Selecting Main Ideas

Efficient reading and underlining depends on being able to pick out the main ideas or paragraphs from a larger unit. To do this, you must be able to know the function of each sentence and what all the sentences together tell.

**Topic**

Every paragraph contains a topic sentence - which is usually but not always placed at the beginning of the paragraph. This topic sentence tells what the paragraph is about. All other sentences support or explain or define that topic sentence.

**Formulating the Main ideas**

Knowing the topic sentence you can then compose the main idea sentence of a paragraph (or a larger unit of writing), which will summarize the paragraph. It should include the thought of the topic sentence and the thought of any ideas which expand or qualify that topic.

When writing the main idea sentence, phrase it in your own words rather than those of the author. Be sure your sentence is not too general, containing more than it should or going beyond the information in the paragraph. Watch also that your sentence is not too specific, overlooking important points.

**Directions.** The first two exercises provide practice in identifying main ideas. Read each paragraph, then mark or classify the statements, which follow using the key below:

1. **The MAIN IDEA (M)** - A statement that summarizes a paragraph or other unit of writing. It includes the thought of the topic sentence and the thought of any ideas that expand or qualify that topic. When writing a main ideas sentence phrase it in your own words rather than those of the author.

2. **TOO GENERAL (G)** - The statement contains more than it should and goes beyond the information in the paragraph.

3. **TOO SPECIFIC (S)** - The statement mentions only one idea or detail that is in the paragraph. Important points have been overlooked.

4. **IRRELEVANT (I)** - The statement is about some aspect of the topic not discussed in the paragraph.

**PARAGRAPH 1**

Another device intended to safeguard liberty was the separation of powers. The new state constitutions usually provided for separate executive, legislative, and judicial departments, each clothed with its own authority and able to carry on its functions independently of the others. The purpose was to throw obstacles in the way of a seizure of power. An individual or a faction, though supreme in one branch, could not legally override the others and bring all part of the government under single unified control.

**Statements:**

- **Ex 1:** The state constitutions provide for separate executive, legislative, and judicial departments. (M-G-S-1)
- **Ex 2:** The writers of the state constitutions were fearful of the seizure of power by an individual or a faction. (M-G-S-1)
- **Ex 3:** A safeguard of liberty in state constitutions is the separation of power to prevent seizure of control by an individual or a faction. (M-G-S-1)
- **Ex 4:** The state constitutions provided for safeguard of liberty. (M-G-S-1)
PARAGRAPH 2

The cell as a whole is bounded by a cell membrane. Composed predominantly of protein and fatty substances, this important structure is far more than a passive outer skin. It is an active, highly selective, semi-permeable membrane, which regulates the entry and exit of materials into and out of a cell. The membrane, therefore, plays a critical role in all cell functions, since directly or indirectly every cell function necessitates absorption of molecules from the exterior and/or excretion of molecules from the interior.

Statements:
Ex. 1: Plant cells secrete cell walls around their plasma membranes. (M-G-S-1)

Ex. 2: The cell membrane plays a critical role in cell functions by regulating the entry and exit of molecules. (M-G-S-1)

Ex. 3: The cell membrane is very important. (M-G-S-1)

Ex. 4: The cell as a whole is bounded by a cell membrane composed predominantly of protein and fatty substances. (M-G-S-1)

Answers
Ex. 1: (I) There is no mention of this fact in the paragraph.
Ex. 2: (W) Main Idea.
Ex. 3: (G) This is an extremely vague statement. It does not say why the membrane is important.
Ex. 4: (S) This statement does not deal with the more important role of the cell membrane in the functions of the cell.
Directions- In the next, two exercises, read the paragraph end then write down your own version of the main idea.

PARAGRAPH 3

Moonlight is really sunlight reflected to the earth from the surface of the moon. Moonlight often seem very bright to us. Looking over a landscape illuminated by the full moon, we exclaim, "Why, it is as bright as daylight." Actual measurements claim that moonlight is only 1/400,000 as bright as sunlight. Owing to it’s irregular surface, the moon makes a poor reflector, reflecting only about seven percent of the sun’s light that falls on it. The full moon looks bright in the sky at night, but when we see it during the day while the sun is shining, it’s disk is so faint that we might easily mistake it for a patch of a cloud.

Your statement of the main idea:

1. Your main idea statement should include the point made in the opening sentence.
   _______my statement does _______my statement does not

2. Your statement should also include the reason for the smaller amount of actual reflection as a supporting detail.
   _______my statement does _______my statement does not

3. Your statement should not include the actual measurement statistic of relative brightness because it is too specific.
   _______my statement does _______my statement does not

4. Th. statement should be mostly in your own words, not those of the author.
   _______my statement does _______my statement does not

Evaluation: The following statement is an example of what the main idea might have been:

Moonlight is sunlight reflected to earth from the moon’s surface; but since the surface of the moon is irregular, only a small amount of the sun’s light is reflected.
A group is an aggregate of individuals which persists in time, which has one or more interests and activities in common, and which is organized, that is, some members lead, others follow, and informal procedures or formal rules and statutes control social relationships within it. A group may be small or large. It is not necessary that the membership is in close physical or social contact, but they must possess an awareness of common membership, and there must be reciprocity among them. They must, in other words, recognize one another, although in some cases this is done at a distance and without personal contact.

**Your Statement of the Main Idea:**

**Evaluation:** The following statement is an example of what the main idea might have been:

A group is an organized aggregate of individuals who have one or more interests or activities in common and who are aware of their common membership.