

LOCATING THE THEME

In order to understand a paragraph, whether easy or hard, a reader must be able to identify the topic or central theme. In an easy paragraph, the reader can immediately identify the central theme or topic with little or no conscious effort. In a difficult paragraph, however, a reader may have to analyze the paragraph for its central theme or topic to ensure understanding.

Below is an easy paragraph. Notice how easily the central theme or topic may be identified.

Crabs may have either a soft shell or a hard shell. The soft shell crabs are those that shed their shells now and then. Their skins do not have a chance to become hard. As they grow older, some do not shed for three or four years. Their shells become very hard.

Notice that the first sentence states the central theme or topic announcing the significance of the details which follow:

Crabs may have either a hard shell or a soft shell.

Thus, if the paragraph is well-written, the rest of it should add further information or details about the hardness or softness of crab shells.

The soft shell crabs are those that shed their shells now and then. Their skins do not have a chance to become hard. As they grow older, some do not shed for three or four years. Their shells become very hard.

As a result, the reader understands quite readily that the central theme is crabs shells. The reader can also identify, "Crabs may have either a soft shell or a hard shell." as the main idea and "crabs' shells" as the central theme or topic.

Analyze the following more difficult paragraph by looking for words that are repeated often in the space provided. Look for the central theme or topic.

Some of the most profound changes wrought by the computer will be in education. Here, the machine will do more than assist students to solve problems and to locate up-to-date information. It will fundamentally improve and enrich the entire learning process. The student's educational experience will be analyzed by the computer from the primary grades through university. Computer-based teaching machines, programmed and operated by teachers thoroughly trained in electronic data processing techniques, will instruct students at the rate best suited to each individual. The concept of mass education will give way to the concept of personal

tutoring, with the teacher and the computer working as a team. Computers will bring many new learning dimensions to the classroom. For example, they will simulate nuclear reactors and other complex or remote systems, enabling students to learn through a form of experience that could formerly be taught only in theory.

- Central Theme/Topic:
- a. computers in primary schools
 - b. computers in education
 - c. computers

You should have selected the central theme or topic as:
"computers in education."

If you had trouble identifying the central theme and topic, use the question and answer formula below:

- Q: What is the paragraph about?
 A: Computers

- Q: What does the paragraph say about computers?
 A. Computers will cause changes in education.

- Q: What proof is there that the paragraph is discussing computers and change in education?
 A. The key words of the paragraph or central theme or tapes, are referred to throughout the paragraph. The following chart illustrates this repetition:

KEY TOPIC OR CENTRAL THEME	COMPUTERS	CHANGE	EDUCATION
References in paragraph:	machine	do more than	assist students
	It	will improve	learning process
	computer	will be analyzed	educational experience
	computer based		teaching machine
	computer (and teacher)	will instruct	personal tutoring
	computers	will bring etc.	learning dimensions

If you had trouble with the last example, try the formula to help you find the central theme or topic in the following paragraph.

Birds are not the only creatures that migrate to warmer climates for the winter. The American monarch butterfly migrates south to Mexico in the autumn and returns northward in the spring. These butterflies have also flown vast distances across the Pacific Ocean to form colonies in Hawaii and Australia. Some monarch butterflies have flown even farther, eventually landing in Africa and Europe. Other moths and butterflies are known to travel over long distances, but only the monarch makes an annual round-trip.

- Central Theme/Topic:
- a. birds and butterflies
 - d. monarch butterfly migration
 - e. migration from the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii.

You should have identified monarch butterfly migration as the central theme or topic.

Now try one more example: Select the central theme or topic in the following paragraph.

Paper has a long history. Though there are many kinds of paper used all over the world today, for hundreds of years the knowledge of papermaking was restricted to a small part of the globe. The ancient Egyptians invented a type of paper from papyrus (reed) stalks, but paper similar to what is used today wasn't invented until A.D. 05, in China. There, the emperor's minister of public works, Ts'ai Lun, discovered a process for making paper from the inner bark of the mulberry tree. The Chinese later discovered that a quality paper could be made by pounding rags or hemp. Finally, in A.D. 751, the Arabs acquired the secrets of papermaking from some Chinese whom they had captured in battle. The Europeans were the last to use paper, finally obtaining it from the Arabs in Spain during the Crusades. The modern method of making paper from wood pulp was invented during the 1800s, and in terms of history, that invention is relatively new.

- Central Theme/Topic:
- a. paper products
 - b. Chinese paper
 - c. history of paper

You should have identified paper's history or the history of paper as the central theme or topic.

EXERCISE

Circle the central theme or topic for each paragraph.

1. The LSD state varies greatly according to the dosage, the personality of the user, and the conditions under which the drug is taken. Basically, it causes changes in sensation. Vision is most markedly altered. Changes in depth perception and the meaning of the perceived object are most frequently described. Illusions and hallucinations can occur. Thinking may become pictorial, and reverie states are common. Delusions are expressed. The sense of time and of self are strangely altered. Strong emotions may range from bliss, to horror, sometimes within a single experience.

Central Theme/Topic:

- a. drug use in America
- b. LSD state
- c. LSD

2. When we buy shoes, we pay money. When we sell labor services or a used car, we are paid money. We do not normally pay for shoes by giving up cigarettes, candy, or nails. Nor do we normally receive payment in such goods. We buy with money and sell for money because it is more economical and convenient. Imagine the problem of carrying around a sample of various goods to be used in exchange for other goods. We would have to guess what particular goods the various people with whom we might trade would want at the time we considered an exchange. We would tie up a larger portion of our wealth (and time and energy) in various goods destined for trading purposes than if there were a common medium of exchange.

