

**COMPETENCY 1.0 UNDERSTAND THE MAIN IDEA AND SUPPORTING DETAILS IN WRITTEN MATERIAL****Skill 1.1 Identify the explicit and implicit main idea of a paragraph or passage**

The main idea of a passage or paragraph is the basic message, idea, point concept, or meaning that the author wants to convey to you, the reader. Understanding the main idea of a passage or paragraph is the key to understanding the more subtle components of the author's message. The main idea is what the author writes about a topic or subject. Once you have identified the basic message, you will have an easier time answering other questions that test critical skills.

Main ideas are either *stated* or *implied*. A *stated main idea* is explicit—directly expressed in a sentence or two in the paragraph or passage. The overall reading selection *suggests an implied main idea*. In the first case, you need not pull information from various points in the paragraph or passage in order to form the main idea because the author already states it. If the author implies the main idea, however, you must formulate, in your own words, a main idea statement by condensing the overall message contained in the material itself.

**Skill 1.2 Identify the statement or statements that best expresses the main idea of a paragraph or passage**

**Practice Question: Read the following passage and select an answer**

*Sometimes too much of a good thing can become a very bad thing indeed. In an earnest attempt to consume a healthy diet, dietary supplement enthusiasts sometimes overdose. Vitamin C, for example, long thought to help people ward off cold viruses, is currently being studied for its possible role in warding off cancer and other diseases that cause tissue degeneration. Unfortunately, an overdose of vitamin C—more than 10,000 mg—on a daily basis can cause nausea and diarrhea. Calcium supplements, commonly taken by women, are helpful in warding off osteoporosis. More than just a few grams a day, however, can lead to stomach upset and even kidney and bladder stones. Niacin, proven useful in reducing cholesterol levels, can be dangerous in large doses to those who suffer from heart problems, asthma, or ulcers.*

**The main idea expressed in this paragraph is**

- A. supplements taken in excess can be a bad thing indeed
- B. dietary supplement enthusiasts sometimes overdose
- C. vitamins can cause nausea, diarrhea, and kidney or bladder stones
- D. people who take supplements are preoccupied with their health

**Answer:** Answer A is a paraphrase of the first sentence and provides a general framework for the rest of the paragraph—excess supplement intake is bad. The rest of the paragraph discusses the consequences of taking too many vitamins. Options B and C refer to major details and Option D introduces the idea of preoccupation, which is not included in this paragraph.

### **Skill 1.3 Recognize ideas that support, illustrate, or elaborate on the main idea of a paragraph or passage**

Supporting details are examples, facts, ideas, illustrations, cases, and anecdotes used by a writer to explain, expand upon, and develop the more general main idea. The nature of the covered topic determines a writer's choice of supporting materials. Supporting details are specifics that relate directly to the main idea. Writers select and shape material according to their purposes. An advertisement writer seeking to persuade the reader to buy a particular running shoe, for instance, will emphasize only the positive characteristics of the shoe for advertisement copy. A columnist for a running magazine, on the other hand, might list the good and bad points about the same shoe in an article recommending appropriate shoes for different kind of runners. Both major details (those that directly support the main idea), and minor details (those that provide interesting, but not always essential, information) help create a well-written and fluid passage.

In the following paragraph, the sentences in **bold print** provide a skeleton of a paragraph on the benefits of recycling. The sentences in bold are generalizations, which by themselves do not explain the need to recycle. The sentences in *italics* add details to SHOW the general points in bold. Notice how the supporting details help you understand the necessity for recycling.

**While one day recycling may become mandatory in all states, right now it is voluntary in many communities.** *The amount of material recycled amazes those of us who participate in recycling.* **For many communities, the blue-box recycling program has had an immediate effect.** *By just recycling glass, aluminum cans, and plastic bottles, we have reduced the volume of disposable trash by one-third, thus extending the useful life of local landfills by over a decade. Imagine the difference if those dramatic results were achieved nationwide.* **The amount of reusable items we thoughtlessly dispose of is staggering.** *For example, Americans dispose of enough steel everyday to supply Detroit car manufacturers for three months. Additionally, we dispose of enough aluminum annually to rebuild the nation's air fleet. These statistics, available from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), should encourage all of us to watch what we throw away.* **Clearly, recycling in our homes and in our communities directly improves the environment.**

Notice how the author's supporting examples enhance the message of the paragraph and relate to the author's thesis noted above. If you only read the boldface sentences, you have a glimpse at the topic. The author, however, develops this paragraph of illustration through numerous details creating specific images: *reduced the volume of disposable trash by one-third, extended the useful life of local landfills by over a decade, enough steel everyday to supply Detroit car manufacturers for three months, enough aluminum to rebuild the nation's air fleet.* If the writer had merely written a few general sentences, as those shown in boldface, you would not fully understand the vast amount of trash involved in recycling or the positive results of current recycling efforts.

## COMPETENCY 2.0 IDENTIFY A WRITER'S PURPOSE AND POINT OF VIEW

### Skill 2.1 Recognize a writer's expressed or implied purpose for writing

An essay is an extended discussion of a writer's point of view about a particular topic. The author can support this point of view by using such writing modes as examples, argument and persuasion, and analysis or comparison/contrast. In any case, a good essay is clear, coherent, well organized, and fully developed.

