

Main Ideas

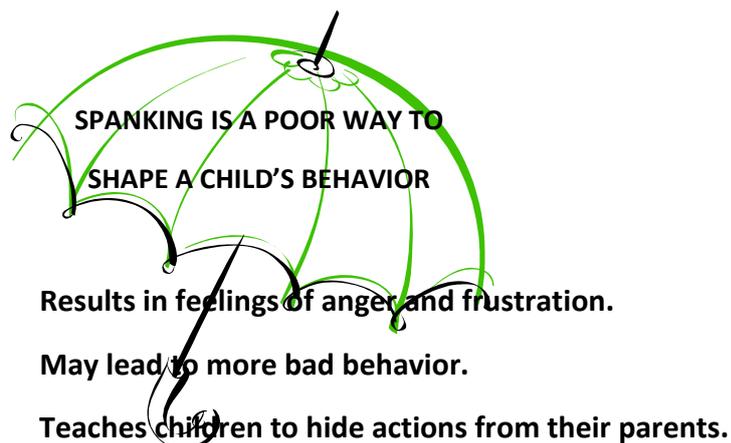
More than other skill, the key to good writing is **recognizing main ideas**. The basic question you must ask yourself is “**What is the main point** that I am trying to describe?”

For instance, read the following paragraph:

Spanking is a poor way to shape a child’s behavior. For one thing, the spanking will result in feelings of anger and frustration. The child, then, will not learn anything positive from the punishment. In addition, the spanking may actually lead to more bad behavior. Having learned that hitting is okay, the child may attack smaller children. Finally, the spanking teaches children to hide certain actions from their parents. Once out of the parents’ sight, children may feel they can get away with the bad behavior.

What is the **main point** of this paragraph? To find the **main idea**, it is often useful first to determine **what topic** is being discussed. In the above paragraph, **the topic is spanking**. **The main idea** about the topic of spanking is that it “**is a poor way to shape a child’s behavior**”. The rest of the paragraph then supports that idea by providing the author’s reasons.

Think of the **main idea** as an “**umbrella**” **idea**. It is the author’s **primary point** about a topic, under which fits all the other material of the paragraph. **That other material is supporting details** in the form of examples, reasons, facts, and other evidence. The diagram below shows the **relationship**.



In a paragraph, author often present the main idea to readers in a single sentence called **topic sentence**. For instance, look again at the paragraph above on spanking. As we have already seen, the topic of this paragraph is spanking, and the primary point about spanking is that it “is a poor way to shape a child’s behavior”.

Both the topic and the point about the topic are expressed in the opening sentence, which is therefore the topic sentence. All the sentences that follow provide supporting details about the negative effect of spanking. The parts of the paragraph can be shown in outline form:

Topic:

SPANKING

Main idea:

SPANKING IS A POOR WAY TO SHAPE A CHILD' BEHAVIOR

Supporting details:

1. **RESULTS IN FEELINGS OF ANGER AND FRUSTRATION.**
2. **MAY LEAD TO MORE BAD BEHAVIOR.**
3. **TEACHES CHILDREN TO HIDE ACTIONS FROM THEIR PARENTS.**

So, we have:

1. **Topic**
2. **Main idea**
3. **Supporting details**

Using the topic to find the main idea

The topic is the topic of a selection.

To find the topic of a selection, ask this simple question:

Who or what is the selection about?

Ask this question as you read carefully the paragraph that follows. Then, write what you think is the topic.

Extrasensory perception, or ESP, is an area that fascinates people. However, ESP is not documented by any convincing evidence. For instance, it would seem that ESP would be an excellent way of winning at games of chance, such as are played at gambling casinos. However, casino owners in Las Vegas and Atlantic City report no problem with “psychics” winning great sums of money. For another thing, although great publicity is generated when a psychic seems to help police solve a crime, the value of such help has never been scientifically proven. Psychic’s tips are usually worthless, and a case is solved through traditional police work. And while audiences may be amazed at the feats of “mind readers”, the fact is that mind readers use simple psychological tricks to exploit their audience’ willingness to believe.

Explanation:

The first sentence suggests that the **topic** of this paragraph is

And as you read the paragraph, you see that, in fact, everything does have to do with this **topic**.

Once you have the topic, your next step is to ask the question:

What is the author’s **primary point** about the topic?

Your answer will be the **main idea of the paragraph**. Read the paragraph again and then write down the **main idea** of the paragraph (pay attention to the sentence #2). In other words, the **main idea** is the “**umbrella**” **statement** under which the other material in the paragraph fits. The **other material** (**supporting details**) is in the form of several **examples** that prove the main idea.

Explanation:

Topic: **ESP**

Main idea: **ESP is not documented by any convincing evidence.**

Supporting details:

- 1. There have been no reports of “psychics” winning great sums at casinos.**
- 2. Crimes are solved by police work, not psychic’s tips.**
- 3. Mind reader use simple psychological tricks, not psychic ability.**