

## The Stated Main Idea - Tutor Hints

### What is the main idea?

A general statement about the paragraph (or reading selection). The *main idea* is a sentence that provides the subject for discussion; it is the topic sentence. It is usually supported by a list of details. If you can tell what the *supporting details* have in common, you can discover the main idea.

#### Example 1:

<sup>1</sup>There are many kinds of unusual plants. <sup>2</sup>Cactuses, for instance, can survive in the great heat of the desert sun at noon and in the bitter cold of the desert at night. <sup>3</sup>Instead of regular leaves, they have needles that serve as a defense against hungry animals. <sup>4</sup>Their stems are full of hollow cells that store enough water to last for months. <sup>5</sup>These features make the cactus a remarkable plant, able to live in one of nature's harshest environments.

*What is the main idea of this passage?*

#### Helpful hints:

- A reading selection is likely to have three kinds of sentences: a *main idea*, *supporting details*, and sometimes a general or catchy *introduction*. The *main idea* can be found *anywhere* among these.
- Read the paragraph out loud to yourself, if possible, and think...*what* or *who* the paragraph is about.
- The *main idea* is usually general—though only general enough to encompass the list of *details*. It will rarely contain specific information such as dates, numbers, and examples.
- The *main idea* will **sometimes** contain clue words that give a name to the list of *supporting details*:
  - "There are several kinds of..."
  - "Use the following steps to..."
  - "For these reasons..."
  - "There are several ways to..."
- Contrasting transition words like "However", "But", and "Yet" often begin the *main idea*, as in the following example.

#### Example 2:

<sup>1</sup>You may think golf is difficult. <sup>2</sup>However, there are several easy ways to improve your golf score. <sup>3</sup>First, try holding the club with your...

*Sentence 1 is a general introduction; it is not the main idea because the author does not give details about golf being "difficult." Sentence 2 is the main idea because a list of details supports it. The word however is the contrasting transition that shifts the reader's focus from the introduction to the main idea.*

## **Answer Key**

Example 1: Sentence 5 is the main idea: "These features make the cactus a remarkable plant, able to live in one of nature's harshest environments."