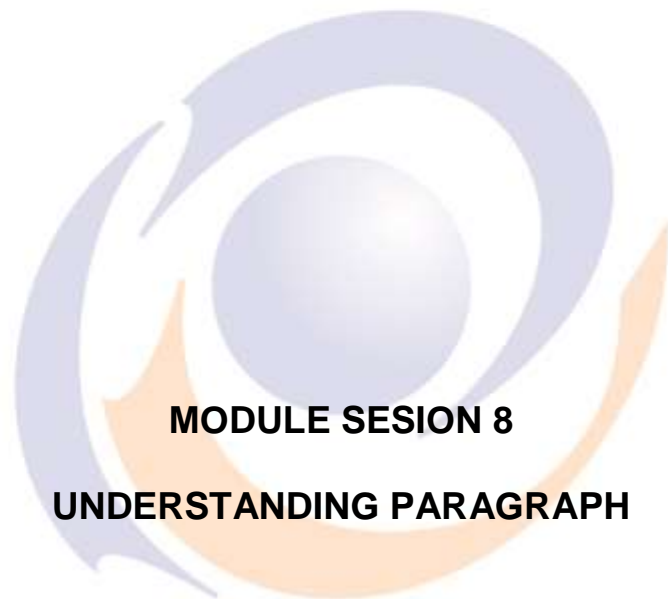




MODULE INTENSIVE READING
(PBI 221)



MODULE SESION 8
UNDERSTANDING PARAGRAPH

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English is a topic-centered language: a paragraph, or longer text, has a single main topic, and all the details relate to that topic. Writers in English almost always mention the topic at or near the beginning of a passage. Good readers look for the topic when they read.

Identifying the Topic of a Paragraph

The topic is the word or phrase that best describes what all of the sentences in the paragraph are about. Words relating to the topic are usually repeated several times in a paragraph. Looking for these words can help you focus on the topic.

Example:

Read the paragraph and underline the words that are repeated. Then write a topic that is not too specific or too general

In developing countries, poor people have suffered the most from shortages of clean water. There are several reasons for this. First, in many developing countries, the majority of houses in poor villages and urban slums are not yet served by a piped water system. People living in these places often have to walk many miles to find water and carry it home in jugs and plastic containers. Second, these people usually have few alternatives to the piped water supply. There may be water closer by in rivers or lakes, but this is often dangerously polluted. In poor areas, street vendors often sell water by the liter, but they often charge extremely high prices for water that is not always safe to drink.

Topic shortage of clean water in poor areas.

Topic Sentences

Paragraphs in English usually contain a topic sentence that lets the reader know what the paragraph is about. Although this sentence is usually near the beginning of the paragraph, it can also be found in the middle or at the end.

The first sentence of a paragraph is usually the topic sentence (sometimes the topic sentence can come later, but generally it is the first sentence). The topic sentence will give you the main idea of the entire paragraph. This sentence will not typically give you details, but it will tell you what information you can expect to see in the rest of the paragraph. For example, you may see this topic sentence: "Students should not wait until the night before a test to study." With this topic sentence, you know the following sentences will talk about this statement in more detail, and you can look for that information.

Supporting Sentences

After the topic sentence, you will have supporting sentences. In these sentences, the writer will go into more detail to explain the topic in the first sentence. You may find statistics or data to back up a statement, for example. You may see the following topic and supporting sentences: "Students should not wait until the night before a test to study. This type of studying does not allow students to retain information well and may also increase anxiety about the test. A student who crams for a test may not perform as well as a student who plans ahead." These supporting sentences aim to prove the claim made in the topic sentence.

Last Sentence

The last sentence, called the concluding sentence, will give a brief summary of the entire paragraph. You may have a paragraph with a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence that looks like this: “Students should not wait until the night before a test to study. This type of studying does not allow students to retain information well and may also increase anxiety about the test. A student who crams for a test may not perform as well as a student who plans ahead. Therefore, cramming for a test may not only increase anxiety about the test itself, but students who wait to study may receive lower test scores.” In this basic paragraph, you can see that the last sentence pulls important information from the supporting sentences.

Tips

If you have difficulty sifting through information, reading the topic sentence and concluding sentence will give you the main points contained in the paragraph. For details, you can then look at the supporting sentences. Reading in this way may result in a slower process, but may help you gather what you need to understand the information.

