



Comprehension – Main Idea

Introduction

Being able to determine the main idea helps readers to recall important information. Locating the main idea and significant details helps the reader understand the points the writer is attempting to express. Identifying the relationship between these will improve comprehension.

This strategy provides a model of explicit instruction for teaching students how to determine main idea. Students begin by learning the definition of main idea and then apply this definition to identify the main idea in sentences and short texts. The ability to identify the main idea in a text, whether it is stated directly or inferred, is critical for students to gain meaning when reading.

Students need to pay attention to the most relevant information in the text and to guide them to develop a main idea statement based on the following information:

- Who or what the paragraph is about (the topic of the paragraph, which will usually be the subject of the main idea statement).
- The most important information about the “who” or “what”.

Students are taught to combine the above elements into a main idea statement with 10 words or less, eliminating nonessential details.

The following teaching steps are adapted from Denton, C., Bryan, D., Wexler, J., Reed, D. Vaughn, S. (2007) Effective instruction for middle school students with reading difficulties: The reading teacher’s sourcebook. University of Texas Systems/Texas Education Agency

Purpose

The students will determine the **main idea**, and important **details** of a paragraph.

Teaching Steps

1. **Develop and activate background knowledge**
 - a. **Define the steps and skills needed**

Notes:

To make text accessible for all students at each step of the strategy, text is read by teacher or peer or made accessible through use of CD or text to speech software.

Provide adequate levels of modelled, guided and independent practice at each step of the strategy to ensure mastery. Mastery requires an accuracy $\geq 80\%$. (e.g 4 out of 5 correct responses, 8 out of 10 correct responses on at least 3 separate occasions).

Steps of Strategy	Skills needed – <i>Students can</i>	Cut back / Adjustments – <i>Teachers will</i>
<p>Find the main idea given a list significant details as phrases e.g. 'a hairy huntsman', 'a shiny red back' - spiders</p>	<p>Understand the vocabulary and concepts contained within selected phrases.</p> <p>Determine what is the same about a list (categorise).</p> <p>Apply Rule 1 from "Main Idea and Summarisation Instruction to Improve Reading Comprehension".</p> <p><u>Rule 1</u>: Reduce lists and label.</p> <p>Give a category name.</p> <p>Record a category name.</p>	<p>Use single words not phrases</p> <p>Pre-teach vocabulary.</p> <p>Use familiar topics.</p> <p>Model asking and answering questions - 'who' is doing 'what', to determine main idea.</p> <p>Revise categorising and labelling.</p> <p>Model then scaffold using questions and sentence stems e.g. These are all...</p> <p>Introduce graphic organisers as a way to record how ideas are linked.</p>
<p>Find the main idea of a sentence which has the main idea stated and examples listed e.g. 'When we are awake, asleep, playing or watching T.V., <u>we breathe air</u>'</p>	<p>As above</p>	<p>As above</p>
<p>Find the main idea when the topic sentence is the initial sentence, then final sentence and then embedded within the paragraph.</p> <p>List significant details.</p>	<p>Understand vocabulary in the text.</p> <p>Access adequate background knowledge.</p> <p>Understand about topic sentences and how they are used in writing to summarise the paragraph.</p> <p><u>Rule 2</u>: Cross out repeated information</p> <p><u>Rule 3</u>: Cross out unimportant details</p> <p><u>Rule 4</u>: Select the topic sentence</p> <p>Determine which sentence is the topic sentence.</p> <p>Record topic sentence and significant details.</p>	<p>Pre-teach vocabulary.</p> <p>Develop background knowledge.</p> <p>Underline main idea and circle supporting details.</p> <p>Record topic sentence and significant details or accept it given orally.</p> <p>Use graphic organiser as a prompt to show supporting details and main idea.</p>
<p>Find the main idea when the topic sentence is the initial sentence, then final sentence and then embedded in the paragraph and <u>paraphrase</u>.</p> <p>List significant details.</p>	<p>As above.</p> <p><u>Rule 5</u>: Write your own topic sentence</p> <p>Say and write topic sentence in own words.</p>	<p>Pre-teach vocabulary.</p> <p>Develop background knowledge.</p> <p>Use strategy for retell to paraphrase topic sentence.</p> <p>Use graphic organiser as a prompt to show significant details and to assist with paraphrasing main idea.</p>

