

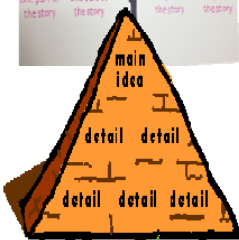
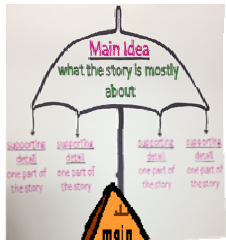
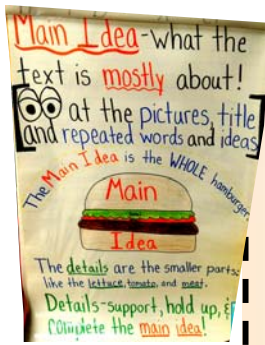
The Point of Factual Information in Paragraphs

Factual information usually appears in paragraphs. There are many kinds of non-fictional *content*.

- *Textbooks, reference books, and other educational materials* give facts and other kinds of knowledge about *subjects of study*. There are texts about language and literature, the humanities (topics of human thought and culture), subjects in the natural and social sciences, and many other areas of interest. There's material to study in the professions, like *education, law, medicine, clergy*. There's printed matter about practical subjects like *accounting or electronics or mechanics*. People buy and study texts and other educational books for school and college courses. They look up information in references (online).
- Articles in magazines, newspapers, and newsletters give factual information about subjects of general interest. There are many pieces of writing about human relationships, health, safety, money, and other everyday practical topics and areas of thought and endeavor. Articles often include paragraphs in bulleted or numbered lists, like this one.
- The *Internet* (*www.*) offers a lot of factual and other info. To find facts and ideas, computer users type in words for various topics. Usually, they can read information on a (computer or handheld) screen. Often, they can print it out on paper for later reference. There are almost always long lists of alternative or additional sites (links) to connect to.

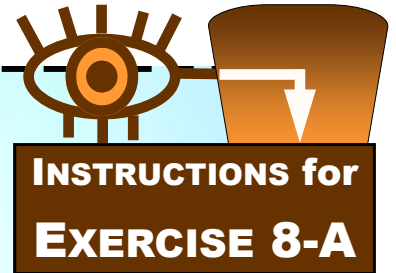
Often, paragraphs in textbooks, in articles, and on the *Internet* get right to the point. They might tell the “main idea” in one or two general sentences. Then there are “supporting details”—examples, explanatory sentences, specific facts, and other “smaller” ideas. These supporting details are supposed to explain the intended messages, making the *point(s)* of each paragraph clear and useful.





Above are some kinds of "Graphic Organizers." They can show the relationships among the main idea(s) and the supporting details of a paragraph.

Topics, Main Ideas, & Details



There are textbooks and other publications of factual information on almost every subject. Usually these books contain *chapters, units, or parts*. Each is about a smaller division of the general subject. There are also articles on many different subjects.

The information of a chapter or an article is in *paragraphs*. A paragraph is a group of sentences about one specific (limited) topic. Each paragraph should "cover" a small part of the subject of the chapter or article.

For each of the following paragraphs, follow these instructions. A few sample answers are given:

1. In one word or phrase, write the specific topic on the line above each paragraph. Don't write a whole sentence.
2. In each paragraph, underline the "topic sentence(s)"—the most general one or two statements. Make sure your choices tell the main idea or point. *Don't* underline supporting details ("smaller" pieces of information).
3. After each paragraph are three statements. *Which sentence gives the best "restatement" (explanation) of the main idea or the message of the paragraph?* Circle its letter a, b, or c.

You can compare your answers with the suggestions on pages 57 to 60 in the *Answer Key*.

4. Now look back at the original paragraphs on pages 125 to 134. How many important pieces of information "support" the main idea or the point of each selection? Can you number them like this: ① ② ③? Without looking at the page, can you retell what you learned from the reading?

