Chapter 1  Writing a summary

1.1 Identifying the main ideas

Learn how to:
• look for clues about the subject of a text
• select main points from a text.

What clues help me decide what a text is about?

When you read any text, your mind immediately gets to work finding out what it is about, what its focus is, or what the writer’s purpose is. In a summary, you write down the answers to these questions in a clear way.

Here are some titles of articles and texts:

a) Brian Lara – his greatest hits
b) On the hunt with killer whales
c) Day in the life of the princess of pop
d) Soaring death rate leaves retirement community stunned

Each of these titles gives strong clues to the content of the article or text that follows.

1. Based on these titles, what do you think each of these texts is about?

2. Which titles leave out key information that you would need to check as you read the text?

You can use titles as a guide to test what you expect to find in a text, but they do not give the whole picture. You need to read the whole text.

Look at this opening paragraph for one of the titles above:

A huge increase in the early deaths of pet cats in Sunny Heights retirement village has left the residents shocked and saddened. Since the start of the year, at least 12 of their feline companions have been found dead.

3. Which title does this match?

4. How is the information different from what you expected after reading the title?

Revision tip

Predicting and retrospecting are useful skills to be used when summarizing. You need to think about what is coming next (predicting), but you should also reconsider what you have just read (retrospecting) – your understanding of a text can sometimes change.
## Layout and organisation

You can find other clues to what a text is about by looking at the order of the information and how it is laid out. For example, paragraphs can indicate a change in time, focus on a new aspect of a topic, introduce a new voice or perspective, or suggest a different viewpoint or attitude. Paragraphs can also introduce different types of information, such as statistics or quotations.

Look at this next paragraph from the text about cats:

> An inspection by local vet, Snupe Dogg, revealed that at least eight of the poor pussycats had been poisoned with an unexplained substance. The remaining four had died in different circumstances but Mr Dogg refused to say more about how they had met their sorry fate: ‘Until I have conducted a full autopsy on each of the deceased cats I will be unable to establish anything further.’

5 What new information is revealed in this extract compared with what you were told in the first paragraph?

6 What new types of information are included here (for example, statistics)?

7 Decide what is the point of the second paragraph and write it out as a short sentence. For example, the main point of the first paragraph could be described as: ‘Cat deaths in Sunny Heights retirement village have grown suddenly.’

### Revision tip

Look for similar or linked vocabulary in a paragraph. For example: *Snupe Dogg, Mr Dogg; poisoned, died, fate, deceased, autopsy; pussycats, cats*. This signposts the focus and will help you to summarize.

### Topic sentences

The topic sentence is the sentence that tells you what the rest of the paragraph is about. Read this paragraph from the middle of a text about ocelots, a type of wild cat. The topic sentence comes at the start.

> This endangered species, like so many others, is quite stunning to look at. Twice the size of an average domestic cat, it has sleek, smooth fur, which can vary in colour and pattern from cream to reddish-brown, with highly visible black patches, which often come together to form curved stripes. The face is also striped, lined in black on either side – like a wonderful miniature leopard or panther. Visually, the ocelot is highly attractive to poachers.

### Remember

Topic sentences are usually, but not always, at the start of a paragraph. To find the topic sentence, look for the sentence that tells you what is the focus of the paragraph.
Having identified the topic sentence, you still need to decide which part of it tells you what the rest of the paragraph will be about.

- The first noun phrase is ‘This endangered species’, which might suggest that the paragraph will focus on threats to the ocelot.
- The rest of the sentence (‘…is quite stunning to look at’) acts as a general introduction to the details about the ocelot’s appearance that follow. There is nothing more about being ‘endangered’.

8 Which of these notes best sums up the main point of the paragraph?
(A) Hunters are very keen to capture the ocelot.
(B) The visual appeal of the ocelot.
(C) How ocelots are like leopards and panthers.
(D) The size of the ocelot compared with house cats.

It might not always be so easy to find the topic sentence. Read this new paragraph.

Ocelots hunt a wide range of animals such as rabbits, rodents, fish, frogs and iguanas, and even tree-dwelling monkeys or birds. They are aided in this by keen sight and hearing, but they also swim well, and their pointed fangs are perfect for delivering a killing bite. In short, they are perfectly adapted to hunting a variety of prey.

The first sentence here suggests this is mostly a paragraph about the types of animals that ocelots prey on. However, while the paragraph is partly about this, there are other types of information, too.

9 What other information is supported by the first sentence?

10 Which do you think is the topic sentence in this paragraph? Why?

Apply the skills

Read these two paragraphs from an article about Navassa Island and its coral reefs.

Navassa has been underwhelming visitors since 1504, when crewmen sent by Columbus arrived and promptly died from drinking contaminated water. An American sea captain claimed the mesa-shaped islet for the USA in 1857 for its rich deposits of bird excrement, used to make fertilizer and gunpowder. Over the next three decades, African-American workers living in virtual slavery mined over a million tons of fossilized guano by hand (which the Navassa Phosphate Company of Baltimore shipped out on the S.S. Romance). In 1889, the workers rose up and killed five supervisors, sparking a legal battle over possession of the island that went all the way to the US Supreme Court. The island and its animal inhabitants – mostly lizards and feral dogs today – were abandoned in 1898 after the Spanish-American War.

Haiti still claims Navassa in its constitution, but the US Fish and Wildlife Service declared it a National Wildlife Refuge in 1999. Only researchers can drop anchor there today, but the interesting part is under water anyway. This March and April, scientists with the Global Reef Expedition, a five-year worldwide coral survey sponsored by the Khaled bin Sultan Living Oceans Foundation, made 212 data-gathering dives on Navassa’s reefs. They found a surprisingly rich coral ecosystem that has escaped much of the damage that overfishing, pollution and climate change have wrought on other reefs in the region.

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Based on this information, write down the main focus of each paragraph.

**Remember**
- Check for a topic sentence – one that gives a clue to the main focus or tone of the paragraph.
- Consider the examples or information given.
- Look for different perspectives between one paragraph and the next: there may be development of ideas or contrasting views.

**Check your progress**

**Competent**
- I can work out the overall focus of a text from its title and supporting paragraphs.
- I understand how topic sentences work.

**Superior**
- I can work out the overall focus of a text from a range of details and track how it changes from paragraph to paragraph.
- I understand how to use a range of strategies to identify topic sentences and main points.