

*Let's get on with it!*



## What is IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEAS?

Identifying Main Ideas is selecting the key concepts (main ideas) being expressed in oral or written communication. This includes presentations, labs, articles, books and so on.

When reading to grasp the main idea in a paragraph, you should mark the topic sentence of that paragraph. The topic sentence contains the main idea the author wants you to know about the paragraph.

There are several different types of paragraph structure. The differences between them are determined by the location of the topic sentence.



## Activity

As you read the different examples, underline the topic sentences. Once you are able to recognize them, you will be able to grasp the main ideas of any text very quickly.

**Type One:**  
Beginning focus

The most common type of paragraph begins with a topic sentence which contains the main idea. This sentence is followed by supporting material which amplifies, explains or illustrates it, or sometimes does two or three of these things.

## Example 01

Plantation labor was highly routinized and regimented. One of the most tedious and backbreaking tasks was hoeing weeds. Workers had to "hoe, hoe' hoe... for four hours in a straight line and no talking," said a laborer. They stopped only to sharpen the blades and then walked to the next lot. "Hoe every weed along the way to your three rows. Hoe-chop chop chop, one chop for a small weed, two for all big ones." As they hoed, they were not permitted to stand up straight and ease the pain in their shoulders and backs. After a week of "hoe hana" many of the workers felt as if they had been kicked and beaten all over." (Takaki, 1983:58)

## Example 02

A rite of passage, according to psychologists, is an event that prompts movement from one stage of life to another. Weddings and graduations are two examples of new beginnings that are considered significant rites of passage. For the bride and groom, a wedding signifies the covenant of fidelity and the couple's public declaration of love. Making the promise for life before loved ones is the first step to their new life together. Graduations also signify a rite of passage. Tests will not be scheduled, and paperwork will no longer be graded on a curve. Whether it is a high school or college graduation, students acknowledge they are beginning a new path on their journey.

**Type Two:**  
Restatement plus new material

Another kind of paragraph begins with a topic sentence which consists of 2 parts. The first part is a restatement of the main point made earlier, and in the second one, there is a new main point which is developed in the paragraph.

## Example 01

If a historian's personal attitudes do not harm his history, equally they can enhance it. Great history is commonly a consequence of a historian's pursuit of evidence to vindicate his previously formed beliefs. Gibbon, for

instance, wrote his masterpiece, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, because he conceived himself to be a champion of civilization and rationalism who could point out that Rome succumbed to 'the triumph of barbarism and religion'. A pure love of the scholarly is rare. Deeply held convictions are needed to drive people to major historical achievements. Again, bias can be used as a historical tool. R.R. Betts, a British scholar working on the Hussites of the fifteenth century Bohemia, was brought up a non-conformist, for example. Hence he was particularly able to understand men who chose to be nonconformists from the established church of their day. His background gave him the advantage of a certain imaginative sympathy which enabled him to illuminate a portion of the past. Bias can be treated not as a liability, but as an asset. (Bebbington 1990:7)



This type of paragraph begins with a phrase that suggests that the idea being presented in the opening general statement will be challenged or modified later.

A number of typical phrases are listed below together with the words which signal the challenge.

- It is sometimes suggested... Yet
- It may seem to follow that... However
- We may conclude that... On the contrary
- It might seem that... But
- It is true that... On the other hand
- It might be thought that... Nevertheless
- It has often been supposed that... The difficulty is...
- Some have believed that... There is an important element missing
- What has been said so far would suggest... In reality...



In some paragraphs the general idea being expressed is only partly stated at the beginning of the paragraph. It is completed later after some explanation, amplification or specific examples have been given, and is then followed by further supporting material.

### Example 01

First, however, an important distinction must be made. A visitor to the Tower of London may well buy a copy of its history. When 'history' is used in this way it means something different from 'history' in the claim history repeats itself. A history of the Tower of London is its written history, a record of the past. The history that may or may not repeat itself, on the other hand, is the past itself, not a record but what really took place. In the English language, the word 'history' can mean either what people write about time gone by, that is historiography; or else it can mean what people have done and suffered, that is the historical process. This book is about both of those; about what the historian does as well as about what all men live through, about how such works as a history of the Tower are written, as well as about the great configurations that have been discerned in the past. (Bebbington 1990:1)

### Example 01

Planters could not legally whip their workers, however, corporal punishment had been declared by law to be "an actionable offence" in the Hawaiian kingdom. "The coolie and the Hawaiian labourer," the editor of the Hawaiian Gazette wrote in 1867, "are alike under the protection of the law." But the law did not reflect reality; it did not actually protect workers on the plantations. Even the Editor of the Pacific Commercial Advertiser, a supporter of plantation interests, conceded in 1868, "It is well known that many are the stripes inflicted and borne because the sufferer is ignorant of the law, or if he knows it, knows also that it is next to useless to seek redress." (Takaki 1983:74)

## Example 02

It is true that the professionalization of history in the twentieth century has set up academic standards that a historian infringes at his peril. A historian has to observe the rules of the club, and so cannot, without loss of respect as a scholar, abandon the professional expectations of his fellows. This factor may counteract the influence of his culture, politics or religion. But this is merely another influence to add to the other three, a novelty thrown up by a particular period, the twentieth century. It is as much of a bias in a historian to fulfil the expectations of his professional colleagues as to vindicate his political position. As it happens, the normal effect of the desire to win the approval of other historians in the Anglo-Saxon countries in the twentieth century is to restrain any bias thrown up by politics or religion. But this need not necessarily be so. In the former Soviet Union, as a counter-example, professional expectations encouraged the writing of history with a very definite political colouring. Professional sanctions do not always eliminate excesses of bias. Rather, they add a fresh bias to the historian, who is already - and necessarily - a bundle of biases. (Bebbington, 1990:6)

*Example 02*  
It is true that the professionalization of history in the twentieth century has set up academic standards that a historian infringes at his peril...  
But this is merely another influence to add to the other three, a novelty thrown up by a particular period, and twentieth century.

Bebbington, David 1990 *Patterns in History*, Leicester, Appolos

Takaki, Ronald 1983 *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labour in Hawaii 1835-1920*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii.



## Key - Topic Sentence

**TYPE ONE**  
*Example 01*  
Plantation labour was highly routinized and regimented.

**TYPE TWO**  
*Example 02*  
Weddings and graduations are two examples of new beginnings that are considered significant rites of passage.

*It is equally true that they [a historian's personal attitudes] can enhance it [history]*

**TYPE THREE**  
... an important distinction must be made...  
*In the English language the word 'history' can mean either what people write about time gone by, that is historiography, or else it can mean what people have done and suffered, that is the historical process.*

**TYPE FOUR**  
*Example 01*  
*Planters could not legally whip their workers...  
But the law did not reflect reality...*