Look at book divisions and articles about topics of interest. Choose informational paragraphs. *Can you find the topic sentence or sentences of each paragraph?* (There may not be any.) *Can you retell the main idea or point in your own words? Can you get the important supporting details?*

Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 1: Specific Topic = _____

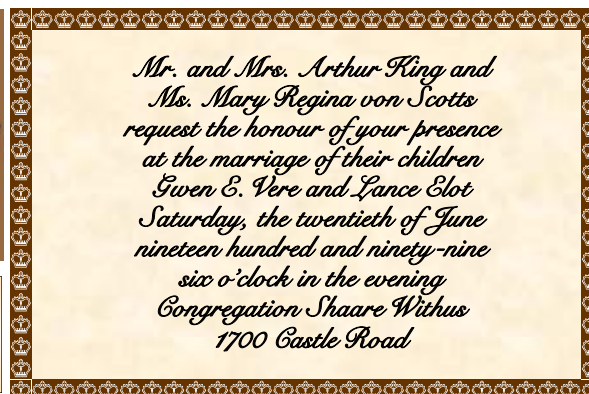
“Etiquette” is the “forms of proper behavior in a culture.” Generally, it means “good manners” in everyday life, but there are also some customs of *formal etiquette* in American society. Wedding announcements and invitations are among the most commonly-accepted forms of formal etiquette in the United States. ① One custom is to engrave or print them on high-quality white or ivory cards, usually five by seven inches. ② A second “rule” is to write them in the “third person” without pronouns like *I*, *we*, or *you*. ③ Also, they should not contain abbreviations (short forms for the dates or places). ④ Often, announcements and invitations are put into high-quality envelopes of the same kind of paper. ⑤ On the outside of the envelopes, elegant formal handwriting is used for the names of the receivers.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- Not many people in the United States are interested in everyday or formal etiquette.
- With its customs and rules, wedding announcements and invitations are a good example of formal etiquette.
- It’s not necessary to spend a lot of money on wedding announcements and invitations if you don’t invite too many people.



An example of a formal wedding announcement and invitation:



READING ABOUT READING:

What’s a “topic sentence?”

Within an informational paragraph, a “topic sentence” is a statement of the main idea or point. It’s the *broadest* sentence of the paragraph. In a general way, it “covers” the information of all the other more specific sentences.



In a paragraph, a “topic sentence” is like an umbrella. It “covers” all the supporting details (the more specific pieces of information).

A traditional or conventional “topic sentence” has two things:

- a word or phrase naming the *topic* of the paragraph
- the writer’s intended point (the “controlling idea”) about the topic.

Here are three examples:

the topic of the sentence	names the subject of the message
A topic sentence	is an overall statement of the main idea.
The info of a chapter or an article	usually appears in paragraphs.

READING
ABOUT
READING:

Do all
paragraphs
have “topic sentences?”

Mostly, we find topic sentences in educational material—especially in textbooks about reading and composition writing. Such paragraphs may be designed for students to *analyze*.

But most paragraphs—even in schoolbooks and college textbooks—*don’t* contain clear, obvious topic sentences. To tell or write the main idea or point of a paragraph, readers have to combine parts of several sentences. Or they have to use their own words.

It isn’t important for every paragraph to contain one or two clear topic sentences. But it *is* important for informational paragraphs to *have* a clear main idea or *make a point*. The other information in these paragraphs should “support” or explain or clarify the writer’s message.

However, *other* kinds of reading material, like stories and anecdotes and letters, don’t usually contain “topic sentences.”

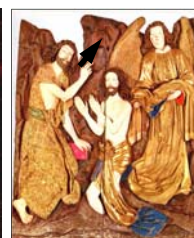
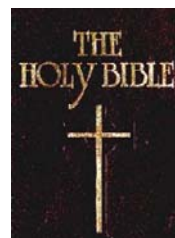
Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 2: Specific Topic = _____

There are two main parts of the *Bible* (the holy writings of two important religions, Judaism and Christianity). The holy Scripture for Judaism is called the *Old Testament*. It contains thirty-nine books, like *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *the Psalms*, *the Book of Job*, *the Song of Solomon*, and others. Christianity has added the twenty-seven books of the *New Testament*. Its main books are the four *Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*. Many of the cultural references in the Western world come from the Bible. Some common examples are the stories of *Adam & Eve*; *Abraham, Sarah, & Isaac*; *David & Goliath*; *Noah’s Ark*; and the parables (fables) and sayings of Jesus Christ. Because of its importance in history and culture, people of many religions in the world know about the organization and content of these two parts of the Bible.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- a. The Bible contains sixty-six books in all, so it takes a lot of time to read it. The *Parables of Jesus* are not part of the Jewish religion.
- b. The story of Abraham and Isaac is different from the story of David and Goliath. Both stories appear in the *Old Testament*.
- c. The organization and subject matter of the Bible are important and well-known in Western history and culture—to members of many world religions.



