

Finding the Main Idea Lesson

Step One: Explain the assignment's purpose to the students

Learning to identify an author's main ideas is beneficial to us as both readers AND writers.

- As readers, it's important that we identify the main points of a text because
 - We want to understand and retain the author's main ideas.
 - Knowing the main ideas allows us to see the bigger picture and make connections between ideas in the text.
 - Too often, readers focus on details because details are interesting, but details illustrate the main points; they are NOT the main points. Remembering only details will not help the reader in the long run because details are not the central message of the text.
- As writers, being aware of the reader's need for clear main ideas will help us
 - Deliberately and purposely compose thesis statements and topic sentences.
 - Plan and organize our essays.
 - Achieve unity in our paragraphs.

Step Two: Explain the objective of the assignment to the students

Students will develop strategies for identifying an author's main ideas or main points.

Step Three: Define main ideas with the students

Some students will know what the main idea is but others may be unsure.

- Main ideas are made up of an author's subject/topic AND the author's main point/focus on the topic.
- Main ideas are often expressed thesis statements and topic sentences
- Some main ideas, however, are implied. The author does not directly state the main idea; instead, the author suggests the main idea with the information found in the text.

Step Four: Discuss thesis statements and topic sentences with the students

Again, some students will be able to identify what thesis statements and topic sentences are but others will not.

- Thesis statements
 - The thesis is what the entire reading selection is about.
 - The thesis is the one most important idea that the entire text explains.
 - In articles and essays, the thesis is quite specific and stated in one sentence, often found placed near the beginning of the text.
 - In textbook chapters, the thesis may be much more general since a chapter is so long.
- Topic sentences
 - Sometimes paragraphs stand alone. But, many times paragraphs are part of a larger text—an essay, an article, a chapter, a book; these paragraphs are called body/support paragraphs.
 - A topic sentence states the main idea of a support/body paragraph. All of the other sentences in the paragraph develop this main idea.

- It's important that writers develop just one main idea per support/body paragraph, so the topic sentence helps them stay on track and keep the paragraph unified.

Step Five: Go over the Main Idea Cheat Sheet with the students.

This handout

- compares paragraph to essay structure,
- identifies the five most common patterns for paragraph structure,
- gives strategies for finding the main idea in paragraphs and essays,
- and provides opportunities for practice.