



# Reading Comprehension

## Identifying Main Idea

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## Identifying Main Idea

I had always found teaching students how to identify main ideas particularly difficult, until I discovered that providing them with examples works best. Here, I break down the non-fiction article "Friend" by Marjorie Ingall into its ten paragraphs. For each paragraph, students are given three choices for the main idea. One choice is too general, one is too specific, and one is "just right". In this way, students can discover (often through discussion) how the "too general" choice may be true, but is not specific enough to convey the author's intended message; how the "too specific" choice includes extraneous details that are not needed to convey the message; and how the "just right" choice clearly encapsulates the message. In future sessions when my students are tasked with independently identifying main ideas of new content, we can discuss how their guesses may be too general or too specific, and they are then able to make adjustments until they arrive at an accurate statement of the main idea.

# FRIEND

*To My Pal Who Hit Career Gold: You Go Girl (I'll Try to Control My Raging Jealousy)*  
by Marjorie Ingall

## **Paragraph 1**

"We hate it when our friends become successful," Morrissey sang, back in the day. I never thought I'd take emotional cues from a mopey British pop star with vertical hair. I'm a generally cheerful American woman. But when a longtime friend did become hugely successful, I was shocked at my dark, seething jealousy.

## **Paragraph 2**

Gayle and I came of age together as writers for teen magazines. She was hilarious and kind. She giggled to me once about chatting with a guy on the subway carrying a wombat in a box. I thought, there are two kinds of people in the world: the kind who strike up conversations with people carrying wombats in boxes, and the kind who don't. She and I, we were wombat people.

## **Paragraph 3**

Years passed I continued to write for magazines and newspapers; she became a struggling novelist. We had kids. We had writing dates and made elaborate yet cheap salads for each other. Her first novel sank without a trace; I tried to console her.

## **Paragraph 4**

And then her second novel became a sensation. It sold millions of copies, was translated into zillions of languages, became a movie. She attended the premiere in Hollywood, wearing a glamorous low-cut black silk tux, as I watched at home, cleaning crayon off the walls.

## **Paragraph 5**

She'd call and share stories of her life, as she always had. I told her of my writer's block. But all the while, my envy lurked in the background like a horror-movie villain. My answers became increasingly curt, our conversation filled with awkward pauses.

### **Paragraph 6**

I hadn't known I was this petty. How could I not be overjoyed for her? She was my friend; she'd worked hard for her success. And I realized something else about myself, something equally unsavory: In the past, when I felt conflicted about a relationship, I'd ghosted. Rather than talking about problems like a grown-up, I'd simply disappear. I'd done it to two different boyfriends and a good friend. They'd call, likely hurt and baffled, and I'd check caller ID and ignore them. There's a difference between being conflict-averse and being a jerk. I was the jerk.

### **Paragraph 7**

So I womanned up and called Gayle. "I'm sorry," I said. "I need to tell you that I feel jealous of you and I don't want to talk to you and I hate myself for it." She expelled a huge breath. "I didn't want to say anything until you did! I'm so glad we're bringing it into the open!" She encouraged me to unload all the ugly stuff I had inside me, and she listened without judgment. It felt purifying.

### **Paragraph 8**

She'd been on the receiving end of friend breakups before, she told me, and didn't want it to happen to us. She made me swear I'd tell her if she started acting like a jerk. (She didn't, though she sometimes got obsessive and self-righteous—flaws she'd always had. And I told her so.) It turns out that friendship, like marriage, requires honest communication even when it's hard. Jeez, who knew?

### **Paragraph 9**

Wealth didn't change her. Her money woes were lessened, true, but she still had legit anxiety about...everything else. I could reassure her. She could reassure me. It's what friends do. As ever, Gayle's my biggest cheerleader.

### **Paragraph 10**

Studies have shown that people who are grateful for their friends tend to be better friends in response, creating, in the words of social psychologists, a "positive-feedback loop." That's us.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Main Ideas – Too General vs. Too Specific vs. Just Right

In order to identify the main idea of a paragraph, an essay, a story, or an article, you must consider: What is the message the author is trying to convey? The main idea must be specific enough to convey the intended message, but should not include unnecessary details.

- Directions:
- 1) Read the article “Friend” by Marjorie Ingall
  - 2) Consider the main message within each paragraph
  - 3) Label the following main ideas as:  
**TG**—too general  
**TS**—too specific  
**JR**—just right

### Paragraph 1

- \_\_\_ I became jealous of a friend’s success
- \_\_\_ People don’t like it when their friends become successful
- \_\_\_ I was shocked by my extreme jealousy of a longtime friend’s huge success because I’m usually an easy-going woman who lives in the United States

### Paragraph 2

- \_\_\_ Gayle and I both were the types who giggle over wombats in the subway
- \_\_\_ Gayle and I were close, longtime friends who shared an outgoing nature and profession
- \_\_\_ Gayle and I were friends

### Paragraph 3

- \_\_\_ Years passed and we remained friends through life changes
- \_\_\_ Life changes as we get older
- \_\_\_ I wrote for magazines while she was a struggling novelist

### Paragraph 4

- \_\_\_ Gayle’s second novel became a movie and she wore a glamorous outfit to the movie’s premiere
- \_\_\_ Gayle’s life and my life moved in different directions
- \_\_\_ Gayle became very successful professionally while my professional life stagnated



### **Paragraph 5**

- \_\_\_ My jealousy started to get in the way of our friendship
- \_\_\_ We started to have problems in our relationship
- \_\_\_ She continued to call me, but I had writer's block

### **Paragraph 6**

- \_\_\_ I'd ghosted two boyfriends and a good friend in the past when problems developed in those relationships
- \_\_\_ I started to realize that ghosting Gayle because of my jealousy of her was a jerky move on my part
- \_\_\_ My lack of communication was immature

### **Paragraph 7**

- \_\_\_ Gayle reacted well when I was honest with her about my jealousy
- \_\_\_ Honesty is always the best policy
- \_\_\_ I womanned up and called Gayle and apologized for being jealous and told her I hate myself for it

### **Paragraph 8**

- \_\_\_ Relationships benefit from honest communication, even when it's hard
- \_\_\_ I told Gayle how sometimes she could be obsessive and self-righteous
- \_\_\_ Honesty is good

### **Paragraph 9**

- \_\_\_ Friends can reassure each other
- \_\_\_ It turns out Gayle's life isn't perfect, just like mine, and as friends we can be each other's cheerleaders
- \_\_\_ Gayle's wealth didn't change her and she still had anxiety about many things in her life

### **Paragraph 10**

- \_\_\_ A positive-feedback loop is when you do something positive for someone who then appreciates it and does something positive for you and so on
- \_\_\_ Many studies investigate friendship dynamics
- \_\_\_ Gayle and I learned to be grateful for our friendship, a dynamic that typically makes for better friendships

## Identifying Main Idea – Answer Key

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### Paragraph 2

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**JR** Gayle and I were close, longtime friends who shared an outgoing nature and profession  
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**JR** Gayle and I learned to be grateful for our friendship, a dynamic that typically makes for better friendships