the main books and illustrations of some of the stories that are part of the Bible—and therefore part of Western history and culture

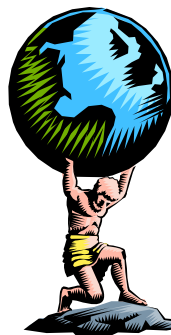
Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 3: Specific Topic = _____

For communication and unity within a society, *mythology* and *folklore* are important parts of history and culture. Of course, neither old nor new myths contain proven facts or information. They're fiction, not fact. Even so, they make a history course or textbook more interesting and effective. For example, we can't teach or learn ancient Western history without the Greek and Roman mythology of *Zeus, Apollo, Venus*, and other gods and goddesses. In our own countries and cultures, more people know historical myths and legends better than some of the facts, dates, and often unimportant details of “real” history. Also, children learn values from the myths and legends of a culture. And because “truth is stranger than fiction,” “modern myths” from the *Internet* or word of mouth can sound like some of the true stories in the news. Of course, we all need to separate fiction from fact in our minds, our teaching, and our learning. Even so, mythology and folklore are important in cultural education and world progress.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- a. If we separate fiction from fact, mythology and folklore become an important part of a culture. They help students to understand history, children to form values, and adults to analyze current events.
- b. The Greek gods and goddesses—like *Zeus, Neptune, Apollo*, and *Venus*—are not as important as the political leaders of that ancient culture and society.
- c. Fact is always different from fiction. For this reason, we should leave myths and legends and other fictional beliefs out of our history books, news reports, storytelling, blogs, and newspapers.



In mythology, Atlas had to support the earth on his shoulders forever.

READING ABOUT READING:

What are “supporting details?”

The “supporting details” of a paragraph can be *examples, explanations, facts, statistics*, and other kinds of *specific information*. They're “supporting details” because they *hold up* or *back up* the main idea or most important point of the paragraph. They make the writer's message easier to understand and remember because they illustrate or explain it.

If we recognize the main idea, message, or point, we can often number or list the supporting details of equal importance. Here's an example:

THE POINT: For several reasons, a topic sentence is easy to recognize.

LIST OF SUPPORTING DETAILS:

1. A topic sentence is the most general sentence of the paragraph.
2. It's often at the beginning or end of the paragraph.
3. It contains two elements—the topic and the controlling idea.
4. It makes the paragraph easier to understand.
5. It's common in textbook paragraphs and other specially-written educational materials.

**READING
ABOUT
READING:**

*Is a paragraph
without a topic
sentence badly
written?*

People of different cultures may have different ideas about the organization of “good” factual writing. Often, textbooks on composition writing in English include a topic sentence in each paragraph. These texts may offer a “formula” or “outline” or “pattern” to follow for good academic writing. These rules help students to organize and express their thoughts clearly so that their readers understand.

On the other hand, what happens if writers always follow the rules for topic sentences exactly? Then the *form* might become more important than the *content*. Writers may produce boring paragraphs. They might not “say” very much in their writing. They may forget the real *purpose* of factual writing. They might not communicate valuable or useful or interesting information or ideas.

A topic sentence in every factual paragraph can be useful for clarity, but it shouldn’t make the writing tedious or trivial.

Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 4: Specific Topic = _____

What is “great literature” in English? Probably, the term “English literature” should include the famous prose and poetry works of both British and American writers, in six periods of history. The most important *British* playwright of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for instance, was *William Shakespeare*. But because European immigrants to early America read and performed his plays everywhere, Shakespeare’s writings were part of American literary culture from the beginning. The same may be true of British poets like *Geoffrey Chaucer* and *John Milton*. And some of the most famous writers of later centuries, like *Charles Dickens* and *T.S. Elliot*, had ties to both England and the United States. For these reasons, for readers from other language backgrounds and cultures, “great English literature” usually means both British English *and* American English works. All of these novels, poems, plays, and other forms of writing belong to six main historical periods: the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century, the Romantic and Victorian eras of the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century on.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—*a*, *b*, or *c*.

