Finding the Main Idea
Using Stasis Theory

What is stasis theory?
Stasis theory was used as early as the fourth century by ancient rhetors to develop their theses. The word stasis is Greek for "a stand." "Thus, a stasis can refer to the position where one rhetor takes up a stand. Seen from the point of view of two disputants, however, the stasis marks the place where two opposing forces come together, where they rest or stand in agreement on what is at issue" (Crowley 33). It is the job of rhetors to move their audience from the stasis, the point they agree to disagree about, to their view. Hence, the rhetor must first determine where the stasis lies in order to establish his thesis and then to begin changing the mind of the audience.

How is stasis theory used?
In order to find the issue, along with the point of agreement and disagreement, the ancient rhetor Hermagoras suggested that the rhetor ask the following questions about a situation:
1. Conjecture-- "Is there an act to be considered?"
2. Definition-- "How can the act be defined?"
3. Quality-- "How serious is the act?"
4. Procedure-- "Should this act be submitted to some formal procedure?" (Crowley 37)

These same questions are still used today in courts of law. For example, I received a speeding ticket and I'd like to contest it in court. I would ask myself these four questions to determine where I need to begin my argument to convince the judge that my ticket was undeserved.

Conjecture: "Was I speeding?" The first question I ask myself is one of conjecture--did the act occur? The judge and I will both agree on this point; she would say that I was speeding, and I would say the same.

Definition: "What is speeding?" The question is one of definition, how the act is defined. Perhaps the judge and I have different definitions of speeding. She would say that even one mile over the speed limit is speeding, and I might think that it isn't speeding unless you go at least 10 miles over the posted speed limit. But I have to agree with the judge again on this, since the law states that speeding is exceeding the posted speed limit, no matter by how much.

Quality: "Is speeding bad?" The question of quality is one of how good or bad something is. The judge would assert that any speeding is bad, no matter what the circumstances. But, here is where we differ. I believe that there are some situations where speeding is justified. In my situation, I was driving late at night, on a deserted road, by myself. I was trying to get home quickly so I could feel safe. I think that speeding, in my situation, wasn't bad.

Since I found the point where we begin to differ, I am ready to establish my thesis. I can begin at the point where we agree, then move onto the point where we disagree. I know that I was speeding, but my speeding wasn't bad.
A rhetor would use this same process in determining his thesis, whether speaking or writing. But how can this same theory apply to readers?

How does stasis theory lead a reader to the main idea?
1. Read the selection
2. Determine the subject. This will usually be just one word.
3. Determine which of Hermagoras’ questions the text answers by asking the four questions regarding the subject.
   - Conjecture—Does it exist?
   - Definition—What is it?
   - Quality—Is it good or bad?
   - Procedure—Should we do something about it?
4. The answer to the question is the main idea.

Try using these steps with the opening paragraph from Walter E. Williams’ article, “The Freedom to Destroy Yourself.”

“Men never do evil so cheerfully and thoroughly as when they do it with religious conviction,’ says Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French philosopher. Such a statement can readily be applied to some of the laws in the United States. A good example are the laws against the sale and possession of heroin. Our society has decided that heroin consumption is not good for the individual. On this I personally agree. But the question is whether we should outlaw those things which most of us agree are not good for the individual.” (Essays 500)

1. Read the selection.
2. Determine the subject.
   Williams has chosen to talk about heroin use.
3. Ask Hermagoras’ four questions regarding the subject, and find which question the article answers.
   - Conjecture—Does heroin use exist? Williams already assumes that his audience agrees with him; it is a given that people use heroin.
   - Definition—Williams doesn’t spend any time telling us what heroin consumption involves. He assumes that his audience knows heroin is a drug and that it is consumed in a variety of ways.
   - Quality—Williams does talk about quality in his argument. He states that people agree that heroin use is bad, which shows his assumptions about the audience—they will also agree with this idea.
   - Procedure—The question as to what we should do about heroin use will be the issue of Williams’ argument.
4. The answer to the question is the main idea.
   Since Williams only presents the question in his opening paragraph, to find the main idea we must read the entire text. We know that the text is going to answer what to do about heroin use, and that answer is Williams’ main idea.
Using the same process, try to determine the main ideas for the following excerpts:

1. “The ‘what’ we are being asked to consider today, of course, is voluntary euthanasia. So that there be no confusion, let me make quite clear that to be opposed to the active taking of life, one does not have to be determined to keep the heart beating at all costs.

   I believe I speak for all responsible physicians when I say that there clearly comes a time when death can no longer be held at bay, and when we must sue for peace on the enemy’s terms. At such a time, attending to the patient’s comfort in body, mind, and soul becomes paramount. There is no obligation, indeed no justification, for pressing on at such a time with so called life sustaining measures, be they respirators, intravenous fluids, CPR or whatever . . . . Also, withholding useless treatment and letting nature take its course is not equivalent to active euthanasia. Some people have attempted to blur this distinction by creating the term “passive euthanasia.” The least unkind thing that can be said about this term is that it is very confusing.” (Conolly 347-8)

2. “I, a white male, have suffered from affirmative action. A major University told me they would love to hire me. But the department was all white and all male, and they were looking to hire a minority woman. I have been denied the chance to make a living because I am white and male. Yet I remain convinced that affirmative action is good social policy . . . .

   Affirmative action may not always be fair. But I’m willing to take second best if overall fairness is achieved. After all, for biblical Christians, fairness—often translated in our Bibles as “justice” or “righteousness”—is a fundamental principle by which God calls us to live. And affirmative action is an appropriate part of a larger program aimed at achieving the godly goal of putting others’ welfare before my own.” (Spickard 12)

Works Cited