1.7: Unstated Main Idea

Finding the unstated main idea is very similar to finding the main idea, or topic sentence, of a paragraph. The difference is that the main idea is not a sentence that you find in the paragraph or reading selection; it is unstated or implied. You might be asking why a reading selection would not contain a stated main idea, but the majority of college textbooks do not contain stated main ideas. The material is presented with enough clues that you can figure out the main idea of the text.

In order to understand how to find an unstated main idea, let’s review some basic steps. When you are finding a stated main idea or topic sentence, you look for the topic. The topic is a few words (may be even one word) that may be repeated throughout the passage. You find the topic by asking “who” or “what” the passage is about. Once you have determined the topic, you move on to asking yourself what the author is saying about the topic. When the main idea or topic sentence is stated, you are looking for a sentence that tells what point the author is making; however, when the main idea or topic sentence is unstated, you must come up with a sentence that states the author’s point. Let’s look at an example.

Carefully I pulled my jacket more tightly around my body. Even the thick sweatshirt I was wearing didn’t help. The tip of my nose was cold, and my fingers felt too frozen to type. I looked longingly at my portable heater but didn’t want to use it because I was afraid I’d leave it on by accident. Sighing to myself, I began to type but stopped when I could almost see my breath in the air. “Enough for today,” I said to myself. “I’m headed home.”

Let’s start with the first question: the topic. Who or what is the paragraph about?

Look at the word choice. The word “cold” is used once, but what picture is the author painting? If you said that the topic was a cold office, you’d be right. There are several clues: warm clothing, cold nose, frozen fingers, breath in the air.

Now, let’s ask ourselves the key question: What is the author saying about the cold office? It appears that the author is
cold enough that he/she chooses not to stay long in the cold office, so put that idea into a sentence.

The office is too cold for anyone (or the author) to stay very long.

**Remember, main ideas must be expressed in a complete sentence, so a fragment will not work when you are constructing the main idea or topic sentence.** In addition, you need to test your sentence. Is it general enough to include the points of the paragraph? Main ideas/topic sentences are general sentences as opposed to specific ones. Is it well written? Again, it must be a complete sentence. Our sentence appears to capture the point the author was making, so we have successfully created a main idea from a paragraph whose main idea was unstated.

Finding the unstated main idea takes some practice. In your textbooks, you will need to read slowly and carefully in order to fully grasp the author’s point. When you write your essays, you will always state the main idea or topic sentence in your essays, but you need to be aware that your college textbooks will not always have the main idea or topic sentence stated for you. If you don’t see a general sentence that sums up the points of the paragraph or reading selection, then you will need to visualize or even write down the main idea because it is unstated.

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**References**

- Dr. Lydia Postell