- a. No one has the right to define “great literature” because it is always a matter of opinion.
- b. “Great English literature” includes fiction books, plays, poetry and other works by both British and American writers in six major periods of history.
- c. Shakespeare’s works have influenced novelists, playwrights, and poets since the sixteenth century, so he was a great English writer.

Theater plays—both comedy and tragedy—are part of the history of “great English literature.”



Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 5: Specific Topic = _____

What are *parts of speech*? What are the *subject* and *predicate* of a *declarative sentence*? How is a *transitive verb* different from an *intransitive verb*—or a *countable noun* different from a *noncount noun*? Probably, as either a native or a non-native speaker of English, you know the answers to these grammar questions. Why, then, can’t you give complete and correct definitions of the terms without a dictionary? Most likely, because the *vocabulary* of English grammar is new for you. Perhaps you learned different terms in school. Perhaps a teacher called a *noun* “a thing-word” or “a substantive” or “a nominative.” Or perhaps an *uncountable noun* was “a mass noun.” English (and English-as-a-Second Language) teachers around the world don’t always use the same vocabulary to talk about the language. For language analysis, technical grammar terms can be helpful, of course. However, it’s the *principles & patterns* that are important in language learning, not the specific linguistic vocabulary.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- Some teachers call a *noun* a “thing-word.” Others call this part of speech “a substantive” or “a nominative.” Is a *verb* “an action word?” Is an *adjective* “a describing word?”
- Teachers may use different vocabulary to talk about language, and this can be confusing to students. They need to learn rules for language *use*, not words to talk about it.
- Linguists create technical grammar terms to describe language principles or patterns. These words are in dictionaries.



What kind of noun is this? An uncountable or noncount noun or mass noun or what?



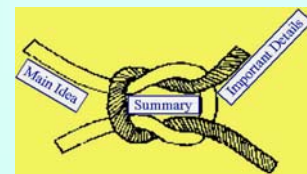
Is this an “action verb?” Is it a “linking verb?” Is it “transitive” or “intransitive?”

READING ABOUT READING:

What’s the difference between a topic sentence and the main idea of a paragraph?

A *topic sentence* tells the most general or the main idea of the paragraph. However, it may not always be a very *useful* statement of the point or message. Even if there *is* a good topic sentence, readers should restate the main idea of a paragraph *in their own words*—at least to themselves. That way, they can be sure they understand completely. Restatement of the main idea in one or two sentences also helps memory.

Another word for “restatement” is *paraphrase*. A paraphrase is a *restatement* of a piece of information. It’s the same idea in other words—preferably the reader’s own words. A restatement of the point or message can be very *general* or more *specific*. A complete and specific paraphrase includes the main supporting details. It’s like a short “summary” of the information and ideas of the paragraph.



**READING
ABOUT
READING:**

Where did the information and ideas in these paragraphs come from?

Most of the information in these factual paragraphs came from old editions of popular references like:

- *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, by E.D. Hirsh and others, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.
- *The New York Public Library Desk Reference*, Prentice Hall General Reference, 1993.
- *The Oxford Companion of the English Language*, Edited by Tom McArthur, Oxford University Press, 1992.

Their wording was reorganized and adapted for purposes of this reading worktext.

Where can we find more short pieces of factual information of this kind?

Reference works like *encyclopedias, atlases, handbooks, periodicals, almanacs, catalogs*, and so on are designed to be *referred to* (used as *sources of data*) rather than read from end to end.

They can be found in reference sections of libraries and bookstores. Of course, their electronic equivalents are *everywhere*—on software and, of course, online.

Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 6: Specific Topic = _____

Of course, reading for meaning is usually a *silent* activity. In general, if a reader has to say the words on a page *aloud*, that person has weak reading skills. Silent reading is not *always* appropriate, however. In some situations, *reading aloud* is common and useful. For example, in some cultures it is a teaching method—to practice phonics or to give dictations or difficult lectures. Second, parents and teachers often read aloud to small children. Third, oral reading is an integral part of many religious services. At the same time or individually, people read the words of a holy book out loud as part of the service. Also, actors may read scripts for others to hear on radio—or they make audio versions of popular books. TV personalities (like newscasters) have to read aloud too. But their reading should sound like *talking*, so they use a *teleprompter*. The audience can’t see this electronic text, so it seems natural.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- Reading aloud is a terrible learning activity because only poor readers have to do it. It’s a confusing, embarrassing waste of time.
- Many people have to read orally for work purposes. Therefore, the best readers are teachers, religious leaders, actors, TV personalities, and newscasters.
- Silent reading is the most common kind, but in some situations, it’s customary to read aloud—like in some kinds of teaching, at religious services, to make audio versions of print matter, and in news broadcasts.



