them with her red shirts. One time she used so much soap that suds poured out all over the floor. Last week she got something stuck in the lint trap, and the dryer caught fire. We put the fire out, but who knows what will happen next!
4. _____ Wagons were only four feet wide and ten feet long. A wagon had to be packed with everything that the family owned. Many treasured items were left behind to make room for food, medicines, and weapons. The jam-packed wagons had to serve as the family's home for four to five long months.
5. _____ Even to go on an overnight visit, a baby needs quite a few items. Of course, he or she will need diapers and two or more changes of clothes. Mealtime needs include favorite foods along with special dishes, spoons, and bottles or cups. Don't forget to throw in some blankets and a baby seat. If you're lucky, there will still be room enough for you and the baby, too!

C Apply

Write a topic sentence for each of the following paragraphs. (The topic sentence in these paragraphs is the first sentence.)

1. _____ . Last month, the museum's courtyard was full of huge stone sculptures. Indoors there was a gorgeous exhibit of paintings from India. Right now there is a show of famous abstract paintings in one hall. The plans for next month include a display with wild laser beams dancing across the walls and ceiling.

2. _____ . They can be made from a variety of fruits for a variety of tastes. They have a nice texture which can be made either chunky or smooth. They can range from very mild to hot and spicy. Chutneys can be used as sauces, sides, spreads, or even as pizza toppings.

3. _____ . Tools should be stored where you can reach them quickly and easily. Many people hang them from hooks on the wall. Different sized nails and screws should be kept in different containers. That way you won't grab the wrong size by mistake. Ropes, extension cords, and cords of power tools should be wound up after use. That way they won't get tangled or knotted.

4. _____ . The Spanish missionaries felt at home in California's warm, dry climate. It was like that of their homeland. They found that plants from Spain did well in their new home. They decided that the California coast was perfect for establishing towns. In fact, the priests and brothers were so enthusiastic that they built 21 missions there.

D**Check Up**

Read each paragraph. Then choose the best topic sentence for each paragraph.

1. _____. The seated statue of Lincoln gazes out over the Reflecting Pool. Inscribed on the walls are two of the famous speeches Lincoln gave. One mural shows the Angel of Truth freeing a slave. Another mural shows the unity of North and South.
 - A Lincoln was a great president.
 - B Lincoln was shot at the theater.
 - C The Lincoln Memorial is in Washington, D.C.
 - D There is much to see at the Lincoln Memorial.

2. _____. In 1396 the queen of Denmark declared that an inn be built every 20 miles along the country's main roads. In 1500 the law was changed to provide an inn every ten miles. The tradition of kindness continues today. Modern travelers can find a good bed and a meal wherever they go in Denmark.
 - F Danish inns are better than hotels.
 - G For centuries, Denmark has been a good place to travel.
 - H Denmark's history is interesting.
 - J In Denmark, if you close your inn you could be arrested.

3. _____. It makes him happy when his students learn. He likes leading discussions about insects, rainbows, and other science topics. Most of all, he enjoys experiments.
 - A There are over 700,000 known species of insects.
 - B Allen knows a lot about insects.
 - C Allen is an excellent scientist.
 - D Allen loves being a science teacher.

4. _____. There is a large grocery store right across the street from her apartment. Right on the corner is her favorite Italian bakery. The library is two blocks away. Best of all, Donna works right next door to where she lives.
 - F Donna's home is on the bus line.
 - G Donna found a job that she likes.
 - H Donna has everything she needs right in her neighborhood.
 - J Donna enjoys Italian foods.

5. _____. Its red color always made it stand out from other planets and the stars. Mars became even more interesting when scientists discovered strange markings on it. People wondered if the markings were really canals dug by Martians.
 - A People have always been fascinated by the planet Mars.
 - B Martians may invade Earth.
 - C Mars is becoming a vacation spot.
 - D The atmosphere on Mars would be deadly to humans.