

Help Guide to Writing Main Idea Questions

(adapted from Monterey Peninsula College Reading Center Resources)

What is a main idea?

The main idea is the central point or thought the author wants to communicate to readers. The main idea answers the question, “What does the author want me to know about the topic?” or “What is the author teaching me?” The main idea of a paragraph or longer piece of writing is expressed in a full sentence.

Use these clues to help find the main idea:

- **Find the topic first.** You have to know the topic before you can determine the main idea. Preview your text and ask yourself, “What or who is the article about?” or “What is the author teaching me about?”
- Ask yourself. **“What does the author want me to know about the topic?”** or “What is the author teaching me about the topic?” You can answer this by finding the idea that is common to most of the text or what opinion all the parts support. Read the first and last sentences of the paragraph (or the first and last paragraphs of the article). Authors often state the main idea near the beginning or end of a paragraph.
- **Pay attention to any idea that is repeated in different ways.** If an author returns to the same thought in several different sentences (or paragraphs), that idea is the main or central thought under discussion.
- Once you feel sure that you have found the main idea, **test it. Ask yourself if the sentence could act as a summary of the other sentences in the paragraph.** Do the examples, reasons, and facts included in the reading explain or give evidence supporting the main idea you have in mind? If they do, then you are right on target. If they don’t, then you need to revise your idea.

Example:

Being different caused problems for the Quakers and many moved to America. For example, by 1677, many Quakers were being arrested and sent to jail in England. So, some of them, led by William Penn, decided to leave for North America, where they settled the state of Pennsylvania. There were also many Quakers in New Jersey, Rhode Island and North Carolina. The Quakers moved to the American colonies for religious freedom.

The main idea of this paragraph is:

- ~~A. Quaker is a type of religion. (Too general)~~
- ~~B. William Penn was the leader of the Quakers. (Just a detail- Whole paragraph is not about William Penn)~~
- C. The Quakers came to America for freedom of religion. **(This is the MAIN IDEA!)**
- ~~D. The Quakers were arrested in England. (Just a detail- Whole paragraph is not about William Penn)~~