Most reading for meaning is silent, but in some situations, reading aloud may be appropriate and helpful.

Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

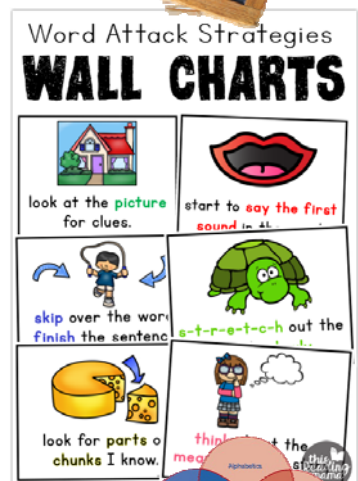
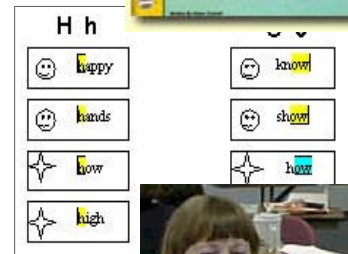
Paragraph 7: Specific Topic = _____

How do people learn to read? How should instructors teach reading, and how should children or novice readers first learn it? Teachers are always discussing various instructional *approaches*. However, there has never been complete agreement. The two main reading methodologies are based on “phonics” and “whole language.” The first is more traditional. Students learn *phonics*—the relationships between alphabet letters and sounds of the language. Then they can “figure out” the sound-symbols, words, and sentences on a page. With an “immersion” approach, in contrast, learners work with “whole texts” of unsimplified language. They try to “sight read” the words and sentences to get the general meaning. Probably, a combination of the phonics and “whole language” methods is the most effective way to teach and learn reading, especially for “alphabetic” languages like English. But because people learn in different ways, reading instruction should probably be customized to each individual or group.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- Some teachers believe in a *phonics* approach to reading, but others prefer the “whole language” method. Probably, a combination of the two is best—especially if teaching is *customized* to individuals and groups.
- People in education are always arguing about something. However, their discussions don’t usually bring good results. Every teacher should use the same method.
- Traditional approaches to reading instruction are old-fashioned and boring. It’s better to just read interesting or funny books with a lot of pictures.

There are many ways to teach or learn reading. Which methods, techniques, and procedures do you think are the most effective in different situations? Why?



READING ABOUT READING:

How do we learn passive vocabulary?

We acquire a lot of vocabulary “passively” from reading. When we see new words or phrases, we look for or guess at their meaning in context. For example, informational *Paragraphs 1-8* give clues to the meanings of these new vocabulary items. Can you explain them?

- *etiquette*
- *abbreviations*
- *the Bible*
- *the Old Testament*
- *the Gospels*
- *parables*
- *mythology*
- *literature*
- *prose*
- *playwright*
- *the Middle Ages*
- *the Renaissance*
- *grammar terms*
- *linguistic*
- *silent vs. aloud*
- *individually*
- *newscasters*
- *teleprompter*
- *approaches*
- *phonics*
- *sight read*
- *whole language*
- *active vs. passive*

Can you find and explain other new vocabulary?

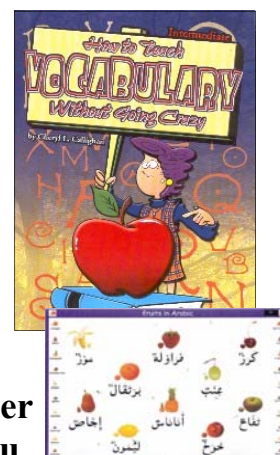
Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 8: Specific Topic = _____