You might also want to look for trigger words that can help you identify upcoming information. In a topic sentence you might see, “There are two main reasons a student should study for a test early.” This signals you to look for two statements to support the idea. Other trigger words may include other numbers or words such as “first,” “next” or “in addition.” Watching for these and similar terms may help you identify the information you need to improve comprehension.

Missing topic sentences:

- a. Although the hydrological cycle produces clean water in the form of rain, it does not remove the pollutants that steadily build up in the oceans.
- b. New laws and regulations make it difficult for people to dump their trash into the oceans.
- c. The oceans have long served as a vast dumping ground for all kinds of waste.
- d. These are just a few of the problems caused by using the oceans as dumping grounds.
- e. Wastewater dumping is yet another major form of ocean pollution.
- f. Some pollutants in the ocean are not dumped there directly.

Main Ideas of Paragraphs

Main Idea

Understanding the main idea of a text

Understanding the main idea of a text is the most important academic reading skill. After you have read an academic text you will need to know the main idea to understand the text.

What is the main idea of a paragraph?

The main idea is the most important idea in the paragraph. It is a fact or opinion. The main idea is usually the first or second sentence in a paragraph. This sentence is called the topic sentence. All the other sentences support the topic sentence. They are details. They are examples or explanations. They provide evidence to support the main idea.

Keys to main idea

- It is the most important and general point in the paragraph.
- It is a fact or opinion.
- It is usually the first or second sentence in a paragraph or second sentence,
- It is supported by detail sentences that say more about the main idea. The supporting sentences give examples and explanations.
- It is a complete sentence, not a question.

Examples of main idea

Here are five short paragraphs. The main idea or topic sentence is shown in bold. The other sentences are supporting sentences. The other sentences provide details.

Ferraris are fast. They can go from 0 kph to 100 kph in just a few seconds. They can get you to a place very quickly.

Ahmed loves fruit. He eats fruit every day. He especially loves apples and oranges. He has never tasted fruit he didn't like.

Bananas are healthy. They contain vitamins and minerals. There is no fat in a banana. They release energy slowly, which is good for the body. Eat a banana every day to help stay healthy.

Reading widely will improve your English. It will improve your reading skills, your vocabulary and your grammar. Read easy texts, ones that are at your level. Read stories and articles that are interesting. Read for fun. If you do, your English will become stronger.

Exercise is good for your heart. Jogging and swimming and other such activities are good for your heart. Getting regular exercise can help you have a healthier heart. Regular physical activity raises healthy HDL cholesterol levels and reduces unhealthy LDL cholesterol and triglycerides. It also lowers blood pressure, burns body fat, and lowers blood sugar levels — all of which benefit heart health.

Topic sentences and main ideas

In addition to stating the topic, most topic sentences also tell the writer's main idea, or in other words, the idea that the writer wants to express about the topic. To explain the idea, the writer includes several supporting details in the paragraph and these details are more specific than the main idea.

Example

Working with another student, read the paragraph and underline the topic sentence. Choose the best main idea statement below.

The global demand for water (estimated at about 5 billion cubic feet per year) has tripled since 1950. One reason for the increased demand for water is the rapid growth in population. Each person on earth consumes, on average, 10 million gallons of water in a lifetime! More people means a need for more water for agricultural and household use. A second reason for the increased consumption of water is the rapid development of complex technology. Factories and food production facilities cannot

function without water. Power-generating facilities also use vast amounts of water to make the steam that is needed to run the turbines and cool the system.

Main idea:

- a. More people means a need for more water for agricultural and household use.
- b. Factories and food production facilities cannot function without water.
- c. The global demand for water has tripled since 1950.

The main idea is choice c. It states the topic and the general idea that the writer explains about the topic. Choices a and b are details about the topic.

Inferring the Main Idea

In some paragraphs, the topic sentence may not state the complete main idea. The topic may be stated in one sentence, and the writer's idea about the topic may be expressed in another sentence or in several sentences in the paragraph. In this case, the reader must combine ideas from several sentences to infer the complete main idea.

Note: To make sure that it is really expressing a complete idea, the main idea statement should always be stated in a complete sentence with a subject and verb.

Connecting Ideas in Paragraphs

Understanding a paragraph—or a longer passage—often involves more than just identifying the topic and main idea. It is also necessary to understand the way writers in English guide the reader through the logic of their ideas or show the connections between ideas.

Pronouns as Connectors

Pronouns often function as connecting words within a sentence or among different sentences. Some of the pronouns that can be used this way are:

- Personal pronouns—he, it, they, him, us, etc.
- Possessive pronouns—his, her, our, their, etc.
- Demonstrative pronouns—this, that, these, those
- Relative pronouns—which, who, where, whose, etc.

