

3. **Read the part of the passage that contains the answer carefully.** The answer will probably be in a very predictable place in the passage.
4. **Choose the best answer to each question.** You can choose the best answer according to what is given in the appropriate section of the passage, or you can eliminate definitely wrong answers and select your best guess.
5. **Click on the answer on the computer screen when you have selected an answer.** You may still change your mind at this point and click on a different answer. You may also return later to a question within the same reading passage (although it can be time-consuming to click back through too many questions).

Next, you should move on to the language skills. The following language skills will help you to implement these strategies and procedures in the reading section of both the paper TOEFL test and the computer TOEFL test.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE IDEAS OF THE PASSAGE \_\_\_\_\_

It is very common for reading passages in the reading section of both the paper TOEFL test and the computer TOEFL test to have questions about the overall ideas in the passage. The most common type of question asks about the main idea, topic, title, or subject. There may also be questions about how the information in the passage is organized or about which type of information is included in a particular paragraph.

### SKILL I: ANSWER MAIN IDEA QUESTIONS CORRECTLY

Almost every reading passage on the paper TOEFL test or computer TOEFL test will have a multiple-choice question about the main idea of a passage. Such a question may be worded in a variety of ways; you may, for example, be asked to identify the *topic*, *subject*, *title*, *primary idea*, or *main idea*. These questions are all really asking what primary point the author is trying to get across in the passage. Since TOEFL passages are generally written in a traditionally organized manner, it is relatively easy to find the main ideas by studying the topic sentences, which are most probably found at the beginning of each paragraph.

If a passage consists of only one paragraph, you should study the beginning of that paragraph to determine the main idea. Look at a multiple-choice example from the paper TOEFL test that asks about the topic of a passage with one paragraph.

**Example from the Paper TOEFL Test** 
**The passage:**

In the philosophy of John Dewey, a sharp distinction is made between intelligence and reasoning. According to Dewey, intelligence is the only absolute way to achieve a balance between realism and idealism, between practicality and wisdom of life. Intelligence involves “interacting with other things and knowing them,” while reasoning is merely the act of an observer, “...a mind that beholds or grasps objects outside the world of things...” With reasoning, a level of mental certainty can be achieved, but it is through intelligence that control is taken of events that shape one’s life.

**The question:**

What is the *topic* of this passage?

- (A) The intelligence of John Dewey
- (B) Distinctions made by John Dewey
- (C) Dewey’s ideas on the ability to reason
- (D) How intelligence differs from reasoning in Dewey’s works

This question asks about the *topic* of the passage. Because this passage has only one paragraph, you should look at the first sentence of the passage to answer this question. The first sentence of this passage discusses a distinction between the ideas of *intelligence* and *reasoning* in the philosophy of John Dewey, so this is probably the topic. A quick check of the rest of the sentences in the passage confirms that the topic is in fact the difference between *intelligence* and *reasoning*. Now you should check each of the answers to determine which one comes closest to the topic that you have determined. Answer (A) mentions only intelligence, so it is not the topic. Answer (B) mentions distinctions that John Dewey made, but it does not say specifically what type of distinctions. Answer (C) mentions only reasoning, so answer (C) is incomplete. The best answer is therefore (D); the idea of *how intelligence differs from reasoning* comes from the first sentence of the passage, which mentions *a sharp distinction... between intelligence and reasoning*.

If a passage consists of more than one paragraph, you should study the beginning of each paragraph to determine the main idea. Look at a multiple-choice example from the computer TOEFL test that asks about the title of a passage with more than one paragraph.

**Example from the Computer TOEFL Test** 

Reading

Nitrogen fixation is a process by which nitrogen is continuously fed into biological circulation. In this process, certain algae and bacteria convert nitrogen into ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>). This newly-created ammonia is then for the most part absorbed by plants.

The opposite process of denitrification returns nitrogen to the air. During the process of denitrification, bacteria cause some of the nitrates from the soil to convert into gaseous nitrogen or nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O). In this gaseous form, the nitrogen returns to the atmosphere.

Which of the following would be the best *title* for this passage?

