

## Chapter 5

# Distinguishing Main Ideas and Details

## What Are Main Ideas and Details?

The main idea of a selection can be defined as the overarching message or information in a text. It can be an abstract concept that serves as the central thought of a selection, or it can be as concrete as a topic sentence in a selection. In nonfiction, the main idea is usually written in a topic sentence or title; in fiction, the main idea may be connected to the theme and is not as apparent. Either way, it is the most important idea in a selection. It tells the reader what the selection is about.

## What Does the Literature Say?

The main idea is a tool used by readers to connect information in the text. Since readers use the main idea to help organize thoughts about the information given, this becomes an important support for readers' comprehension (Jitendra, Hoppes & Xin, 2000). According to research by the National Reading Panel (2000), one of the main components of comprehension, being able to understand concepts within a text, involves the ability to identify and recall main ideas and supporting details. This finding emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to identify the main idea and being able to connect the supporting details to the main idea.

Main ideas are easiest for readers to identify when the topic sentence states what the paragraph is about, but that is not the case in most texts. The placement of the main idea is important because if the main idea is not initially there for struggling or striving readers, research indicates that this may interfere with comprehension (Hedin & Conderman, 2010). It is often difficult for students to recognize the main idea if the text does not directly state a topic sentence or, as in most narrative text, if the main idea must be discerned from the writing. According to Wilawan (2011), being able to identify the most important ideas in a text is complex and involves multiple cognitive activities, such as understanding text structure and grasping main concepts from information in the text.

When Walmsley (2006) discusses main ideas and details in his article "Getting the Big Idea: A Neglected Goal for Reading Comprehension," he indicates that the main idea of a book relies on the main idea of paragraphs but extends into the "big ideas," which actually aid students in understanding the text at the sentence and paragraph level. Walmsley suggests that when readers focus on the "big idea," this actually promotes better understanding of the smaller details.

## Increasing Complexity through the Grades

In order to differentiate with tiered instruction focusing on the main idea and details, we need to think about how clearly or obtusely a main idea can be stated, the number of details given that support that idea, and existing details in the text that may confuse the reader. When the main idea is not directly stated or is a “big idea” that spins off the topic of the text, this makes it more difficult for students to identify the main idea. So, the goal for teachers would be to scaffold students when there is too much information or not enough explicit information.

**At grade three**, students are expected to be able to determine the main ideas and key details from both narrative and expository text (CCSS.RI.3.2). Students are expected to also state how key details support the main idea.

**At grade four**, students are expected to not only determine the main idea and identify supporting details, but to be able to summarize the text (CCSS.RI.4.2). This would involve students being able to differentiate between that which is important and that which is interesting.

**At grade five**, the expectation is that students can identify two or more main ideas and supporting details and summarize (CCSS.RI.5.2). In essence, this makes the task a bit more complex by adding another layer on to identifying the main idea, and text must be chosen carefully to ensure that two main ideas do coexist in the text. As teachers, we need to make sure that the supporting details are chosen accurately and align with the main idea.

## Model Lesson 1: Main Idea and Key Details

In fiction texts, the main idea and theme are often intertwined. For that reason, we are focusing more on paragraph level and not book level. We will look for smaller ideas within paragraphs and not the complete message of the story.

### **Lesson Objective:**

Students will be able to identify the main idea and details that support the message of the main idea.

### **Teacher Modeling**

Explaining main idea is relatively easy when students are reading or writing a patterned five-sentence paragraph. In reading regular texts, it is not so easy. Since we assume the main idea may not always be visible, we will start with a concrete explanation and have students tell us what the topic is and eventually identify and state the main idea. In order to do this, you can do a sports bag activity.

Bring in two sports bags. The first sports bag should contain a pair of soccer cleats, soccer shorts, and shin guards. (These can be pictures if preferred.) The second bag should contain baseball cleats, a baseball cap, and a baseball glove. (These can be pictures.) Hold up the two bags and ask, “What am I holding?” After students say sports bags, put them down on the table for a moment while you write the topic on the board as “sports.” Tell students that, as they read, they may figure out a main idea but must also unpack what the author has said to support the main idea.

Take out the contents of the first sports bag, and ask if they can tell you what sport the bag is about. Explain that the main idea of the first bag is soccer. Ask how students determined that the first bag was about soccer. Students will identify the items needed for soccer. Explain that these are the details that support the main idea of “soccer.” Put that bag aside and take out the contents of the second sports bag. Then ask, “What is the main idea of this bag?” Elicit the answer of “baseball.” Then ask students to share the details in the bag that helped them state the main idea. Students will explain that the items in the bag relate to baseball. Tell students that reading for main ideas and supporting

details is not much different. As they read books, they should look for the whole picture (soccer, baseball) and the details (contents of the sports bags) that support the main idea. Explain that in reading, there are often details that may not be easily identified as supporting the main idea, so students need to read between the lines.