Pronouns are used to refer to a noun or noun phrase that has already been mentioned. (A noun phrase is a group of words that functions as a noun in the sentence.) This noun or noun phrase is called the referent. In order to understand what you read, you need to be able to identify the referent for each pronoun. A good reader does this automatically

Example:

Read the following paragraph, the main idea statement, and the list of pronouns and referents below. Working with another student, circle the pronouns, underline the referents, and draw an arrow from each pronoun to its referent. The first one is done for you.

Working Women

One of the most significant economic trends in the United States in the last half century has been the sharp increase in the number of women in paid employment. This trend is commonly seen as the result of various sociological developments. First, women are no longer bound to their traditional role of homemaker, thanks to smaller families and labor-saving

household devices. There has also been a strong demand for women in the job market, where the range of opportunities for them is continually expanding. Furthermore, women are generally earning more than in the past, which means they can afford to pay for child care and help with household chores.

Main idea: The number of women in paid employment has increased in the last half century.

Pronouns	Referents
This	Increase in number of women in paid employment
There	Women
Where	The job market
Them	Women
Which	Women are generally earning more

Transition Words and Phrases as Connectors

Writers also show connections between ideas by using transition (connecting) words or phrases. These words help the reader to follow the logic of the writer's thinking.

Some common transition words and phrases			
Also	Especially	In fact	soon
as a result	Finally	in other words	such as
as well as	First	in particular	that is
at the same time	For Example	instead	then
at this point	For instance	in the same way	thus
at times	For this reason	likewise	whereas
before long	Furthermore	now	
but	However	similarly	

Thinking in English

In these exercises you will practice what you have learned so far about paragraphs. The last sentence in each paragraph is incomplete. In order to choose the best completion, you need to understand the main idea and how all the ideas in the paragraph are connected.

Example:

Read the incomplete paragraph and write the main idea. Then decide which ending best fits the logic of the paragraph.

The wine industry in the Burgundy region of France has proved to be an unexpected source of data about the history of climate change. From the Middle Ages until the twentieth century, churches in Burgundy were central to social, cultural, and even economic activity. They also often functioned as a bureaucratic center, holding records of all aspects of town life, including winemaking. Thus, every year careful note was made of a key date in the local agricultural calendar, the first day of the grape harvest. And since grape harvest time is closely related to temperature, scientists have been able to reconstruct

- a. the medieval churches in northeastern Burgundy.
- b. medieval winemaking methods in Burgundy.
- c. climate data for Burgundy for the years after 2003.
- d. summer temperatures in Burgundy from 1370 to 2003.

Main idea: The wine industry in the Burgundy region of France has proved to be an unexpected source of data about the history of climate change.

Tips For Paragraph Comprehension

Often, standardized tests make use of paragraph comprehension in ascertaining a test-taker's skills. Questions might be posed about a detail within the paragraph, about context and word meaning, inference, or a summary of the paragraph. Whether reading for the purpose of a test or otherwise, there are certain steps you can take to increase your level of comprehension.

Look for the Main Point

Read the paragraph over quickly, but do so with the main point in mind. Ask yourself what is the main point of the paragraph. To determine whether you've made an accurate assessment of the main point, look for material supporting the main point. For example; if the main point of a paragraph is that the Boston Celtics are poised to win the next NBA Championship, then supporting material might include the statistics of key players, the position of the Eastern Conference and the position of the league overall. Often, the main point is the first sentence of the paragraph.

Understand the Type of Paragraph

Understanding the type of paragraph aids in comprehension and test-taking. Common paragraph types are narrating, describing, explaining a process, explaining with examples, comparing or contrasting, classifying, and defining. Gather an understanding of each type, and learn to recognize it. Such an understanding is especially important with questions that ask the author's purpose in the paragraph. They also aid in overall understanding.

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Keep Questions in Mind

If answering questions for a test, review your questions beforehand. A question might ask for a summary of the paragraph read. The key to the answer is in your main point. Other common questions ask about a specific detail, the answer of which may be found in your main point. Context and meaning questions ask about the specific use of a word within a sentence. Here, you must rely on your knowledge of synonyms. Inference questions are the ultimate test of comprehension, as they ask you to draw a conclusion based on your readings. To succeed, you must stay within the bounds of the passage and avoid speculation in your answers.

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