Main Idea & Supporting Details

How do details provide evidence to support the main idea?

The **main idea** of a lesson, section, or paragraph is what it is mostly about. It is the idea that the author most wants you to understand when you read. **Supporting details** in a lesson tell more about the main idea. They help you better understand the **main idea** and why it is important.

The **main idea** of a lesson can often be found on the first page of the lesson. Sometimes, special kinds of lessons in your textbooks, such as biographies, experiments, and activities, may not have a **main idea** written on the first page. You will have to read the lesson in order to figure out the **main idea**. You need to ask yourself what the purpose of the lesson or activity is.

Sometimes the **main ideas** of sections or paragraphs are written in one sentence. Other times, you will have to read the section or paragraph, and ask yourself what is most important. Sometimes, the headings in a lesson can give you important clues about the **main idea**.

Although the **main idea** is the most important idea in a lesson, section, or paragraph, most of the lesson is made up of **supporting details**. Understanding the **supporting details** helps you understand the **main idea**. You can find the **supporting details** that support a **main idea** in many different places in the lesson.

Look at:

- the sentences that make up paragraphs and sections.
- graphics including illustrations, photographs, charts, graphs, and maps.
- the captions, or writing that explains the graphics.
- sidebars, or boxes on the side of the text that provide additional information about the topic.
- vocabulary words, including words that are in bold print, italics, or that are highlighted. These words are often important **supporting details** that support the **main idea**.

Once you find the supporting details, ask yourself:

- how does each **supporting detail** provide evidence to support the **main idea**?
- how important is each **supporting detail** to understanding the **main idea**? (Some **supporting details** will be more important than others.)
- why did the author choose to include that **supporting detail**?
- how does the **supporting detail** help you understand the **main idea**?

Understanding the connection between the **supporting details** and the **main idea** will help you better understand the lesson.

Sequential Order

What is sequential order?

Many lessons in your textbooks are written to emphasize **sequential order**. This means that they are written to describe events in the order in which they happened. **Sequential order** is also used to write instructions, such as those you might find in a science experiment or recipe.

If a text is organized to emphasize **sequential order**, the author wants you to pay careful attention to the order in which events or steps take place. You may be asked questions about that order.

How can you tell if a text is organized sequentially?

Recognizing that a text is written to emphasize **sequential order** can help you read the text better. To identify **sequential order**, look for:

- headings/subheadings that describe specific events or steps. These headings will usually begin with a verb (action word).
- special signal words (*before*, *after*, *next*, *then*, etc.) that are used to indicate sequence.
- timelines or illustrations that indicate the order of events (look for arrows, etc.).
- numbers that may indicate steps.
- dates that indicate when events happened.
- a main idea that explains how events or steps are related.

What should you do if events are not presented in sequential order?

Some texts that emphasize **sequential order** may not describe the steps or events in the order they happened. Pay attention to all signal words. Sometimes the steps or events may not be described in the order in which they happened. You will need to use the sequence signal words to help you put them in order. You may want to take notes on a separate piece of paper or draw yourself a timeline. This will help you organize the information in the correct order. It will help you keep track of when events occurred.

Interpreting Graphics

How can you interpret graphics?

Your textbooks include many **graphics** such as pictures, maps, diagrams, and charts. In order to understand your textbook, you need to be able to interpret these **graphics**. When you interpret a **graphic**, you study it carefully. You discover important details about it and you understand the significance, or importance of the details. Some **graphics** are just for decoration, but many **graphics** contain useful information.

Interpreting a **graphic** means understanding its purpose and the information it shows, not just what it looks like. Remember to look for details in **graphics**:

Ask yourself:

Maps

- What kind of map am I looking at (historical map, elevation map, product map, route map, distribution map, etc.)?
- Why did the author choose to include this kind of map?
- How would landforms, such as mountains, affect the people living nearby?
- Why was a certain path followed on a historical route?
- What comparisons can I make between sizes of cities and states?
- What are the longitude and latitude of places mentioned in the text?
- When was the map made and how may it have changed over time?

Charts and Diagrams

- What kind of chart or diagram am I looking at (bar graph, pie chart, web, flow chart, diagram, line graph, etc.)?
- Why did the author choose to include this kind of chart/diagram?
- What comparisons can I make between numerical values or data?
- Is the graphic the best way to present the data?
- How is the data linked to information in the text?
- Is the source of the data a reliable source?

