**Finding the Main Idea**

Next, we are going to practice finding the main idea in a paragraph. To understand the difference between a main idea and the topic, imagine that you are listening to your friends talk about their pets. The TV is on, so all you can make out are the name of their pets. If someone asked you what the topic was, you would say “pets.” But because you couldn’t hear the whole thing, you didn’t understand the “main idea” was whose pet was the best.

The topic is very broad – the main idea is more specific. The sentences that follow in the paragraph offer examples or descriptions to illustrate or explain the main idea. We are going to be working on using a main idea to write topic sentences in the writing section of this module.

Here is an example from the reading for this week, *Scandal in Bohemia*.

**“To Sherlock Holmes she is always THE woman.** I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer--excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results.“

The main idea of this paragraph is the first sentence. The first sentence identifies the two characters that the rest of the paragraph is going to describe, and suggests at their relationship. Each sentence that follows either describes the woman, Sherlock Holmes, or how he felt about her or her effect on him.

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Here is another example from the same story, see if you can find the main idea:

One night--it was on the twentieth of March, 1888--I was returning from a journey to a patient (for I had now returned to civil practice), when my way led me through Baker Street. As I passed the well-remembered door, which must always be associated in my mind with my wooing, and with the dark incidents of the Study in Scarlet, I was seized with a keen desire to see Holmes again, and to know how he was employing his extraordinary powers. His rooms were brilliantly lit, and, even as I looked up, I saw his tall, spare figure pass twice in a dark silhouette against the blind. He was pacing the room swiftly, eagerly, with his head sunk upon his chest and his hands clasped behind him. To me, who knew his every mood and habit, his attitude and manner told their own story. He was at work again.

a. One night--it was on the twentieth of March, 1888--I was returning from a journey to a patient (for I had now returned to civil practice), when my way led me through Baker Street.

b. As I passed the well-remembered door, which must always be associated in my mind with my wooing, and with the dark incidents of the Study in Scarlet, I was seized with a keen desire to see Holmes again, and to know how he was employing his extraordinary powers

c. His rooms were brilliantly lit, and, even as I looked up, I saw his tall, spare figure pass twice in a dark silhouette against the blind.

d. He was pacing the room swiftly, eagerly, with his head sunk upon his chest and his hands clasped behind him.

The correct answer is a. The first sentence gives you the point-of-view, or who is the person explaining what is happening, and it lets you know that this person is going into a particular place. Each of the other sentences describes the place where he, Dr. Watson, entered, what it looked like, and who was in there.

B is not as strong a choice as a, because it refers to *Study in Scarlet* and Holmes’ powers, which are not described in the rest of the paragraph. Choice B is too specific to be the main idea of this paragraph. Choices c and d are not correct because they are describing Holmes’ actions, and his walking is not what the whole paragraph is about.

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Let’s try one more, read the following and select which one is the main idea from the list below:

“At three o'clock precisely I was at Baker Street, but Holmes had not yet returned. The landlady informed me that he had left the house shortly after eight o'clock in the morning. I sat down beside the fire, however, with the intention of awaiting him, however long he might be. I was already deeply interested in his inquiry, for, though it was surrounded by none of the grim and strange features which were associated with the two crimes which I have already recorded, still, the nature of the case and the exalted station of his client gave it a character of its own. Indeed, apart from the nature of the investigation which my friend had on hand, there was something in his masterly grasp of a situation, and his keen, incisive reasoning, which made it a pleasure to me to study his system of work, and to follow the quick, subtle methods by which he disentangled the most inextricable mysteries. So accustomed was I to his invariable success that the very possibility of his failing had ceased to enter into my head.”

a. At three o'clock precisely I was at Baker Street, but Holmes had not yet returned.

b. The landlady informed me that he had left the house shortly after eight o'clock in the morning.

c. I sat down beside the fire, however, with the intention of awaiting him, however long he might be

d. I was already deeply interested in his inquiry, for, though it was surrounded by none of the grim and strange features which were associated with the two crimes which I have already recorded, still, the nature of the case and the exalted station of his client gave it a character of its own.

The way to figure out that the answer this time is d, is to look at each sentence that follows and ask, does this refer back to the location, Baker Street? Do they refer back to the landlady? Do they refer back to Dr. Watson’s waiting? Or, do they refer back to the case? They both refer back to the current investigation, by talking about Holmes’ way of untangling mysteries, and that Watson’s belief that the investigation would be a success.

The introduction to this paragraph may have thrown you off so be careful to read through the entire paragraph each time, and look at each sentence and its role within the paragraph. Mostly the main idea comes right up front – but not always!