

Whenever you read an essay—whether written by a professional writer or by a classmate—you should always look for the **main idea**, or **thesis**. Sometimes you can find a sentence that states it clearly; at other times, you have to figure it out. **Most of the essays in our reader require you to do more than underline a sentence in the first paragraph!**

Every **Reading Assessment Test** will have a section asking you to “**state the main idea, or thesis, of this essay in 1 or 2 complete sentences. Use your own wording as much as possible.**” Below, I’ve outlined some steps that should help you to do this.

Steps in Writing a Main Idea/Thesis Statement for an Essay

1. First, determine the **topic**. What is the **subject (topic)** of this article or essay? What is it about? Margin notes are useful for this step. What is each paragraph about?
2. Look at the **title**. What does it tell you about the essay or article? Does it give the **subject** and/or an **idea about the subject**? Does it convey a tone or attitude?
3. Consider the author’s **purpose**. Why did he or she write this essay? What do the author’s **feelings about the subject** seem to be? What impression does the writer want to make on readers? What does he or she want readers to understand about the topic? (A good way to think about this question is to imagine the writer choosing which details to include, knowing that the **choice of details** will affect the readers’ responses.)
4. Consider the **writing strategy (rhetorical pattern)**. If it’s a **comparison and contrast** essay, the main idea sentence you write should usually include both topics under consideration. Likewise, if it’s a **cause and effect analysis**, the main idea sentence should use words that indicate this, such as “**consequences, causes, reasons, effects, results,**” etc.
5. Write a main idea sentence after you have considered all of the above points. You might use this **formula: Begin with the topic and then add the idea that the essay develops about the topic.** For instance, I just read a magazine article about the execution of teenaged murderers (age 19 and under).

The underlined portion of the previous sentence is the **topic** of the article, but it is **not the main idea**. To state the main idea, I would have to add the point the writer was making about the topic. The sentence below states the **main idea**:

The execution of teenagers is wrong and should be stopped.

Tip: Don't use "how" or "about" in your main idea sentence. These words usually result in a statement of the topic or the author's purpose—not the actual thesis, or main idea.

6. **Revise** your statement as necessary. **This step is important.** Rarely, do good readers write a **clear, concise, and complete main idea statement the first time**. Take out repetition. Make sure your statement is a complete sentence (or more than one) that makes sense by itself.