Pictures

- What kind of picture am I looking at (drawing, photograph, portrait, landscape, cartoon, etc.)?
- Why did the author choose to include this picture?
- What background details give clues about the picture?
- What are the names of the people or buildings represented in the picture?
- What time (such as the year or season) is represented?
- What is the artist's point of view?

Making Inferences

What does it mean to make an inference?

When you read, you learn many new facts and ideas. Sometimes the facts and ideas that you need to learn are not stated directly in your textbook. You will need to make an **inference** or draw a conclusion. When you make an **inference** or conclusion, you use the information you read and what you already know to figure out something that is not specifically stated in the text. Ask yourself questions about what you already know or have already read.

When should I make an inference?

- when it seems like something has been left out
- when connections or conclusions are unclear
- when the text raises questions but doesn't answer them

What kind of questions should I ask?

The kind of questions that you ask will depend on what you are reading and what you need to know. The list below includes some different kinds of questions that will help you make **inferences**.

- Why would someone act this way?
- What are the likely consequences or effects of a certain action?
- If this statement is true, what else must be true?
- What is the author implying?
- Why would the author choose to include this information?

Examples

Information Read and Questions Asked	Information Known	Inference/Conclusion
"Maria blew out the candles and ripped open the colorful box." *Why would someone act this way?*	Blowing out candles and opening presents are birthday traditions.	Maria could be having a birthday.
"The scientist viewed the rings around Saturn through the night sky." *If this statement is true, what else must be true?*	You can't see the rings around Saturn if you just look up in the sky.	The telescope must have been invented and the scientist was using the instrument.
"Sarah needed her umbrella to get to school." *What is the author implying?*	Umbrellas protect us from the rain.	It was raining where Sarah lives.

Making **inferences** will help you understand your lessons more easily. It will also help you analyze and talk about what you read.

Fact & Opinion

How can you distinguish facts from opinions?

When you read, you can learn many new **facts**. You will also discover **opinions**. **Facts** can be proven true through research or experiments. **Opinions** can't be proven because they are beliefs or feelings.

Fact: Olympic figure skater Sasha Cohen is five feet two inches tall.

This is a **fact** because you can prove that she is this height by using a measuring tape.

Opinion: Sasha Cohen's size makes her look very cute.

This is an **opinion** because it expresses someone's feelings. You cannot prove that someone is cute. Even if a book says she is cute, that is only the author's **opinion**.

Fact: Fifty percent of the class thinks Sasha Cohen's size makes her look cute.

This is a **fact** because you can count the number of students that agreed that she looks cute and prove that it is fifty percent of the class.

Sometimes facts and opinions are mixed together.

Mixed: Although Sasha Cohen won a silver medal, she is the best skater in the world.

This is both a **fact** and an **opinion**. You can prove that Sasha Cohen won a silver medal, but you can not prove that she is the best skater in the world.

A **fact** should be the same in every source that you read. If the **fact** differs from one source to another, check with a trustworthy source to find out the truth.

How can you tell the difference between facts and opinions?

- Look for signal words or phases (*I believe*, *we think*, and *in my* ***opinion***), and judgment words (*best*, *greatest*, *cutest*, *brave*).
- Ask yourself if (and how) a statement could be proven.
- Identify the purpose of a lesson (a lesson written to convince or persuade is more likely to contain **opinions** than one written to explain).

Word Knowledge

How can I improve my word knowledge?

What is word knowledge?

When you read, you encounter many words. Some of them are words that you know well. You know what they mean, and you know how to use them. Others are words that you know a little bit about. These are words that you have heard before, but don't completely understand. You may have an idea of what they mean, but you may not be able to use them. Others are words that you have never heard before.

Word knowledge means being aware of the words that you read. It also means being interested in words and their meanings and uses. When you develop **word knowledge**, you learn new ways to think about words.

How do I identify important words?

- Skim the lesson for words in **bold** type or *italics*.
- Look for vocabulary sections at the beginning of your lesson, or for definitions in boxes on the page as you read.
- Look for words that are new or unusual.

What should I do when I find new or unusual words?

Ask:

- Why did the author choose *this* word in particular?
- Is this a different form of a vocabulary word?
- Does this word have more than one meaning?
- Have I heard this word before? Where?
- Do I know what this word means, or do I have an idea about what it means?
- Can I use this word, or do I have an idea about when or how it might be used?
- Do I know other words that mean the same thing as this word? Could they be used in place of this word in this sentence?
- How can I remember what this word means?
- How could I use this word in my own life?
- What is special, or what do I like about this word?

Thinking about words in this way will help you increase your **word knowledge**. You will read and understand your textbooks better. You will also develop a love for words.