

Teaching Main Idea

Goals:

Identifying main ideas and working out the relationship between main ideas and supporting details is really the essence of reading comprehension. If we cannot understand what an author is trying to say or why an author has chosen to provide us with certain details, then we won't understand the text. Yet, finding the main idea of a reading selection is one of the most difficult skills a reader must manage.

Identifying the main idea and determining what is important are prerequisite skills in summarizing a text. Summarizing requires readers to determine important—and discard unimportant—details and to put the main ideas in their own words. Identifying the main idea teaches students to discriminate between the important information and the less important details in a text.

The ability to identify essential ideas and salient information is a prerequisite to developing critical reading skills (Harvey, 2000).

In understanding the concept of a "main idea," it is useful to distinguish between the following terms: topic, main idea, theme, and topic sentence.

- The topic of a text is the subject, or what the text is about. A topic can be expressed as a *noun* or a *noun phrase*. Some examples of topics include recycling, mammals, trees of New England, and names.
- An idea is what you say about a topic. Ideas, including the main idea, are expressed as sentences. If someone asks you to identify the main idea of a passage and you respond with a single word, you haven't said enough; you've probably just identified the topic. Some examples of main ideas include:
 - Recycling is expensive in the short term, but yields long-term savings.
 - All mammals are the same in certain ways.
 - The trees of New England are the most beautiful in the world.
 - It's no fun when someone makes fun of your name.

Teaching Main Idea

- A theme is an idea that is repeated throughout a text or collection of texts. For example, "the importance of family in shaping identity" is a theme that can be found throughout literature.
- A topic sentence is the term used to identify the sentence in a paragraph that contains the main idea. Conventionally, the topic sentence is the first sentence in a paragraph, but not always. It can be at the beginning, the middle, or the end. While some paragraphs don't really have an easily identifiable topic sentence, some have more than one. (Which is the topic sentence in this paragraph?) Nevertheless, topic sentences are useful in determining the relationship between main ideas and supporting details.

This skill is made easier by knowing how to identify the supporting details in a reading selection. For example, consider the following:

All mammals are the same in certain ways. They all have lungs, hair or fur, and the ability to nurse their young.

These two sentences obviously bear an important relationship: the first carries the main idea while the second supplies details that support the main idea.

- Distinguish between specific and general words
- Distinguish between specific and general sentences
- Identify the topic of a paragraph
- Identify the controlling thought in a paragraph
- Identify the topic sentence in the paragraph
- Infer the main idea when a topic sentence is absent
- Paraphrase the main idea
- Identify supporting details in a paragraph
- Use transition words to help understand the organization of the paragraph

A paragraph is a group of related sentences about a single topic

- TOPIC: the subject of the whole paragraph
- MAIN IDEA: the point that the whole paragraph makes
- DETAILS: the sentences that explain the main idea

Teaching Main Idea

- TRANSITIONS: words and phrases to connect the ideas

General vs. Specific

- The main idea in a paragraph is a *general idea*. In contrast, the supporting information in a paragraph is made up of *specific* ideas and details.
- To improve your skill at finding main ideas, you need to practice distinguishing between general and specific ideas.
- The general idea includes all the specific ideas.

See if you can identify the general word in each group.

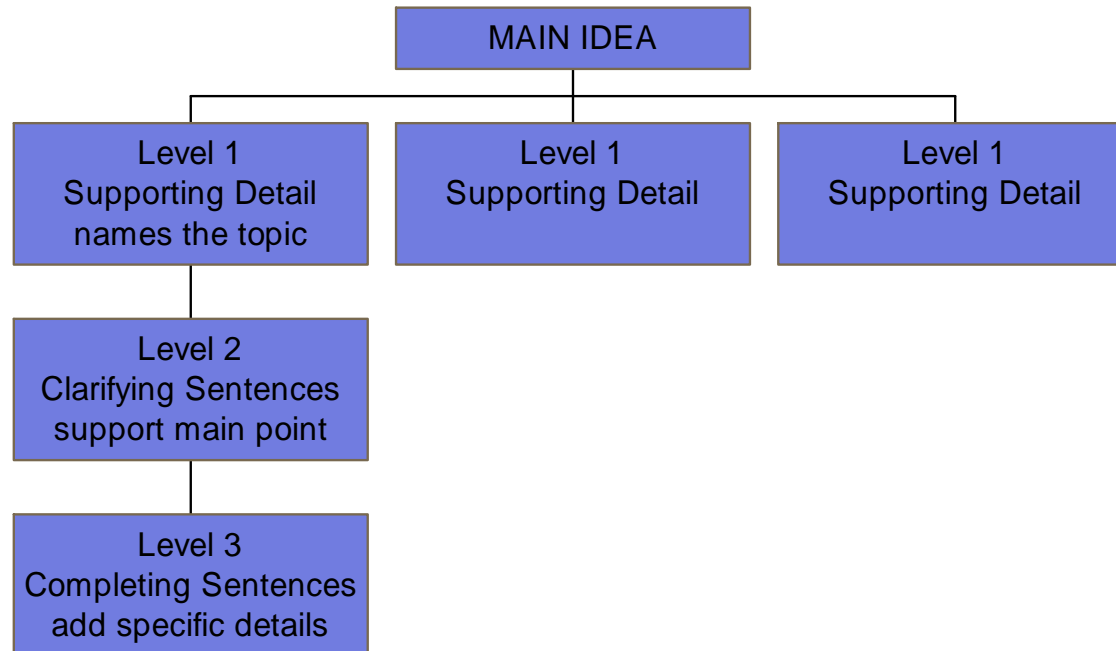
- a) jealousy hatred emotion worry
- b) spiders cockroaches mosquitoes insects
- c) chemistry science physics biology

Answers and Explanations

- a) The general idea is "emotions" because it includes all of the others as examples.
- b) The general idea is "insects" because it includes all of the others as examples.
- c) The general idea is "science" because it includes all of the others as examples

Teaching Main Idea

Recognizing Supporting Details



Types of Supporting Details

- Examples, Illustrations
- Facts and Statistics
- Reasons
- Incident
- Descriptive Details
- Steps or Procedures
- Comparison or Contrast

Teaching Main Idea

Direct strategy instruction + self-monitoring+ guided practice= increased ability to identify the main idea and discriminate between main idea and supporting details.

Teaching Students to Locate Main Idea and Distinguish Supporting Details

It is a multiple step process:

- 1. Teach term concepts (model with think aloud; show examples) so that students**
- 2. Focus first on helping student identify explicit main idea (vs. implied main idea).**
- 3. Begin with shorter pieces of expository text or paragraphs.**
- 4. Teach students the main idea annotation strategy**
- 5. Provide a “cheat sheet” with procedures, prompts and transition word list.**
- 6. Help students internalize the “cheat sheet”.**
- 7. Provide lots of practice.**