The Process of Nitrogen Fixation





Two Nitrogen Processes

The Return of Nitrogen to the Air

The Effect of Nitrogen on Plant Life

This question asks you about the best *title* for the passage. In a passage with more than one paragraph, you should be sure to read the first sentence of each paragraph to determine the subject, topic, title, or main idea. In this example, the first sentence of the first paragraph indicates that the first paragraph is about the process of *nitrogen fixation*. If you look only at the first paragraph, you might choose the incorrect first answer, which would be a good title for the first paragraph only. The first sentence of the second paragraph indicates that the process of *denitrification* is discussed in the second paragraph. The third answer is incorrect because the return of nitrogen to the air is the process of denitrification, and this is discussed in the second paragraph only. The last answer is incorrect because the effect of nitrogen on plant life is not discussed in this passage. The best answer to this question is the second answer; the *two nitrogen processes* are *nitrogen fixation*, which is discussed in the first paragraph, and *denitrification*, which is discussed in the second paragraph.

The following chart outlines the key information that you should remember about main idea questions:

MAIN IDEA QUESTIONS  		
HOW TO IDENTIFY THE QUESTION	on both paper and computer tests  	What is the <b>topic</b> of the passage? What is the <b>subject</b> of the passage? What is the <b>main idea</b> of the passage? What is the author's <b>main point</b> in the passage? With what is the author <b>primarily concerned</b> ? Which of the following would be the <b>best title</b> ?
WHERE TO FIND THE ANSWER	The answer to this type of question can generally be determined by looking at the first sentence of each paragraph.	
HOW TO ANSWER THE QUESTION	1. Read the first line of each paragraph. 2. Look for a common theme or idea in the first lines. 3. Pass your eyes quickly over the rest of the passage to check that you have really found the topic sentence(s). 4. Eliminate any definitely wrong answers and choose the best answer from the remaining choices.	

**TOEFL EXERCISE 1:** Study each of the passages and choose the best answers to the questions that follow. In this exercise, each passage is followed by several main idea, topic, or title questions so that the students can practice this type of question. On the TOEFL test, one passage would probably not have two such questions because they are so similar.

*PASSAGE ONE (Questions 1–2)*

Line (5) Fort Knox, Kentucky, is the site of a U.S. army post, but it is even more renowned for the Fort Knox Bullion Depository, the massive vault that contains the bulk of the U.S. government’s gold deposits. Completed in 1936, the vault is housed in a two-story building constructed of granite, steel, and concrete; the vault itself is made of steel and concrete and has a door that weighs more than twenty tons. Naturally, the most up-to-date security devices available are in place at Fort Knox, and the army post nearby provides further protection.

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| <p>1. Which of the following best describes the topic of the passage?</p> <p>(A) The city of Fort Knox, Kentucky<br/>                 (B) The federal gold depository<br/>                 (C) The U.S. army post at Fort Knox<br/>                 (D) Gold bullion</p> | <p>2. Which of the following would be the best title for this passage?</p> <p>(A) The Massive Concrete Vault<br/>                 (B) Fort Knox Security<br/>                 (C) Where the United States Keeps Its Gold<br/>                 (D) A Visit to Kentucky</p> |
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*PASSAGE TWO (Questions 3–4)*

Line (5) One identifying characteristic of minerals is their relative hardness, which can be determined by scratching one mineral with another. In this type of test, a harder mineral can scratch a softer one, but a softer mineral is unable to scratch the harder one. The Mohs’ hardness scale is used to rank minerals according to hardness. Ten minerals are listed in this scale, ranging from talc with a hardness of 1 to diamond with a hardness of 10. On this scale, quartz (number 7) is harder than feldspar (number 6) and is therefore able to scratch it; however, feldspar is unable to make a mark on quartz.

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| <p>3. Which of the following best states the subject of this passage?</p> <p>(A) The hardness of diamonds<br/>                 (B) Identifying minerals by means of a scratch test<br/>                 (C) Feldspar on the Mohs’ scale<br/>                 (D) Recognizing minerals in their natural state</p> | <p>4. The main idea of this passage is that</p> <p>(A) the hardness of a mineral can be determined by its ability to make a mark on other minerals<br/>                 (B) diamonds, with a hardness of 10 on the Mohs’ scale, can scratch all other minerals<br/>                 (C) a softer mineral cannot be scratched by a harder mineral<br/>                 (D) talc is the first mineral listed on the Mohs’ scale</p> |
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## PASSAGE THREE (Questions 5–6)

Line (5) Hurricanes generally occur in the North Atlantic from May through November, with the peak of the hurricane season in September; only rarely will they occur from December through April in that part of the ocean. The main reason for the occurrence of hurricanes during this period is that the temperature on the water's surface is at its warmest and the humidity of the air is at its highest.

