

## GETTING MAIN IDEA & RELATED DETAILS

**Starter:** “Being able to read with understanding” can be compared to “being able to see the forest in spite of the trees.”

What is the similarity between the two points of comparison?

### MAIN IDEAS

To gain the best understanding of a written text you must analyze it by examining its organization. Information in the text is typically organized and written using main ideas and related details which support these main ideas. The main idea of a paragraph gives specific information about its subject. Then all, or most, of the sentences in the paragraph are related to this main idea because they tell you something about that specific information. The identification and analysis of main ideas and related details are extremely important reading techniques when you try to master the enormous amount of information usually presented in textbooks.

Main ideas can be classified into 2 types, namely **stated main ideas** and **implied main ideas**. The first type is main ideas which are explicitly stated in a paragraph whereas the second type is main ideas which are not stated and thus must be implied from clues provided in the paragraph. Stated main ideas can be in one or two sentences. They are usually found at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the paragraph. Examples A, B and C underline the location of the stated main idea of each paragraph. Example D is an illustration of an implied main idea. The underlined words signify the clues that help the reader to identify the main idea.

#### Example A:

It is generally true that most convenience foods do cost more than unserviced food products. The extra services that make the food easy to use must be paid for. Washing, combining, removing waste, standardizing and packaging products add to the cost of the final product. However, some costs are offset by lower transportation costs because of reduced weight and bulk and improved storage life.

#### Example B:

No other cloth is so difficult to make yet so delicate, requires so much skill in manufacturing, or demands so much creative ability in designing as lace. Everything about lace indicates special characteristics. It is a product of many combined procedures. Special yarns are made with great strength but of great fineness; fabric construction involves interlooping and knotting, and even surface embroidery may be used.

#### Example C:

The invention of the typewriter provided a means by which women could gain access and entry into the heretofore exclusively male world of the business office. World War I and World War II provided additional office work opportunities for women in the labor force due to the vast number of men in the military. Also, within the military, a large area of employment was opened with the formation of the women’s service branches---a large part of which consisted of office work. Over the years there has been an increase in the number of women employed in office work.

**Example D:**

Usually, neither white nor brown sugar is sifted before measuring. White sugar, however, if it is at all lumpy (confectioners sugar frequently is) should be sifted first, spooned into a dry measure, and leveled off with the edge of a spatula or knife. Brown sugar, on the other hand, must be packed into the cup so firmly as to keep the shape of the cup when it is turned out. If brown sugar is lumpy, it can be rolled or sifted before measuring. Free-flowing brown sugar is poured into a cup or fractional cup and leveled.

**Implied main idea:** There are correct ways to measure white or brown sugar.

The best technique to find the main idea (no matter what type it is) is to ask yourself these two questions:

1. What or who is the paragraph about?
2. What does the paragraph tell you about the subject?

The answers to the questions above determine the main idea of the paragraph. To illustrate this point, another paragraph with no stated main idea, and questions and answers, is given below.

The room was entirely carpeted with a thick soft rug. Drapes, spun of gold thread, bedecked the large pictured windows. Sterling silver candlesticks flanked a gold clock on the mantelpiece. Crimson velvet covered the large sofa. A Steinway grand piano stood in the center of the room.

**Question 1:** What is the subject? A room.

**Question 2:** What is distinctive about the subject? It is richly decorated.

**Main idea:** The room is luxuriously decorated.

**Exercise 1:** Read the following paragraphs and identify or highlight the main ideas. Also state the type of each main idea and the subject of each paragraph.

**Paragraph 1**

Insurance should be considered a necessity. A couple needs medical coverage, automobile coverage, and life insurance. If they own a home, they need fire insurance also. Couples should start with a medical policy that protects them against catastrophic illness and then, as children arrive, change to broader coverage. This pattern should also be followed with life insurance. The couple should buy term insurance, increasing the amount of the coverage as needed to protect family members.

**Ans.:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph 2**

In some situations you do want immediate participation. On the other hand, formal speakers must cover their subject and stay within their allotted time. Unreasonable numbers of questions and interruptions have ruined an otherwise good speech and have shaken an experienced speaker. The solution to the problem lies in the word *control*. Speakers must retain control. They must control audience participation in such a way as to do justice to the *audience*, the *material* to be covered, and the *time* restrictions placed upon their speech.

**Ans.:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph 3**

The cotton blossom, which appears about one hundred days after planting, is beautiful. Creamy white or light yellow the first day, it changes to pink, lavender, or red on the second day. But the petals drop off after about forty-eight hours, leaving the boll or seed pod in which the fibers form. Fifty to eighty days later the pod bursts open, and the fleecy cotton fibers are ready for picking.

**Ans.:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph 4**

When we talk we rarely trust the words alone to convey our messages. We shift our weight, stand close to the other person or far away, wave our arms, smile or frown, speak loudly or softly, touch or don't touch, or use other nonverbal behaviors to emphasize or clarify what our words mean. We communicate by the way we sit or stand, straighten our clothing, place our hands, manipulate a glass, and so forth. Consciously and unconsciously, we use nonverbal behaviors to communicate our feelings, likings, and preferences as well as to reinforce the meanings of our words.