Steps of Strategy	Skills needed – <i>Students can</i>	Cut back / Adjustments – <i>Teachers will</i>
Find main ideas in extracts or short whole texts using contents, headings and subheadings in conjunction with visual organisers and semantic webs to formulate main idea.	<p>Understand vocabulary in the text.</p> <p>Locate and understand the importance of contents, heading and subheadings.</p> <p>Place information into visual organiser.</p> <p>Select key words under each heading and use as a guide to sentence formation</p> <p>Use information to make up a brief outline of information.</p>	<p>Pre-teach vocabulary.</p> <p>Develop background knowledge. Teach where to find 'contents' and 'headings' and 'subheadings'.</p> <p>Model placing this information into visual organiser and look back at information, highlight key words and use these to form a sentence or dot points, under each heading. (Key words will reflect answers to the 'wh' questions.)</p>
Find the main idea to summarise when the topic sentence or main idea is inferred in some paragraphs in longer texts using the 5 rules suggested above.	<p>Understand vocabulary in the text.</p> <p>Comprehend texts at the literal and inferential level.</p> <p>Identify topic sentences in paragraphs.</p> <p>Identify inferred main idea in a paragraph.</p> <p>Follow the 5 rules above, for summarising.</p>	<p>Pre-teach vocabulary.</p> <p>Develop background knowledge</p> <p>Use graphic organiser as a prompt to show significant details and main idea.</p> <p>Provide practice underlining explicit topic sentences when given.</p> <p>Provide practice in writing inferred topic sentences to summarise text.</p> <p>Return to simpler, shorter text selections.</p>

- b. Through observation, assessment and asking questions determine where your students are up to in this series of skills. This is important especially for your students with reading difficulties, who may need to work at an earlier level of strategy development to the rest of the class.**

For those students who are unable to work with written text, the following framework will provide suggested adjustments using visual texts. These students may be those who are unable to read the written text as well as those who require instruction at a concrete level.

Steps of Strategy	Skills needed – <i>Students can</i>	Cut back /Adjustments – <i>Teachers will</i>
<p>Group objects, photos, pictures and then words (given orally) that are the same in some way and then give a reason for grouping and label for categorisation.</p>	<p>Understand the concepts 'same' and 'different'</p> <p>Group and label familiar objects, photos, pictures.</p> <p>Identify the most important feature of a group and give a reason and label.</p> <p>Give label to a group of words or phrases.</p> <p>Understand the vocabulary used.</p>	<p>Teach 'same', 'different' using examples and non examples.</p> <p>Give practice grouping objects, photos and pictures and labeling.</p> <p>Pre-teach vocabulary.</p>
<p>Give the 'main idea' of a picture and then a series of sequential pictures.</p>	<p>Identify the most important fact about a picture and give a title.</p> <p>Order pictures sequentially.</p> <p>Select from a series of pictures the most important character/s (subjects) and actions and then group or categorise subjects and actions.</p>	<p>Provide pictures of increasing complexity from those with few details to those with many.</p> <p>Using these pictures of increasing complexity model giving a main idea.</p> <p>Ask questions - 'who' (the subject) is doing 'what' (the action), 'where', 'when' and 'why' to assist students to determine main idea.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for students to select the main idea of a picture / pictures from 2 - 4 examples read to students.</p> <p>Teach how to list multiple answers for 'who' and 'did what' and categorise and label answers for each.</p>
<p>Understand what significant details are related to pictures.</p>	<p>Use information from pictures to justify why the main idea has been chosen by orally giving details.</p> <p>Explain that these details are called significant or supporting details.</p>	<p>Give a title to a picture and ask 'why' the title given to the picture is appropriate.</p> <p>Explain that the answer provides the significant details.</p> <p>Give examples of multiple subjects e.g. 'the children' (boys and girls) and multiple actions e.g. 'playing' (running, catching etc) and discuss what each subject is doing – the details</p>

c. Materials required

- Copies of a short text.
- Blank main idea sheet on IWB.
- Pictures or cartoons depicting simple actions.
- Several blank main idea sheets (see appendix).