Central Theme/Topic:

- a. money
- b. trading for products.
- c. convenience of money.

3. You may have heard the expression, "He got on his horse and went galloping off in all directions." The implication is that the person described is disorganized, a common reaction to stress. Frustrations, conflicts, and anxieties can become so great that an individual is no longer able to function effectively. He vacillates back and forth between one decision and another; he makes foolish errors on simple tasks; he forgets to do things that he normally never forgets. These are all forms of disorganization resulting from stress.

Central Theme/Topic:

- a. effects of stress.
- b. disorganization
- c. making decisions

4. Although the question has long since become purely academic, it is interesting to ask whether our Constitution was itself "constitutional" in the manner of its adoption. Delegates, without authority to do more than amend the Articles of Confederation and representing only twelve of the thirteen states, had brought forth a proposed new constitution. Amendments to the Articles required ratification by all the states before becoming effective. The Constitution was proclaimed as in effect after the ninth state had ratified; thus, at this point--and despite later additional ratifications--it was an unconstitutional constitution. Some writers have described the Constitutional Convention as marking the second American Revolution; others have termed it a coup d'etat engineered by conservative interests.

Central Theme/Topic: a. our constitution
 b. Article of Confederation
 c. unconstitutionality of our Constitution

5. Has the end to the feasible size reduction of computer circuitry been reached? Hardly. The boards of today will become the tiny chips of tomorrow. One scientist has speculated that . . .it may be possible to achieve the packing density currently obtained on a square inch throughout a cubic inch of material. The density of electronic components would then be "about a fourth the density of nerve cells in the human brain." Thus, it is expected that . . . central processors with the power of today's large computers will occupy the space of a shoebox!

Central Theme/Topic: a. computer power.
 b. computer circuitry
 c. size of computers

6. The crowning achievement of Jefferson's first administration was the purchase of Louisiana in 1803. In doubling the area of the United States, Jefferson provided an ample estate upon which his dream of an American agrarian democracy might be realized. He wished his country to remain, if possible, a land of small independent farmers. If land ever became scarce, the opportunity for future generations to remain economically independent might disappear. The purchase of Louisiana could postpone that day, Jefferson thought, for a thousand years.

Central Theme/Topic: a. buying land in America
 b. Jeffersons dram of an agrarain democracy
 c. purchase of Louisiana

7. And so they sailed for America---a little bank of disgruntled men, each with his own good reason for seeking the new land. Arne was tired of masters; he wanted to find work where he could live free from the fear of beatings. Olaf wanted a home in a land where he could worship God in his own fashion without any sheriff to tell him what to do. Willem's reason was a little one; he was tired of the scoldings of his wife. The fourth man, Oscar, had known many famines in his homeland, and, for him, this was a journey to find a fertile farm. The last man was Mancur, the builder. So long as there were trees to fell and settlers wanting homes, he knew that he would have a welcome.

Central Theme/Topic: a. Arne's guest
 b. America
 c. reasons for sailing to America

8. To the visitor from the hinterland who lands in midtown Manhattan, the impression is one of confusion, noise, dirt, and monumental indifference. "Is this," he asks, "the celebrated Mecca that annually draws businessmen, students, job-seekers, and tourists from every corner of the globe?" If he swiftly decides that "It's a nice place to visit, but..." he has failed to find New York's open sesame. The jade expert can find an emperor's collection of carvings in the Jade Room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artist can leisurely study a rare volume of William Blake's etchings in one of the specialized rooms of the Main Library or walk for years through the endless public and private galleries. The chess- player finds his friends at the Marshall Chess Club, the tired businessman his excitement at the Copa, the historian his archives at the Butler Library, and the Orientalist his confreres at Asia House. But New York's magic door will open only if the visitor arrives with a key.

Central Theme/Topic: a. visitors to Manhattan
 b. confusion in Manhattan
 c. New York's magic door.

9. The weather in the Aleutian Islands is undoubtedly the vilest in the world. Fog rests heavily on land and on the sea and riptides present a constant danger to shipping. Worst of all are the winds; a gentle breeze may blow up into a violent hurricane, stirring up seas so rough that ships take water down their smokestacks. Or a gust of wind may reverse itself completely within a few seconds, tearing up ships, planes, and buildings, and sending fear into the hearts of the people.

Central Theme/Topic: a. weather
 b. destruction by wind
 c. weather in the Aleutian Islands

10. An insect tries to escape through the windowpane, tries the same hopeless thing again and again, and does not try the next window, which is open and through which it could come into the room. A mouse may act more intelligently; caught in the trap, he tries to squeeze through between two bars, then between the next two bars, then between other bars; he varies his trials, and he explores various possibilities. A man is able or should be able, to vary his trials still more intelligently, to explore the various possibilities with more understanding, and to learn by his errors and shortcomings. "Try, try again" is popular advice. It is good advice. The insect, the mouse, and the man follow it; but if one follows it with more success than the others, it is because he varies his approach more intelligently.

- Central Theme/Topic:
- a. man's brain power
 - b. intelligence's effect on the trial and error method
 - c. animal acts of escape

ANSWER KEY

1. LSD State
2. the convenience of money
3. the effects of stress
4. unconstitutionality of our Constitution
5. size of computers
6. Jefferson's dream of an ararian democracy
7. reasons for sailing to America
8. visitors to Manhattan
9. weather in the Aleutian Islands
10. intelligence's effect on the trial and error method