To model this for students, we will use the following paragraph, although you could easily use excerpts from literature. (One example is from Patrick Catling's *The Chocolate Touch* (1952) on page 13, where he describes the main character's bad fault.)

My neighbor, Mrs. Gonsalves, loves to travel. She says she keeps her suitcase packed and ready to go. Last year she went to Colorado, New York, and Portugal. This year she is going to Puerto Rico, back to New York, and to Vermont to ski. I just wish Mrs. Gonsalves would go to Disney World and take me with her!

Show the above paragraph on a projector or chart. Read and explain that the main idea is that Mrs. Gonsalves loves to travel. Then explain that the paragraph has lots of supporting details as the author names where Mrs. Gonsalves has been and where she is going, and this all supports the main idea.

Show students how you would write down the main idea and supporting details by writing the following on the board:

**Main idea**

Mrs. Gonsalves loves to travel.

**Supporting details**

Says her suitcase is always packed

Went to Colorado, New York, and Portugal

Will be going to Puerto Rico, New York, and Vermont

Tell students they will write all the supporting details down when doing this and that usually there are a few supporting details. To model a more implicit main idea, we will continue with the next paragraph and show the following to students:

My mom says she wishes Mrs. Gonsalves would take her, too. Mom says she doesn't care where Mrs. Gonsalves is going. She says she'd always want to come back home to me! Mom and I live in Illinois and we have been to Missouri, but that's it. I would only want to go with Mrs. Gonsalves if she were going to Disney World.

Explain to students that the main idea is not stated in this paragraph, but the reader must decide what it is. Read the sentence and explain your thinking to students. You may say something like, "I think the author is telling us something important here. Look at what the author has written: The author says the main character's mom would go with Mrs. Gonsalves'. I think the author is telling us that the mom really wants to travel but doesn't have the money." Explain that this can be stated in different ways, although it really says the same thing. As long as what someone says is the correct main idea, it doesn't matter if it is said a bit differently. Model this on the board. Write down the main idea in a couple of different ways. Then list the supporting details.

**Main idea**

Mom would like to travel. OR

Mom would like to go someplace for a visit.

**Supporting details**

Says her Mom would go with Mrs. Gonsalves.

Mom wishes to go.

Mom has only been to Illinois and Missouri.

Although there are many graphic organizers on main idea and supporting details, we prefer that students write down the terms. This allows them to write as much information as they want or need and gives practice with the terms themselves. When a state test requires main ideas or supporting details, it is important that students understand these academic terms.

**Guided Practice**

For guided practice, you first want to review main idea and supporting details with students by explaining that sometimes the main idea is stated and sometimes the reader has to figure it out. For example, we will use pages from *The Chocolate Touch* for guided practice and explain that sometimes it takes more than one paragraph to grasp the author's main idea. In the story, John, who is a "pig" about chocolate, found a magic coin that he spent at a fantasy chocolate shop. He has hidden his chocolate purchase upstairs under his bed and pretends (to his parents) he is tired. So on pages 31 to 34, John is convincing his parents he is tired and wants to go to bed, even though it is early. His mother puts him to bed and he pretends to immediately fall asleep. After his mother leaves his bedroom, John jumps out of bed and gets the chocolate. He is planning on devouring the whole chocolate purchase.

Begin by having students write on a piece of paper the term *main idea* in preparation for after reading. As you read or students read, tell them to think about what John's main purpose is on these pages, as that will lead them to the main idea. After finishing the reading, ask what the main idea of this selection was and what was going on in John's mind. Discuss the events and motivation for what took place. Although it is not stated, the author has John wanting to go to bed early, which leads readers to know that he wants to sneak and eat the chocolate under his bed. Students should identify the main idea. Have them write the main idea on their paper. When they do this, write down all the different ways students expressed the main idea on the board. The board may have something like this:

**Main idea**

John is going to bed early to eat his chocolate without his parents knowing. OR

John is being sneaky and pretending to go to bed. OR

John is not being honest. He just wants to eat the chocolate.

Now have students write down the term *supporting details*. Have them list what the author said that led them to this main idea. Supporting details should look like the following:

### **Supporting details**

John usually took a long time to go to bed.

He yawned very early in the evening.

Said he was sleepy.

John hates his tonic, but he ran and got it and took it quickly.