2. State Objective/Purpose and Explain the Benefits

Teacher:

Today I am going to show you a strategy, or plan of action, that will help you determine the main idea of each paragraph as you read. It is important to be able to identify main ideas so you can monitor your understanding as you are reading. Good readers find the main idea of each paragraph to help them summarise the text in their own words.

3. Model and Teach the Strategy

Genre: Non-fiction

Grouping: Whole class

- Define main idea using the 'Get the Gist' strategy.

Teacher:

The name of the strategy you will be learning today is 'Get the Gist'. If you get the gist of something you read or hear or see on TV, you understand the most important ideas. The 'Get the Gist' strategy is a step-by-step way to help you find the most important ideas in paragraphs you read. The strategy has three parts:

- *Ask yourself, "Who or what is the paragraph about?"*
- *Ask yourself, "What is the most important information about the 'who' or 'what?'"*
- *Say it in a main idea statement with 10 words or less.*

One way to introduce this strategy to students is to teach it without text.

- Look at a cartoon or picture of an animal doing something. No words are necessary, just a character involved in some sort of action. For instance, a dog jumping to catch a Frisbee in his mouth. Perhaps there are surrounding trees, flowers, and sunshine. Now ask the students to look at the cartoon.

Teacher: *In one or two words, tell me who or what this cartoon is about.*

Students: *A dog.*

Teacher: *What is the most important thing about the dog?*

Students: *He's jumping to catch a Frisbee.*

Some students may mention the flowers, or the trees, or that it is a sunny day. If this happens, ask questions to guide students to see the difference between the most important idea and non-essential details.

Teacher: *Is the sunny day the most important thing about the cartoon? If we just looked at this picture, would we say, "This is a picture of a dog on a sunny day," or would we say, "This is a picture of a dog jumping to catch a Frisbee"?*

Now that the students have identified "who" or "what" the cartoon is about, and the most important information about the "who" or the "what," ask them to count on their fingers to come up with a main idea statement that has 10 words or less. For example:

- The dog is jumping to catch a Frisbee. (8 words)
 - The dog is catching a Frisbee in his mouth. (9 words)
 - The dog leaps to catch a Frisbee. (7 words)
- Repeat with other cartoons or pictures if needed, until students clearly understand the concept of main idea and the 'Get the Gist' strategy.

- Give students a copy of a short passage. This is giving practice in at the level: ‘Find the main idea when the topic sentence or main idea is inferred in a short paragraph of 3-4 sentences. List significant details’
 - Show a blank main idea sheet (See Appendix).
 - Preview the passage: Look at illustrations, title, headings, and bold words.
 - Write the title or topic of the selection on the line provided.
 - Prior knowledge: Ask students to think about what they already know about the topic. Accept responses.
 - Read the first paragraph with the students.
 - Reread the paragraph one or two sentences at a time. Think aloud as you identify who or what the paragraph is about and the most important thing about the “who” or “what.” Be sure to include in the think aloud the process of deciding what is the most important thing and why. Record in appropriate spaces on the main idea form.
 - Think aloud the process of identifying important details in the passage. Ask questions such as, “Is this detail important?” “The important information in this sentence is...” “This detail is not important because...” Then record important details in the appropriate column.
 - Think aloud how you make sure that all of the important details are related to the main idea.
 - After reading an additional paragraph, show students sample main idea statements, some that are correct and some that are incorrect. Discuss each statement and determine whether it is an accurate statement of the main idea.
 - Provide additional modelled practice as required.

