

ASKING QUESTIONS TO FIND THE MAIN IDEA

By Linda Feaman and Nancy Geldermann

Finding the main idea of a paragraph, whether explicitly stated or implied, is a challenge for many students, particularly when reading substantive complex texts. Teaching students to use the following questioning process when finding the main idea helps them work through a logical thought process to uncover what the author is saying. Because the questions are sequenced and scaffolded, thinking is synthesized as students are pushed back into the text to find answers. With repeated practice, this process can become an intrinsic strategy for students to use when reading independently.

The process consists of the following steps:

1. Read the paragraph.
2. Ask the questions in sequence, going back to the text to formulate answers.
3. Identify the main idea as the answer to question #3.

In the following example, the main idea is explicitly stated in the last sentence of the paragraph, but without using the questioning process, many students might mistake the topic of the paragraph for its main idea. (He didn't just wonder about the world - he wondered about it differently than anyone else ever had.) The referenced text in the article is from *Albert Einstein* by Dana Meachen Rau.

Have you ever wondered how the world works? A scientist named Albert Einstein always wondered about that. He thought the world was an amazing place. He was interested in the huge objects found in outer space as well as the tiny bits of matter that can be seen only through a microscope. He had many new ideas, or theories, about the way the world works. He looked at the world in a way no one else ever had.

1. What is the topic of this paragraph? *Albert Einstein's wonderings about how the world works.*
2. What does the paragraph say about the topic? *He had many new ideas about the way the world works.*
3. What does the author want us to know about the many new ideas Einstein had about the way the world works? *He looked at the world in a way no one else ever had. (main idea)*

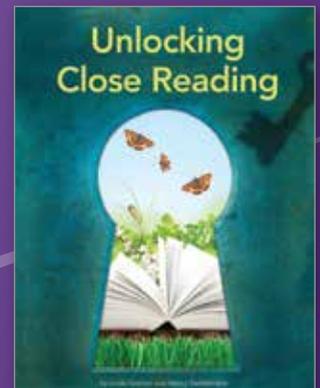
The next paragraph is more challenging, as it requires inference to understand why the compass worked in an unexpected way. The main idea is in the last sentence, but the questioning process helps uncover the extra information needed to have it make sense.

When Albert was five years old, his father showed him a compass. A compass is an instrument with a needle that shows the four directions - north, south, east, and west. People use it to show them which way they are going. Einstein was fascinated by the way the compass moved. The needle always pointed north no matter how he turned the compass. It made him think the world does not always work the way we expect it to.

1. What is the topic of this paragraph? *Young Albert's fascination with the workings of a compass.*
2. What does the paragraph say about the topic? *Einstein expected the needle of the compass to point in the direction he wanted to go, but unexpectedly, it always pointed north.*
3. What does the author want us to know about the unexpected workings of the compass? *Discovering that the needle always pointed north made Einstein realize that the world doesn't always work the way we expect it to. (main idea)*

Explicit teaching of this questioning process will help students approach challenging informational text with purpose and confidence and will grow their reading skills so that they become competent, capable independent readers.

Linda Feaman and Nancy Geldermann are the authors of *Unlocking Close Reading*, 2015, Capstone Professional.



Unlocking Close Reading • 978-1-62521-928-2

2015, Capstone Professional \$24.95