(10) Of the tropical storms that occur each year in the North Atlantic, only about five, on the average, are powerful enough to be called hurricanes. To be classified as a hurricane, a tropical storm must have winds reaching speeds of at least 117 kilometers per hour, but the winds are often much stronger than that; the winds of intense hurricanes can easily surpass 240 kilometers per hour.

5. The passage mainly discusses

- (A) how many hurricanes occur each year
- (B) the strength of hurricanes
- (C) the weather in the North Atlantic
- (D) hurricanes in one part of the world

6. The best title for this passage would be

- (A) The North Atlantic Ocean
- (B) Storms of the Northern Atlantic
- (C) Hurricanes: The Damage and Destruction
- (D) What Happens from May through November

## PASSAGE FOUR (Questions 7–9)

Line (5) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882) was perhaps the best-known American poet of the nineteenth century. His clear writing style and emphasis on the prevalent values of the period made him popular with the general public if not always with the critics. He was particularly recognized for his longer narrative poems *Evangeline*, *The Song of Hiawatha*, and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, in which he told stories from American history in terms of the values of the time.

(10) *Evangeline* was set during the French and Indian War (1754–1763), when the British forced French settlers from Nova Scotia; two lovers, Gabriel and Evangeline, were separated by the British, and Evangeline devoted her lifetime to the search for Gabriel. With its emphasis on sentimental, undying love, *Evangeline* was immensely popular with the public.

(10) In *The Song of Hiawatha*, Longfellow depicted the noble life of the American Indian through the story of the brave Hiawatha and his beloved wife Minehaha. The tear-inspiring poem follows Hiawatha through the tragedies and triumphs of life, ending with the death of Minehaha and Hiawatha's departure into the sunset in his canoe.

(15) *The Courtship of Miles Standish* takes place during the early period of the settlement of New England, a period which was viewed as a time of honor and romance. In this poem centered around a love triangle, Miles Standish asks his friend John Alden to propose to Priscilla Mullins for him; John Alden ends up marrying Priscilla Mullins himself, and it takes time for his friendship with Miles Standish to recover. As with Longfellow's other narrative poems, the emphasis on high ideals and romance made the poem extremely popular.

7. Which of the following best describes the main idea of the passage?
- (A) American history is often depicted in poetry.
- (B) Longfellow described American history even though people really did not enjoy it.
- (C) The popularity of Longfellow's poems results from his stress on the values of the people.
- (D) Longfellow wrote long narrative poems that were not always popular with the critics.
8. The best title of the passage is
- (A) Longfellow's Popular Appeal
- (B) Historical Narrative Poems
- (C) The Lyric, Dramatic, and Narrative Poems of Longfellow
- (D) Longfellow and the Critics
9. The subject of the fourth paragraph is
- (A) nobility and honor in the poems of Longfellow
- (B) the love triangle involving Miles Standish
- (C) the popular appeal of *The Courtship of Miles Standish*
- (D) the period of the early settlement of New England

## SKILL 2: RECOGNIZE THE ORGANIZATION OF IDEAS

In the Reading section of both the paper TOEFL test and the computer TOEFL test, there may be questions about the organization of ideas in a passage. On the paper and the computer tests, you may be asked to determine how the ideas in one paragraph (or paragraphs) relate to the ideas in another paragraph (or paragraphs). On the computer TOEFL test, you may also see a question that asks you to click on the paragraph in a passage that contains certain ideas. Look at an example from the paper TOEFL test that asks you to determine how the information in the passage is organized.

### Example from the Paper TOEFL Test

#### The passage:

- If asked who invented the game of baseball, most Americans would probably reply that it was their belief that Abner Doubleday did. They believe this because the story
- Line about Doubleday is part of the tradition of baseball.
- (5) Doubleday was given credit for this invention early in the twentieth century when sporting-goods manufacturer Spaulding inaugurated a commission to research the question of who invented baseball. In 1908, a report was published by the commission in which Abner Doubleday, a U.S. Army
- (10) officer from Cooperstown, New York, was given credit for the invention of the game. The National Baseball Hall of Fame was established in Cooperstown in honor of Doubleday.
- Today, most sports historians are in agreement that Doubleday really did not have much to do with the
- (15) development of baseball. Instead, baseball seems to be a close relative of the English game of rounders and probably has English rather than American roots.