In bed, John pretended he was sleepy and then pretended he was asleep.

A few seconds after his mother left the bedroom, he got the chocolate basket.

Discuss the supporting details with students and ask, “How do you know when something supports the main idea?” Make sure students point out those actions that were not part of John’s usual behavior showed he was being sneaky. Then explain there is a pattern that aids us in identifying supporting ideas.

## **Student Application: Tiered Activities for Differentiation**

When first trying this activity, we recommend that you choose a book or a chapter that has an easily identifiable main idea. The activity for the initial level has a strong scaffold as you give the students the main idea. If they continue struggling with this concept, try giving them the details and letting them identify the main idea from the text.

### **Initial Level**

At this level, give students the main idea. Students should write down the term *main idea* on their paper and then state the main idea. Next, they are to write down *supporting details* and then list at least two supporting details from the text.

Teacher action: Give students the main idea. Make sure there are at least two supporting details students can identify.

### **Transitional Level**

At this level, give a statement to students that will help them discover the main idea. For example: “The main idea on these two pages has something to do with John’s behavior. It focuses on honesty.” Or, “The main idea is stated in the text, but you need to read and figure it out.” Then students must write the supporting details.

Teacher action: Give a hint about the main idea and tell students the total number of supporting details they should find.

## Accomplished Level

At this level, do not supply additional support. Students are to discover the main idea on their own and state the main idea in two different ways. Then they are to write the supporting details as modeled.

Teacher action: You may supply the number of supporting details students should find.

## Additional Recommended Books

DiCamillo, K. (2000). *Because of Winn-Dixie*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

Naylor, P. R. (1997). *Shiloh*. New York: Scholastic.

Steele, M. (2014). *On cue*. North Mankato, MN: Capstone.

## Model Lesson 2: Main Idea and Supporting Details

When dealing with informational text, we often assume that the main ideas and supporting details are more explicit than in fiction. Although this is often the case, there are many biographies or books that describe events in which the main idea is not explicitly stated and must be gleaned from details and comments within the text. The book, *Mr. Ferris and His Wheel* (Davis, 2014), is a case of both. This book portrays the building of the Ferris wheel for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. To summarize, the organizers wanted something built that would outshine the Eiffel Tower that had been showcased in the 1889 Paris World's Fair. People were skeptical that a big wheel, with room-sized compartments that cycle up and around high in the air, would be safe. This book alludes to the skepticism and events leading up to the success of what we now call the Ferris wheel.

### Lesson Objective:

Students will be able to identify the main idea and supporting details in an informational text.

### Teacher Modeling

As you begin your lesson on main ideas, explain to students that the main idea is the most important information from what you are reading, talking about, or doing. Teach or review the concept by beginning with some familiar scenarios and discussing the main idea of the actions. In partners, have students talk to each other about going to the toy aisles in a department store. What section of the toy aisles do they head for? What do they see? Some may go to the area with building blocks, others where the dolls are kept, and yet others to the games. All of the toys in these aisles support the main idea of *toys*. Let's continue "shopping" as we teach students the concept of what *main idea* means, along with how details aid us in identifying the main idea. Tell students to think about the signs they see in drugstores as you bring out a set of pictures. Use pictures of *details*, and explain to students how you figure out the main idea. Using either a presentation slide or pictures cut out from sales flyers, unpack your thinking as you identify the main idea. One group of pictures could be toothbrushes, toothpastes, dental floss, etc. As you show these pictures to students, explain that you can easily tell the items are used for cleaning our teeth, and the main idea that would most likely be seen on a store sign would be something like *dental hygiene* or *oral care products*. Some other ideas for modeling the concept of details supporting main ideas can be found in Figure 5-1 on page 55, *Working with Main Ideas*. The main idea of the set of pictures focusing on joy or happiness is a bit more abstract. As you model for students, emphasize the feeling of joy that each picture portrays.

Figure 5-1 Working with Main Ideas

Working with Main Ideas	
Suggested Picture Items (Details)	Main Idea
Paper, pencils, ruler, eraser, crayons	School supplies
Hiking boots, backpack, walking stick, bug repellent, poncho	Hiking equipment
Baseball, football, basketball, hockey stick, baseball bat and glove	Sports equipment
[more abstract] Someone jumping for joy, a person smiling, someone laughing, someone with the "yes!" smile, a giggling baby, victory sign with a smile	Happiness or joy

Talk about how activities and events in books can help the reader identify the main idea the author is trying to make. Sometimes the main idea is right there, but many times the reader has to figure it out.

