What is the main idea?
A general statement about the paragraph (or reading selection). The main idea is a sentence that provides the subject for discussion; it is the topic sentence. It is usually supported by a list of details. If you can tell what the supporting details have in common, you can discover the main idea.

Example 1:
1. There are many kinds of unusual plants.  
2. Cactuses, for instance, can survive in the great heat of the desert sun at noon and in the bitter cold of the desert at night.  
3. Instead of regular leaves, they have needles that serve as a defense against hungry animals.  
4. Their stems are full of hollow cells that store enough water to last for months.  
5. These features make the cactus a remarkable plant, able to live in one of nature’s harshest environments.

What is the main idea of this passage?

Helpful hints:
- A reading selection is likely to have three kinds of sentences: a main idea, supporting details, and sometimes a general or catchy introduction. The main idea can be found anywhere among these.
- Read the paragraph out loud to yourself, if possible, and think...what or who the paragraph is about.
- The main idea is usually general—though only general enough to encompass the list of details. It will rarely contain specific information such as dates, numbers, and examples.
- The main idea will sometimes contain clue words that give a name to the list of supporting details:
  - “There are several kinds of...”
  - “Use the following steps to...”
  - “For these reasons...”
  - “There are several ways to...”
- Contrasting transition words like “However”, “But”, and “Yet” often begin the main idea, as in the following example.

Example 2:
1. You may think golf is difficult.  
2. However, there are several easy ways to improve your golf score.  
3. First, try holding the club with your...

Sentence 1 is a general introduction; it is not the main idea because the author does not give details about golf being "difficult." Sentence 2 is the main idea because a list of details supports it. The word however is the contrasting transition that shifts the reader’s focus from the introduction to the main idea.
Answer Key

Example 1: Sentence 5 is the main idea: “These features make the cactus a remarkable plant, able to live in one of nature’s harshest environments.”