Larbi Ben M’hidi University- Oum El Bouaghi

Department of English

Course Title: READING

Level: First Year-LMD

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**Understanding Paragraphs**

English is a topic-centered language: a paragraph, or longer text, has a single main topic, and all the details relate to that topic. Writers in English almost always mention the topic at or near the beginning of a passage. Good readers look for the topic when they read.

**Identifying the Topic of a Paragraph**

The topic is the word or phrase that best describes what all of the sentences in the paragraph are about. Words relating to the topic are usually repeated several times in a paragraph. Looking for these words can help you focus on the topic.

**Example:**

*Read the paragraph and underline the words that are repeated. Then write a topic that is not too specific or too general*.

 In developing countries, poor people have suffered the most from shortages of clean water. There are several reasons for this. First, in many developing countries, the majority of houses in poor villages and urban slums are not yet served by a piped water system. People living in these places often have to walk many miles to find water and carry it home in jugs and plastic containers. Second, these people usually have few alternatives to the piped water supply. There may be water closer by in rivers or lakes, but this is often dangerously polluted. In poor areas, street vendors often sell water by the liter, but they often charge extremely high prices for water that is not always safe to drink.

**Topic :** *shortage of clean water in poor areas*

**Exercise 1** : *Read each paragraph and underline words that are repeated. Then write a topic that is not too specific or too general*.

**1.** Like many other fast-growing cities around the world, Mexico City is facing severe water shortages. Many of its 20 million inhabitants receive only one hour of piped water per week. Others receive none at all for weeks on end. Those who can afford the expense build their own home water system to catch and keep rainwater to supplement the city water. The situation, according to international experts, is the result of a combination of factors. First, the system of pipes is old and poorly managed, with the result that the pipes lose almost 40 percent of the water that they distribute around the city. Second, the demand for water, which has grown with the rapid population growth, far exceeds the supply. Furthermore, the water

is consumed not only by residents for household use, but also by thirsty industries such as beer-brewers and soft-drink bottlers, and there is little incentive' for them to conserve or recycle water.

**Topic: …………………………………………………………………………………………**

**2.** The current water shortages in Mexico City contrast remarkably with the city's situation in the past. When the Spanish arrived at the Aztec capital in 1519, they found stone buildings and gardens set on an island in the middle of a vast series of interconnected lakes—an "enchanted vision," according to one Spanish soldier. The Spanish destroyed the buildings, and began draining' the water from the lakes to build what became Mexico City. For the next four centuries, the city was able to meet its water needs from springs, shallow wells, and the remaining lake water. In the mid-nineteenth century, the residents of the city began taking water from the underlying aquifer. In the twentieth century, as water needs grew and supplies

from the aquifer became inadequate, city authorities brought water up from two nearby river systems. Twenty-five years ago, they began piping in water from 80 miles (130 km) away. Because Mexico City is located on a highland, the water must all be pumped uphill at considerable expense.

**Topic: …………………………………………………………………………………………**

**3.** Related to the shortages is another problem: the city is sinking. Other cities around the world (such as Venice, Italy) are also experiencing this phenomenon, but the situation is most dramatic in Mexico City. Some neighborhoods are going down by as much as 15 inches (40 cm) a year, or a total of about 30 feet (9.1 m) over the last century. The cause is simply the fact that water is being removed from the aquifers faster than it can be replaced by rainwater. As water is removed, the spongy soil dries up and becomes more compact,' and the city slowly settles down. The effects are evident. At the Monument to Independence, which was built at ground level in 1910, twenty-three more steps were recently added to reach the

base from the current ground level. Buildings and streets have been damaged by the uneven settling of the city, and so have the water and sewage systems. Since the city is now 6 feet below the level of nearby Lake Texcoco, flooding has become a frequent problem and because of the poor state of the sewage system, the flood waters are often full of untreated waste.

**Topic: …………………………………………………………………………………………**

**Topic Sentences**

Paragraphs in English usually contain a topic sentence that lets the reader know what the

paragraph is about. Although this sentence is usually near the beginning of the paragraph,

it can also be found in the middle or at the end.

**Exercise 2** : *Each of the paragraphs is missing a topic sentence. The missing sentences are listed at the end of the exercise (with one extra sentence). Working with another student, read the paragraphs and write the letter of the sentence that fits each paragraph best.*

**The Pollution of the Oceans**

**1.** No one can calculate the quantity of solid waste that has been dumped' in the world's oceans, but the total certainly exceeds many millions of tons. For example, from 1880 to 1895, 75 percent of the solid waste from New York City was dumped untreated into the Atlantic Ocean. Although it is now prohibited by law, the dumping of solid waste, including wastewater sludge, industrial waste, and high-level radioactive waste were common in the United States until 1970. Cruise ships and huge floating fishing factories still regularly dispose of their solid waste products directly into the ocean.

**2.** The earth naturally recycles water and refreshes the land in what is called the hydrological cycle. The hydrological cycle not only renews the supply of water, but cleans it as well. The process begins as heat from the sun causes sea water, 97 percent of the earth's total water reserve, to evaporate' and form clouds. Because water evaporates at lower temperatures than most pollutants, the water vapor that rises from the seas is relatively pure and free of the contaminants, which are left behind. Next, water returns to earth as rain, which drains into streams and rivers and rushes toward the sea.

**3.** Chemicals, petroleum products, and other dangerous substances such as radioactive materials remain in the ocean, polluting it permanently. The polluted ocean water kills fish or makes them dangerous to eat, posing health problems for those who consume them. It kills the tiny sea creatures that are the source of food for larger fish, sharks, and whales. It also spoils a source of great beauty and pleasure when some solid waste is thrown onto beaches during storms. Discharged petroleum products are frequently found on beaches and they not only ruin the beach, the petroleum residue' kills hundreds of shore birds.

**4.** Nonpoint pollutants are dumped into lakes, rivers, and streams that may be far away from any ocean. However, these pollutants flow, eventually, into the oceans. They can come from a variety of sources, from road salt to agricultural pesticides. One source of nonpoint pollution is runoff from farming, including fertilizers, manure, and pesticides. Another source is industrial runoff, including heavy metals, phosphorous, and many other chemicals. Urban runoff (oils, salts, various chemicals) and atmospheric fallout of airborne pollution are other sources of nonpoint pollutants that reach the oceans.

**5.** This includes water and waste from sinks, toilets, washing machines, and bathtubs. The problem with this type of waste is that it provides massive amounts of nutrients for water plants, such as algae, so that they grow rapidly. This sudden growth causes concentrations or algae blooms, which use up the oxygen in the water. As the oxygen levels of the water decline, many organisms suffer and die, and the ocean ecosystem is radically altered. This can be prevented by the installation of waste treatment plants that prevent waste from entering the sea, but such facilities do not exist in many poorer countries.

**Missing topic sentences:**

**a.** Although the hydrological cycle produces clean water in the form of rain, it does not

remove the pollutants that steadily build up in the oceans.

**b.** New laws and regulations make it difficult for people to dump their trash into the

oceans.

**c.** The oceans have long served as a vast dumping ground for all kinds of waste.

**d.** These are just a few of the problems caused by using the oceans as dumping grounds.

**e.** Wastewater dumping is yet another major form of ocean pollution.

**f.** Some pollutants in the ocean are not dumped there directly.

**Source :**

Mikulecky. S & Jeffries. L (2007). *Advanced reading power : Extensive reading, vocabulary building, comprehension skills, reading faster*. Longman: USA.