Tell students the book you are going to read is about the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (or whatever book you chose to read and the topic), and that they will have to listen carefully to figure out the main idea. In the case of *Mr. Ferris and His Wheel*, read the first three pages. The book begins 10 months before the fair is to open and explains that the fair must have a star attraction that would impress the world and outshine the Eiffel Tower. A contest was announced for entries for the star attraction. Discuss what is happening with students and explain that the author is telling us that the Chicago World's Fair organizers wanted something better than the Eiffel Tower. Explain that the main idea can be stated a few ways and you will write these on the board (see finished example below). Explain to students that, in this text, the main idea is extremely clear—something needs to be built for the Chicago World's Fair that will outshine the Eiffel Tower, which was the star attraction at the last world's fair. After reading all three pages, we can state the main idea in different ways, but they all mean the same thing: America is in a challenge and must win by creating something better than the Eiffel Tower. Tell students, as in shopping for toys, we have to look for details in the text that support our identified main idea—that the author gives us facts that support the main idea. Reread the three pages, and write down the facts as you discuss the support with your students (see Figure 5-2: *Star Attraction* on p. 56).



Figure 5-2: Star Attraction

### Main idea

Star attraction must impress the world. (stated explicitly) OR

Star attraction must be much better than the Eiffel Tower. OR

Star attraction must be the best ever.

### Supporting details

It's America's turn to impress the world.

What could outshine the famous French tower?

A contest was announced because the organizers were looking for the best.

Judges said no to all because they were too much like the Eiffel Tower.

## Guided Practice

Once you have modeled how students are to identify the main ideas and supporting details, it is time to give them more responsibility with this task. We will continue on with *Mr. Ferris and His Wheel* to explain the process. The next five pages of the book describe how George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr. convinces the organizers to let him build the "Monster Wheel." The organizers allowed this with just four months left before the fair was to start. They were desperate, although they did not firmly believe this could be done. After reading, ask students what this section of the book was about. Can they identify the main idea the author is stating in these pages? After discussing, have students write "main idea" on a piece of paper and jot down the main idea as they would like to state it. Answers may look like:

### Main idea

Only George knew his idea of the Monster Wheel would work. OR

Most people doubted George could make the Monster Wheel. OR

George's pride in America made him determined to build the Monster Wheel.

Now have students go back into the text to find support for the main idea. Ask the following questions: "What things did the author tell you that made you decide the main idea? What in the book supports the main idea?" Tell students they are to write supporting details on their papers, as you had modeled previously. Then reread the text and guide students in writing down supporting details in their own words or using the sentences in the text. Possible answers:

### Supporting details

George thought it was a matter of national pride.

George couldn't allow a French tower to overshadow America's World's Fair.

George, with his co-worker William Gronau, worked hard on his invention.

The construction chief of the fair frowned upon George's idea.

Judges were desperate and said George could build the wheel.

Banks laughed at his idea and would not lend him money.

George used his own savings and money from investors to build the wheel.

At this point, if you think students are ready, you can assign independent practice. If not, model one more time. If you are using the Ferris wheel book, the main idea of the next four pages focuses on the hard work necessary to get the wheel built during the Chicago winter, especially with only four months to build. This can be assigned for student application, which is similar to what was done in the previous fiction text application.

### **Student Application: Tiered Activities for Differentiation**

Students will identify the main idea, whether it is explicitly stated in the text or needs to be figured out. The goal is get students to write as much as they can in their own words.

#### **Initial Level**

At this level, give students the main idea. Students should write down the term *main idea* on their paper with the stated main idea. Then they write down the term *supporting details*. Tell students they are to look for facts in the text that support the main idea and write down at least three of the important facts.

Teacher action: Give students the main idea. Make sure there are at least three facts that support the main idea. (If not, the main idea given may not be broad enough.)

#### **Transitional Level**

At this level, talk about the topic of the text and give students a hint as to what the main idea would be about. Then students must write the supporting details.

Teacher action: Make sure students know the topic and tell students the total number of supporting details.

#### **Accomplished Level**

At this level, do not supply additional support. Students are to discover the main idea on their own and state the main idea in two different ways. Then they are to write the supporting details as modeled.

Teacher action: You may supply the number of supporting details students should find.

### **Additional Recommended Books**

Edwards, R. (2010). *Who is Barack Obama? Who Was ...?* New York: Penguin Group.

Forten, C. (2014). *Diary of Charlotte Forten: a free black girl before the Civil War*. First-Person Histories. North Mankato, MN: Capstone.

Mochizuki, K. (1993). *Baseball saved us*. New York: Lee & Low Books.