

LESSON 12 • OUTLINING & READING SKILLS

SELECTING MAIN IDEAS OF PARAGRAPHS

Textbook Page 12

The Main Idea of a Paragraph: A good title expresses the main idea of the entire paragraph—not just one interesting detail (too narrow) and not everything about the broader subject (too broad).

Directions: Read each paragraph carefully. Decide upon the best title from the three choices. **Circle the letter** (a, b, or c) of the one title that states the complete main idea.

PARAGRAPH 1

Archaeology & Early Humans

Findings in caves have given us many clues as to how ancient people lived. As people have dug through layers and layers of dust, they have found such things as cooking pots, stone axes, weapons, and stone needles which were used by cave dwellers thousands of years ago. In 1927 someone found a tooth which came from an ape-like person. Because it was near Peking, China, the person was called the Peking man. We know that the Peking man knew how to use tools and fire because tools and fire-places were discovered nearby.

- ☐ a The Peking man
- ☐ b Findings in caves give clues about ancient people
- ☐ c Tools and weapons of early people

PARAGRAPH 2

Pioneer History & Architecture

Some of the earliest houses on the plains were built of sod. There were few trees, and wood was scarce. As farmers began breaking up the ground for planting crops, they got an idea. The thick sod was tightly woven with the roots of grass. Why not use sod "bricks" for the walls of their homes? Soon sod homes became a common sight on the broad plains. Not only were they warm in winter, but they were cool in summer.

- ☐ a The plains farmers
- ☐ b Early homes on plains were sod
- ☐ c Life of the plains farmers

PARAGRAPH 3

Native American Culture & Beliefs

Indians of long ago painted designs on their shields for a good reason. They believed that the designs had a magical power in battle. In their dreams they were shown what kinds of designs to paint. The designs would offer protection. The shield was made from the tough skin of a bull buffalo and protected them from arrows but not rifle fire. Even so, the Indians still had great faith in the power of the designs.

- ☐ a Indian shields
- ☐ b The power of Indians' dreams
- ☐ c Why Indians painted designs on shields

LESSON 12: SELECTING MAIN IDEAS OF PARAGRAPHS

Full Score: 3 Points

Pedagogical Purpose & Cognitive Strategy:

This lesson trains students in distinguishing between the **Central Main Idea**, an **Overly Narrow Detail**, and an **Overly Broad Topic**. A valid outline title must serve as an umbrella that covers every sentence in the paragraph without leaving ideas out or promising information not present.

1. Paragraph 1: Cave Findings & Ancient Dwellers**Correct Title: b****✓ b. Findings in caves give clues about ancient people**

[CORRECT] Directly reflects the topic sentence. Covers both archaeological artifacts (cooking pots, stone axes, weapons, needles) and biological remains (Peking man tooth, hearths).

[DISTRACTOR a - Too Narrow] "The Peking man" — Only introduced in the latter half as one specific example of a cave finding. Ignores the general tools and lifestyle clues in the first half.

[DISTRACTOR c - Too Narrow] "Tools and weapons of early people" — Excludes the discovery of Peking man and the general concept of cave archaeology.

2. Paragraph 2: Pioneer Sod Houses**Correct Title: b****✓ b. Early homes on plains were sod**

[CORRECT] Synthesizes the whole paragraph: explains why wood scarcity led to sod, how sod bricks were cut from root-woven prairie turf, and why sod homes were effective shelters.

[DISTRACTOR a - Too Broad / Misleading] "The plains farmers" — Focuses on people rather than their shelter architecture. The text is specifically about sod homes.

[DISTRACTOR c - Too Broad] "Life of the plains farmers" — Would require discussing agriculture, diet, family life, and prairie hardships.

3. Paragraph 3: Native American Shield Designs**Correct Title: c****✓ c. Why Indians painted designs on shields**

[CORRECT] Directly matches the topic sentence: "Indians... painted designs on their shields for a good reason." The entire passage explains this reason (spiritual protection in battle).

[DISTRACTOR a - Too Broad] "Indian shields" — Implies a general survey of shield construction, materials, and warfare tactics, whereas the passage centers on the painted designs and spiritual faith.

[DISTRACTOR b - Too Narrow] "The power of Indians' dreams" — Dreams are only mentioned once as the source of design patterns, not the overall subject.

Teacher Diagnostic Guide: The Title Evaluation Matrix

Error Type	Student Cognitive Trap	Instructional Remediation
Too Narrow (Detail Fixation)	Student selects a vivid or exciting fact mentioned in the paragraph (e.g., <i>The Peking man</i> , <i>Indians' dreams</i>).	Ask: "Does this title cover the first sentence? Does it cover the whole paragraph or just one sentence?"
Too Broad (Generalization)	Student selects the general topic area without noticing the specific focus (e.g., <i>Life of the plains farmers</i>).	Ask: "Does the paragraph talk about cooking, clothing, and farming, or only about building sod houses?"
Accurate Main Idea	Title functions as an "umbrella" that encompasses all sentences in the paragraph.	Reinforce: "Notice how every sentence gives another fact supporting this main idea title."