What is “vocabulary?” It isn’t all the words and phrases in a huge, complete dictionary, is it? Probably, a person’s *vocabulary* is “all the words a person can understand and use.” Linguists and teachers agree: there are differences between someone’s *passive* and *active* vocabulary “bank.” *Passive vocabulary* is “receptive.” It’s all the words a listener or reader can *understand*. Usually, just a *general* understanding is enough to get the meaning of speech or printed text. Therefore, someone’s *passive* vocabulary is always much larger than his/her *active* vocabulary. *Active vocabulary* is “productive.” It’s much more complex than just understanding the general meanings of words and phrases. To know items *actively*, learners have to be able to do several things. For instance, they need to know the *grammatical limitations* of the items. They should be able to *apply the rules* in speaking or writing—and know their slightly different meanings and uses. And they ought to get the “feeling” or “sense” of the words. If someone “knows” 50,000 words actively, for example, he/she really has about 250,000 pieces of vocabulary information.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- a. Like most words in the English language, the word *vocabulary* has a lot of different meanings. That’s why dictionary use is so important.
- b. Even if someone knows 250,000 words, that person still has a lot to learn. You can never know enough vocabulary.
- c. Most vocabulary knowledge is “passive”—the words you understand generally. A smaller part of vocabulary is “active”—the words you can use correctly or effectively well in speaking or writing.



Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 9: Specific Topic = _____

A century and a half ago, many of today's countries did not exist as independent nations. Britain, France, Germany, and some smaller European countries had empires. They held colonies in Africa and Asia, and Spain had colonies in Latin America. The former Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and the former Yugoslavia (now Serbia, Herzegovina, and other independent states) belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Most of today's Middle Eastern nations were part of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, and the Russian Empire covered much of two continents. However, World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1936-1945) changed many boundaries and borders. Since that time, the spirit of nationalism has brought independence to most of the countries of the “Third World.” Then the collapse of Communism between 1989 and 1991 led to new changes in the world's map. Clearly, the political geography of today's world is very different from the geography of previous times—and it will continue to change. For political and economic reasons, more national boundaries will probably disappear, change, and be created.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- a. The political geography of the world is much different today from in previous times. Nations of the world have changed and will continue to change their boundaries and borders.
- b. Most European countries had empires, and most nations of the Third World were colonies. Nationalism brought independence. Many countries combined into one.
- c. The collapse of Communism caused the most significant changes in political geography in the twentieth century. It was mostly in Europe. Asia got larger and larger.



The physical globe hasn't changed much in the last few centuries, but the borders of nations are very different.



For instance, the boundaries of nations in Africa often change.



Several areas of Europe and Asia have changed a lot, too.

READING ABOUT READING:

How can we learn vocabulary actively?

Active vocabulary is “productive,” not “receptive.” For this reason, learning vocabulary *actively* is more complex than recognizing the meanings of words and phrases passively. Here are suggestions for ways to learn vocabulary items for active use:

- In listening and reading, notice the *context* or sentence patterns of new vocabulary items. Can you think of similar sentence patterns with different words?

For example: “The physical sciences include *physics*.”
“The physical sciences include *chemistry*.”
“The physical sciences include *astronomy*.”

- Look up the items in a print dictionary or online. Notice the grammatical information (the parts of speech, the *kinds* of nouns or verbs, etc.) Pay close attention to the examples. Can you think of examples of your own that use the words or phrases in the same ways?

Write a possible word or phrase title on the line above this paragraph. Underline one or two “topic sentences.” (You can also number/letter the main supporting details.)

Paragraph 10: Specific Topic = _____

The *physical sciences* include *physics*, *chemistry*, and *astronomy*, fields of study based on the language of mathematics. *Physics* is the study of *matter* (something that fills space) and *motion* (movement). Physicists know about *mechanics* (motion), *thermodynamics* (heat), *electricity*, and *magnetism*. Each of these subdivisions or sub-fields is based on only a few major and basic “laws.” Modern (twentieth century) physics has added the study of *relativity* (objects moving at the speed of light) and the study of *the atom* (the smallest unit of matter). *Chemistry* is the science of the substances in the world and universe. And *astronomy* is the study of the moon, planets, sun and other stars, and other objects in the sky and space. One modern part of astronomy is *cosmology*—the science of the expanding universe and its beginnings.

Circle the letter of the best restatement of the main idea or point—a, b, or c.

- Some physical sciences are *physics*, *chemistry*, *astronomy*, and *cosmology*. All of these fields have sub-fields, all with their own definitions and even smaller divisions of study.
- Some fields of scientific learning are newer than others, so it doesn’t make sense to study the old theories of past centuries.
- Which have more “laws?” The fields of *government*, *justice*, *administration*, and *politics* or the physical sciences—like *chemistry* and *astronomy*?