When an author sets out to write a passage, he/she usually has a purpose for doing so. That purpose may be simply to give information that might be interesting or useful to a reader. It may be to persuade the reader to a point of view or to move the reader to act in a particular way; it may be to tell a story; or it may be to describe something in such a way that an experience becomes available to the reader through one of the five senses. Following are the primary devices for expressing a particular purpose in a piece of writing:

- **Basic expository writing** simply gives information not previously known about a topic or is used to explain or define one. This type of writing presents facts, examples, statistics, cause and effect, direct tone, objective rather than subjective delivery, and non-emotional information in a formal manner.
- **Descriptive writing** centers on person, place, or object, using concrete and sensory words to create a mood or impression and arranging details in a chronological or spatial sequence.
- **Narrative writing** uses an incident, anecdote, or related series of events to develop its story. Chronology, the five W's, topic sentence, and conclusion are essential ingredients.
- **Persuasive writing** implies the writer's ability to select vocabulary and arrange facts and opinions in such a way as to direct the actions of the listener/reader. Persuasive writing may incorporate exposition and narration as they illustrate the main idea.
- **Journalistic writing** is theoretically free of author bias. It is essential when relaying information about an event, person, or thing that it be factual and objective. Provide students with an opportunity to examine newspapers and create their own. Many newspapers offer free educational programs to schools.

**Skill 2.2 Evaluate the appropriateness of written material for a specific purpose or audience**

See Skill 2.1.

**Skill 2.3 Recognize the likely effect on an audience of a writer's language choices using the content, word choice, and phrasing of a passage to determine a writer's purpose or point of view**

Tailoring language for a particular **audience** is an important skill. Someone writing for a business associate will certainly write differently than when writing for a younger sibling. Not only would the vocabularies be different, but the writer would also need to adjust the formality/informality of the discourse.

The things to be aware of in determining what the language should be for a particular audience, then, hinge on two things: **word choice** and **formality/informality**. The most formal language does not use contractions or slang. The most informal language will probably feature a more casual use of common sayings and anecdotes. Formal language will use longer sentences and will not sound like a conversation. The most informal language will use shorter sentences—not necessarily simple sentences—but shorter constructions and may sound like a conversation.

In both formal and informal writing, there exists a **tone**, the writer's attitude toward the material and/or readers. Tone may be playful, formal, intimate, angry, serious, ironic, outraged, baffled, tender, serene, or depressed, etc. Both the subject matter and the audience dictate the overall tone of a piece of writing. Tone also relates to the actual words that make up the document, as we attach affective meanings, called **connotations**, to words. Gaining this conscious control over language makes it possible to use language appropriately in various situations and to evaluate its uses in literature and other forms of communication. By evoking the proper responses from readers/listeners, we can prompt them to take action. The following questions are an excellent way to assess the audience and tone of a given piece of writing.

1. Who is your audience? (friend, teacher, business person, or someone else)
2. How much does this person know about you and/or your topic?
3. What is your purpose? (to prove an argument, to persuade, to amuse, to register a complaint, to ask for a raise, etc)
4. What emotions do you have about the topic? (nervous, happy, confident, angry, sad, no feelings at all)
5. What emotions do you want to register with your audience? (anger, nervousness, happiness, boredom, interest)
6. What persona do you need to create in order to achieve your purpose?
7. What choice of language is best suited to achieving your purpose with your particular subject? (slang, friendly but respectful, formal)
8. What emotional quality do you want to transmit to achieve your purpose (matter of fact, informative, authoritative, inquisitive, sympathetic, or angry) and to what degree do you want to express this tone?

## **Skill 2.4 Recognize how intended audience and purpose affect an author's choice of style and content**

The **tone** of a written passage is the author's attitude toward the subject matter. The tone (mood, feeling) is revealed through the qualities of the writing itself and is a direct product of such stylistic elements as language and sentence structure. The tone of the written passage is much like a speaker's voice; instead of spoken words, however, it is the product of words on a page.

Often, writers have an emotional stake in the subject, and their purpose, either explicitly or implicitly, is to convey those feelings to the reader. In such cases, the writing is generally subjective, that is, it stems from opinions, judgments, values, ideas, and feelings. Both sentence structure (syntax) and word choice (diction) are instrumental tools in creating tone.

We may think of tone generally as positive, negative, or neutral. Below is a statement about snakes that demonstrates this.

*Many species of snakes live in Florida. Some of those species, both poisonous and non-poisonous, have habitats that coincide with those of human residents of the state.*

The voice of the writer in this statement is neutral. The sentences are declarative (not exclamations or fragments or questions). The adjectives are few and nondescript—*many, some, poisonous* (balanced with *non-poisonous*). Nothing much in this brief paragraph would alert the reader to the feelings of the writer about snakes. The paragraph has a neutral, objective, detached, impartial tone.

Then again, if the writer's attitude toward snakes involves admiration or even affection, the tone would generally be positive.

*Florida's snakes are a tenacious bunch. When they find their habitats invaded by humans, they cling to their home territories as long as they can, as if vainly attempting to fight off the onslaught of the human hordes.*

An additional message emerges in this paragraph—the writer quite clearly favors snakes over people. The writer uses adjectives such as *tenacious* to describe his/her feelings about snakes. The writer also humanizes the reptiles, making them brave, beleaguered creatures. Obviously, the writer is more sympathetic to snakes than to people in this paragraph.

If the writer's attitude toward snakes involves active dislike and fear, then the tone would also reflect that attitude by being negative.

*Countless species of snakes, some more dangerous than others, still lurk on the urban fringes of Florida's towns and cities. They will often invade domestic spaces, terrorizing people and their pets.*

Here, obviously, the snakes are the villains. They *lurk*, they *invade*, and they *terrorize*. We might describe the tone of this paragraph as distressed about snakes.

In the same manner, a writer can use language to portray characters as good or bad. A writer uses positive and negative adjectives, as seen above, to convey the manner of a character.