**Ans.:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph 5**

Each occupation or profession lays the groundwork for people being much alike. They receive about the same income. They probably live in the same kind of neighborhood. And they will speak the same specialized language that is associated with their kind of work. Finally, they will probably belong to the same union or association. Yes, people who work at the same kind of job certainly do have much in common.

**Ans.:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph 6**

Probably the most poisonous snake found in Arizona is the Sonoran coral snake, a small reptile averaging about eighteen inches in length. Actually a coral snake is a shy animal with highly dangerous venom. Fortunately the snake's head is so small that its jaws can be opened only a little distance, but it can bite a human between the fingers of the hand or strike at the fingers or the hand of a small child.

**Ans.:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph 7**

Most twins are *fraternal*, which means they developed from two separate eggs which were fertilized at the same time. Such twins are no more similar in physical characteristics than are any other brothers or sisters. About a third of twins are *identical*, which means they developed from a single fertilized egg, and usually share a common placenta. Unlike fraternal twins, their genetic makeup is identical, so they have very similar physical characteristics, and are always the same sex.

**Ans.:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## RELATED DETAILS

Once you have identified the main idea of a paragraph, you are ready to identify details which relate to that main idea. Related details provide additional information about the main idea.

Usually, there are three kinds of related details used to support main ideas. They are **example**, **reason**, and **restatement**. Examples and reasons which are probably the most frequently used related details, support both stated and implied main ideas; restatements support only stated main ideas. Sometimes a related detail can be identified as either example or reason. It depends on how you interpret what you have read and the way you then relate the detail to the main idea of the paragraph.

A main idea is not necessarily supported by all three kinds of related details. You may find paragraph main ideas which are supported by only one kind of detail – usually all examples or all reasons. Or you may find paragraph main ideas supported by any combination of the three kinds of related ideas.

Sometimes authors include details which are not related to the main idea at all. They are filler-filling up space but adding nothing to what you need to know about the paragraph main idea. To recognize filler, simply ask yourself, “Does this detail tell me anything about the main idea?” If it doesn’t, ignore it. Filler has no place in your package of related information.

Below are some examples of related details. The main idea of each paragraph is underlined for you.

### **Example A: Example**

(1) Most people have certain habits that help prepare them for rest and sleep. (2) For example, some like a snack before bedtime. (3) Others may wish to have a glass of milk, hot chocolate, or tea. (4) For many, preparation for sleep includes brushing their teeth, washing their hands and face, and going to the bathroom. (5) Most people have a regular bedtime hour.

Sentences 2 – 5 are examples of habits that help prepare most people for rest and sleep.

### **Example B: Reason**

(1) The middle years are frequently viewed as a period of career change. (2) Relatively recent research indicated that a sizable portion of middle-agers are disillusioned and disenchanted with their present jobs. (3) In the pursuit of happiness and occupational satisfaction, some workers are making midlife career changes.

Sentences 2 – 3 are reasons why the middle years are viewed as a period of career change.

### **Example C: Restatement**

(1) Humans, as a species, are stress seeking. (2) We seem to long for new experiences and new challenges. (3) Traveling to the North Pole, climbing mountains, living in deserts, and exploring the bottoms of oceans are all activities for which we are biologically and socially unfit, but we do them anyway. (4) Humans do seek out certain types of stress.

Sentence 2 is the reason and sentence 3 is the example whereas sentence 4 is the restatement. Notice that sentence 4 could have been the main idea: it basically states the same concept. Thus, it is restating the main idea.

**Exercise 2:** Read each main idea and the details that relate to it. In the blanks, put **E** if it is an example, **R** for reason, **Re** for restatement, and **F** if it is a filler\*. Then check the answers with your friend.

**\*Notes:** A filler is a sentence that is added to a paragraph to give more details to the paragraph.

1. Main idea: In early middle childhood, peer groups are relatively informal.
  - a. Children at this age enjoy hopscotch, jump rope, and marbles. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. The children themselves form their groups and members come and go. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Peer groups in early middle childhood are quite flexible in structure. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. There are few operating rules in peer groups at this level. \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Parents appear to be supportive of these peer groups. \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Main idea: Aspirin is one of the most widely used drugs in the world.
  - a. Aspirin reduces inflammation and soreness in an injured area. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Aspirin blocks pain in the mild-to-moderate range. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Aspirin causes side effects that pose problems for some users. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Aspirin's suggested dose range is 600 to 1,000 mg. \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. People all over the world use aspirin. \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Main idea: There are various ways in which animals are protected from their enemies.
  - a. Lizards, snails, and some snakes are colored to blend in with their environment. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Skunks have an unpleasant-smelling spray. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. People have to look for ways to protect themselves from enemies. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Some small mammals conceal themselves in nests, in burrows, or beneath tree roots. \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Porcupines and armadillos are protected by formidable armor. \_\_\_\_\_

Are you sure that you can identify related details now? You can test yourself if you go back to Exercise 1 and identify types of related details in each paragraph. Check your answers with your friends or your teacher if you like.