

Main Idea

Name: _____

All well-written paragraphs have one main idea or topic. The main idea is generally found in what is called the topic sentence. This is usually the first sentence in the paragraph, and all other sentences in the paragraph relate to it.

Note-taking

Good note-taking is based on understanding the main idea and being able to paraphrase it (that is, write it in your own words).

One way to find the main idea is to look for the most common word used. Usually, that is what the topic is about.

In the example that follows, the most common words are highlighted.



The **platypus** is one of the oddest animals on the planet. Being a mammal that lays an egg like a reptile makes the **platypus** an unusual creature. With a large rubber-like bill similar in shape to a duck's, the **platypus** can dig for small creatures in the water. It has webbed feet. The **platypus** is a very fast swimmer with a sleek, furry body.

The word **platypus** is the most common word used. This paragraph is about the platypus. The main idea is describing the platypus.

1. Read the paragraphs that follow and look for the most common words used. Then, in the space beneath the paragraph, write what the main idea is. Look up any words you do not know the meaning of.

a. Hebrew literature speaks of strange energy sources and of lamps that lit themselves. There are accounts of stones that shone in the dark and were used on ships at night. These stories were thought to be imagined until recent times, when certain rocks were found that could be treated to radiate light. Sailors who traveled to South America in the 1800s told of strange, orb-like lamps hung by natives in the jungles. These lamps were able to remain alight all the time, using an unknown source of energy.

Common word: _____

Main idea: _____

b. A Neanderthal skull found 65 feet below the surface of the ground in 1921 in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) opened up a mystery. A high-speed object, similar to a bullet, had pierced the skull. This was curious, because it was found that this injury could only have happened at the moment of death and not later. Whoever fired the deadly bullet must have fired it many thousands of years ago, when Neanderthals were alive. A forensic scientist positively stated that the damage to the Rhodesian man's skull "could not have been caused by anything but a bullet."

Common word: _____

Main idea: _____

Note-taking (cont.)

c. In the short space of 20 years, modern societies have become totally dependent on computers. Every facet of our lives is affected by computers. They are part of our homes, schools, and offices. Computers now run our banks, traffic lights, telephones, cars, and communication industries. A break in the supply of electricity for any length of time brings chaos to the computers that depend on it. The question is: Have we become too dependent on this marvelous invention?

Common word: _____

Main idea: _____

d. The Siberian tiger is the largest member of the cat family. These huge, territorial tigers live in Siberia and Manchuria in mountainous conifer forests at elevations up to 3,000 feet. The Siberian tiger has been hunted for its skin and starved as its habitat has been destroyed, so now there are fewer than 500 of these magnificent Siberian tigers left.

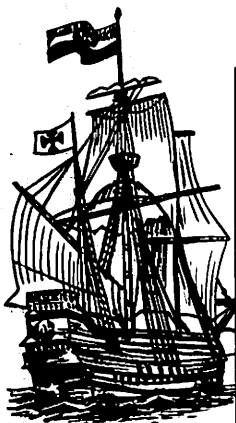
Common word: _____

Main idea: _____

e. The first "modern" deep-sea research was conducted back in the 1700s, when French scientist Pierre Simon de Laplace calculated the average depth of the Atlantic Ocean. His figure of just under 13,000 feet was found later to be quite accurate. When people began laying cables along the ocean bottoms, they had to know how deep they were and what was down there. Even at great depths, life exists. Researchers in 1864 discovered a crinoid (a feathery, plant-like animal) nearly 10,000 feet down. It was from 1870 on that the pace of deep-sea exploration quickened. For example, the British government sent out the Challenger expedition in 1872. For four years, it investigated the world's ocean depths, discovering thousands of new marine plants and animals.

Common word: _____

Main idea: _____



f. Francis Drake was a privateer (a civilian captain employed by the government to fight a war), a skilled navigator, and one of the world's best-known sailors. His enemies feared him so much they nicknamed him "El Draque," which means "The Dragon." Several times, he led fleets into the Caribbean Sea—the Spanish Main—as well as attacked the city of Cádiz, in Spain. He was there when the Spanish Armada was defeated in 1588. Drake was the first Englishman to circumnavigate the world on the Golden Hind. It is said that not even the great English seaman Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson played a more important part in English history than Drake.

Common word: _____

Main idea: _____