4. Memorise the Strategy

Use the ‘Main Idea Chart’ (see Appendix) to memorise the strategy. Put it up in the classroom, use it as a prompt.

5. Guided Practice – support the strategy collaboratively

Grouping: Partners

- Give partners a blank main idea sheet.
- Working with a partner, have students read the next paragraph and use the ‘Get the Gist’ strategy. Ask students to work with their partners to come up with a main idea statement that includes:
 - Who or what the paragraph is about.
 - The most important thing about the “who” or the “what” stated in 10 words or less.
- Share main idea statements with the class. Think aloud with the class to modify any statements that are inaccurate or incomplete. Also emphasize that all of the main idea statements do not have to be exactly the same in order to be correct.
- Ask students to record important details that relate to the main idea.
- Circulate around the room and be available to clarify and check for accurate details. Continue to ask questions such as, “What are the most important details?”
- At the end, ask partners to share the important details and tell why they think the details they selected are important.
- Provide additional guided practice as required.

6. Independent Practice – use the strategy by yourself

Grouping: Partners, then individual

Provide an additional short passage or the next few paragraphs in a chapter and have students use a main idea sheet to develop a main idea statement and record significant details.

Initially, have students work with a partner, and after students are more proficient, ask them to use this strategy independently.

7. Generalization

Teacher: *Think about your other classes. Raise your hand if you can think of a way to use the 'Get the Gist' strategy in another class.*

Student: *We could use the strategy in science class.*

Teacher: *How would that look?*

Student: *Well, we could find the main idea of each paragraph as we read the chapter.*

Teacher: *That's right. Do you have to have a main idea sheet to do that?*

Student: *Well, we could draw our own form, or we could just come up with a main idea statement for each paragraph and write down the important details.*

Teacher: *Good thinking. Does anyone have a science textbook? Let's quickly look at a chapter together and see how we could take notes using the 'Get the Gist' strategy...*

8. Periodic Review/Multiple Opportunities to Practice

Students determine the main idea of an entire passage or chapter.

- Have students write the main idea statements for each paragraph in the passage.
- Use these statements to determine the main idea of the entire passage (summary)

Students may also use the main idea statements of each paragraph to write a summary of the entire passage or chapter (See Summarising). Students may also extend the main idea strategy to complete a main idea log (see Appendix) or some other note-taking form.

References

Coyne, M.D., Kame'enui, E.J. & Carnine, D.W. (2007). *Effective teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learners* (Third Edition), Pearson: New jersey.

Denton, C., Bryan, D., Wexler, J., Reed, D. Vaughn, S. (2007) *Effective instruction for middle school students with reading difficulties: The reading teacher's sourcebook*. University of Texas Systems/Texas Education Agency

Appendix

Main Idea Chart

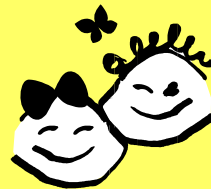
Main Idea Sheet

Main Idea Log

IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEA

'Get the Gist'

1. 'Who' or 'what' is the paragraph about?
2. What is the most important information about the 'who' or 'what'?
3. Say it in a main idea statement with 10 words or less.



MAIN IDEA SHEET

Name(s) _____ Date _____

Title or Topic of the Selection _____

Paragraph	Who or What is the Paragraph About?	Most Important Information About the "Who" or "What"	Key Details

Note: The complete main idea statement is formed by combining the "Who or What" column with the "Most Important Information" column.
Denton, C., Bryan, D., Wexler, J., Reed, D. Vaughn, S. (2007) p.107

MAIN IDEA LOG

Title of passage:

Identify three or four important ideas from the passage:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Write the main idea of the entire passage (10 words or less):

Generate three questions about important ideas:

(Who? What? Where? Why? How?)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Create one question about the passage that you think the teacher may ask you:

Denton, C., Bryan, D., Wexler, J., Reed, D. Vaughn, S. (2007), p.309