

Main Ideas

What you need to know in order to select the main idea:

A complete paragraph always contains a main idea, a statement that indicates who or what the paragraph is about and what is important about that topic. The main idea can be the first sentence in the paragraph, a sentence preceded by introductory comments, a concluding sentence, or implied. When main ideas are implied, the reader is required to read the related, supporting details and formulate a statement indicating the main point.

In longer selections consisting of several paragraphs, the main idea is a summary statement of the main ideas of the separate paragraphs. In chapter-length textbook sections, clues may point to main ideas. Introductory sections, different colored ink used for main points, main points placed in boxes on chapter pages, illustrations showing the relationship of main ideas, and summary sections.

Instructors often give you clues regarding the main ideas when they use words like

Today I will discuss
An important feature
The chief reason...
It's important to know that
There are five steps to this process as follows...
To summarize...

Effective selection of main ideas:

- Well-organized and concise lecture notes
- Accurate predictions of likely test questions
- Summary sheets showing the main points relating to a topic
- Distinctly marked pages in textbook noting main ideas, major support statements, terms and their definitions, and items in lists.

Ineffective selection of main ideas:

- Magic marker highlights on entire sections within reading assignments,
- No written clues regarding what to study for a test.
- Unreadable and messy lecture notes showing a collection of one line comments
- Incomplete summary sheets showing little relationship between the textbook and lecture notes regarding a topic.

Source: Ellis, David B. *Becoming a Master Student*. Rapid City, South Dakota: College Survival, Inc., 1993.