

Reading Skill 1

Identifying main ideas and supporting details

You can understand the main idea of a paragraph by reading its topic sentence. A topic sentence is usually the first sentence of a paragraph. It carries the most important message in the paragraph. Note that there is not always a topic sentence in a paragraph.

Example 1

Numbers play an important role in Chinese culture. The number '8' is considered the luckiest number because its pronunciation is very similar to those of the Chinese words for 'prosperity' and 'wealth'. On the other hand, the number '4' and the Chinese word for 'death' sound nearly the same, so the Chinese would try to avoid using it. A typical example is that some buildings in China do not have the 4th, 14th or 24th floors.

From the topic sentence, we know that the main idea of the paragraph is about how certain numbers are perceived in Chinese culture. The rest of the paragraph gives examples, the numbers '8' and '4', to illustrate concretely the importance of numbers in Chinese culture.

Example 2

In Chinese culture, colours also carry symbolic meanings. Red is the dominant colour for celebratory occasions and festivities, such as weddings and Chinese New Year parties, since it represents happiness and luck. However, white symbolises death and is commonly seen at funerals. Therefore, it is inappropriate to wear white clothes on such festive, joyous occasions.

From the topic sentence, we know that the main idea of the paragraph is about the symbolic meanings of certain colours in Chinese culture. The rest of the paragraph gives examples, the colours 'red' and 'white', to provide more detailed information about the symbolic meanings carried by colours.



Let's Practice

Choose the best answer by blackening the circle.

The essence of feng shui lies in the way people place things. Some Chinese believe that arranging objects in a certain way or pattern can bring them good fortune. Bamboo plants are said to be able to attract prosperity and better health while fish tanks are considered to be what invites wealth and abundance.

1. What is the main idea of the above paragraph?
 - A. Good feng shui means good wealth.
 - B. Plants and fish tanks are items essential to good feng shui.
 - C. Feng shui is the positioning of objects for good fortune.
 - D. Feng shui is exercised only in China.

The Chinese believe that what they do at the beginning of a year affects what may happen to them throughout the entire year, so they pay special attention to what not to do at Chinese New Year. For example, sweeping the floor and washing hair are considered taboos as they think by doing so, their good fortune will either be swept away or go down the drain together with the water. From the traditional Chinese perspective, it is wiser to obey these rules than to take risks.

2. What is the main idea of the above paragraph?
 - A. January and February are the most important months of a year.
 - B. Breaking taboos at the start of a year gives rise to year-long misfortunes.
 - C. Sweeping the floor and washing hair help drain away misfortunes.
 - D. Risk takers are usually non-Chinese.

