

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS ACTIVITY SHEET
IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEAS IN EXPOSITION



Identifying the Main Ideas in an Expository Paragraph (Form 3)

What is a Paragraph?

A paragraph is a unit of writing that deals with a specific idea. In most expository or informational texts, each paragraph contains:

A topic sentence that contains the main idea.





Supporting sentences that expand on the main idea.

A concluding sentence that restates the main idea.

What is the Main Idea?

The main idea is who or what the paragraph is about.

How to find the main idea in a paragraph?

-  Examine the title of the passage to which the paragraph belongs.
-  Look at the opening sentence and closing sentence of the paragraph. They usually offer clues about the main idea.
-  Look for words and phrases that are repeated.
-  Look for key transitional words and phrases (e.g. “because” indicates that a reason will follow; “on the other hand” or “while” indicates a contrasting point is being made.)

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Let's examine the following paragraph carefully to find its main idea.

Memories - Good and Bad



A person's memory can be like a mansion with many, many rooms. Some of the rooms you visit frequently, while others you may not enter for many years. As you age, some of these rooms may change, and you may remember things slightly differently than how they actually happened. In other cases, the rooms may stay the same, but the doors may become locked. Sometimes these rooms can only be unlocked if you find a special key. Some of these rooms you may enjoy visiting; some of them, you may just wish the door stayed shut.



Find the Main Idea

1. What hint does the title of the passage give me about the main idea of this paragraph?	"Memories – Good and Bad" tells me that this passage may be about exactly that: the good and bad memories that people have.
2. What hints do the opening and closing sentences of the paragraph tell me about the main idea of this paragraph?	The first sentence says that a person's memory has many rooms. The last sentence says that some of these rooms might be enjoyable to visit (i.e. good memories) and other rooms might not be enjoyable to visit (i.e. bad memories)
3. What key words are repeated in this paragraph?	The word "room" and other words related to dwelling places.
4. What signal transitional words appear in this paragraph?	Transitions like "while" and "in other cases" tell me that the writer is contrasting two things. Perhaps good and bad memories?
Main idea: A person's memory has many compartments. Some are pleasant to revisit, while others are not.	

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Activity 1: Use the guiding questions to help you find the main idea of this paragraph.

One of the keys that can often unlock a person’s memory is a specific sensory input—something you can see, smell, touch, taste, or hear. There is the famous case of the novelist Marcel Proust, who tasted a madeleine—a kind of cookie—and it caused him to suddenly remember an enormous amount of his childhood, memories that had previously been locked away. He went on to write a seven-volume novel called *In Search of Lost Time*, in which he explored these memories and what they meant to him. Proust might not have written these volumes exactly as they are had he not eaten that fateful madeleine.

1. In which sentence can you find the main idea in this paragraph?	
2. What, according to the paragraph is the meaning of “sensory input”?	
3. How do the words “one” and “specific” provide hints about the main idea in this paragraph?	
The main idea of this paragraph is:	

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Activity 2:

Sometimes, in longer paragraphs, it is challenging to find the main idea, even after reading the first and last sentences. The following is another paragraph from the passage that was used earlier. It has many examples and elaborations that make it challenging to decipher its main idea. In this passage:

1. Highlight all the signal words that indicate examples, illustrations and elaborations (e.g. “for example, including, meaning etc.)
2. Cross out the examples, illustrations and elaborations.
3. Read the remaining words.
4. If possible, try to visualise what the words are saying to you. Drawing a diagram may help.

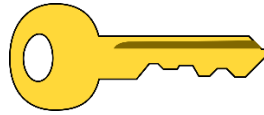
The senses you possess are a way for your brain to monitor what’s going on outside. When you receive a particular sensory input, meaning one of your senses is stimulated, that sense will send a signal to your brain telling the information it just received. For example, when Proust tasted his cookie, the sense receptors on his tongue sent a message to his brain telling it how the madeleine tasted. The messages are signals transmitted along nerve cells until they reach the brain. When the brain receives these signals, it processes them and controls the body’s reaction to them. Sense receptors react to many different types of inputs, including electromagnetic, mechanical, and chemical. In Proust’s case, his tongue was sensing the chemical makeup of the cookie and its mechanical properties, such as the cookie’s hardness and brittleness.

In one sentence, say what this paragraph is about:

All passages retrieved from <https://www.readworks.org/article/Memories---Good-and-Bad/b6ed930a-0b27-4125-8bd3-9d9f2b4e66d9#!articleTab:content/>

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Answer key



Activity 1: Use the guiding questions to help you find the main idea of this paragraph.

1. In which sentence can you find the main idea in this paragraph?	<p>The first sentence.</p> <p>One of the keys that can often unlock a person’s memory is a specific sensory input—something you can see, smell, touch, taste, or hear.</p>
2. What, according to the paragraph is the meaning of “sensory input”?	<p>Something you can see, smell, touch, taste, or hear (the hint, is the dash that comes before it).</p>
3. How do the words “one” and “specific” provide hints about the main idea in this paragraph?	<p>It only takes input to one of a person’s senses to unlock or trigger a memory.</p> <p>or</p> <p>Seeing something, hearing something, smelling something, tasting something or feeling something can unlock a person’s memory.</p>
<p>The main idea of this paragraph is:</p> <p>One way to trigger a person’s memory is through the involvement of any one of his senses.</p> <p>or</p> <p>Something that you see, hear, smell taste or touch can trigger your memory/cause you to remember something that you may have forgotten.</p> <p>or</p> <p>Any statement that indicates that one of your senses can unlock a memory.</p>	

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Activity 2

The word and phrases that are bold are signal example words. All examples have been crossed out.

The senses you possess are a way for your brain to monitor what's going on outside. When you receive a particular sensory input, **meaning** ~~one of your senses is stimulated~~, that sense will send a signal to your brain telling the information it just received. **For example**, ~~when Proust tasted his cookie, the sense receptors on his tongue sent a message to his brain telling it how the madeleine tasted~~. The messages are signals transmitted along nerve cells until they reach the brain. When the brain receives these signals, it processes them and controls the body's reaction to them. Sense receptors react to many different types of inputs, **including** ~~electromagnetic, mechanical, and chemical~~. **In Proust's case**, ~~his tongue was sensing the chemical makeup of the cookie and its mechanical properties, such as the cookie's hardness and brittleness~~.

Passage without elaborations:

The senses you possess are a way for your brain to monitor what's going on outside. When you receive a particular sensory input, that sense will send a signal to your brain telling the information it just received. The messages are signals transmitted along nerve cells until they reach the brain. When the brain receives these signals, it processes them and controls the body's reaction to them. Sense receptors react to many different types of inputs.

Main idea: This paragraph is about the way brain receives signals from our senses and then controls our body's reaction to these signals.