



# MODULE 5

## Differentiating Between Main Ideas and Supporting Details

### **An Effective Reading Process: Student Strategies**

Being able to distinguish between main ideas and supporting details will help you to draw conclusions, evaluate, and critically interpret--all integral skills for comprehension in college reading. The strategies included in this handout will help you identify these critical components of a reading; these strategies can be applied at the paragraph or chapter level.

### **STRATEGY #1: Asking Questions That Help Identify Main Ideas and Supporting Details in Essays and Articles**

These are basic questions you can ask to stimulate your interest in a reading and to create a framework for recognizing the main idea and supporting details:

1. Based on the title of the reading, what do you think the article will be about?
2. Is there one sentence that describes the main idea for this topic?
3. What two words would you use to describe the general idea of the article?
4. What details from the selection support this general idea?



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### STRATEGY #2: Identifying Presentation Patterns In A Textbook

Textbook authors frequently establish patterns of presentation section-by-section or even paragraph-by-paragraph. The chapter headings in the textbook should serve as a guide to the overall pattern. In a carefully designed textbook, the headings will vary in size, color, font type, or style (italicized, underlined, bolded, all capital letters, and so on). Then, the paragraphs within those sections might also follow a consistent pattern.

#### Identifying patterns in chapter headings

A well-designed textbook will repeat a pattern of headings to help you understand how the information is structured, how much information is presented, and the level of detail. For example, returning to bold headings in all caps will indicate a shift to a new concept. Of course every textbook is different as there is no universal pattern for creating headings, but here is a quick explanation and example:

- **TITLE**  
The largest heading in the chapter indicates the main topic.
- **BOLD HEADING--ALL CAPS**  
This level provides an introduction to the major concepts of the section or chapter. Perhaps there is some comparison to other concepts discussed or an explanation of how this concept fits into the bigger picture or process.
- **Bold Heading**  
At this next level, more information will be provided, but usually not at the detail/example level. This might include background information, major influences or people involved, and so on.
- **Regular heading--no bold**  
At this level, the author will usually provide examples, details, and other explanations for the concept.

For example, let's examine the heading structure of this section in a psychology textbook.

#### WHAT IS PIAGET'S THEORY OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT?

##### Developmental Processes

Schemes  
Accommodation  
Assimilation  
Equilibration

##### Developmental Stages

Sensorimotor stage  
Preoperational stage  
Concrete operational stage  
Formal operational stage (p. 106).

From Lepoinka, M.E. (2007). *Writing and developing your college textbook: A comprehensive guide to textbook authorship and higher education publishing*. (2nd ed.). Gloucester, MA: Atlantic Path Publishing.

As you can see, the major concept of this section is Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Within this section, there are two main divisions: developmental processes and developmental stages. Both of those divisions have an additional level where details, explanations, and examples help the reader understand Piaget's theory of cognitive development.



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Learning to read these patterns will help you identify the main idea and supporting details of chapters or large sections of their textbooks and therefore increase your reading comprehension.

### Identifying patterns in a paragraph

Once you have learned to detect patterns in textbook headings, you can turn your attention to the paragraphs within those headings as they may also follow a pattern. This strategy is especially useful if you are having trouble finding the main idea. Although time consuming, this strategy can give you a more thorough understanding of the reading.

These are some common paragraph patterns:

#### Pattern A:

- First sentence: Main idea  
Next sentence(s): Further explanation of the main idea.
- Next sentence(s): Examples or evidence or both.
- Final sentence of the paragraph: A summary idea of the main concepts of the paragraph or a lead-in to the continued development of the main idea in the following paragraph.

#### Pattern B:

- Paragraph starts with examples/evidence and concludes with a main idea statement.

#### Pattern C:

- Paragraph consists of examples and evidence as a follow-up to the preceding paragraph's main idea statement.

#### Pattern D:

- Paragraph provides explanations, examples, evidence, comparisons and contrasts, but the main idea is implied; it is not stated clearly in any one sentence of the paragraph. This means the reader needs to determine the main idea and should make note of it in the margin.

One simple strategy you can use is to highlight, underline, circle, or otherwise mark the main idea, explanations, examples, and evidence. Take a look at this passage from a psychology textbook. The student used highlighters to identify the presentation pattern at the paragraph level for improved reading comprehension.

Main Idea

Explanation

Examples

Evidence

More than 200 years ago, philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume echoed Aristotle's conclusion from 200 years earlier: **We learn by association.** **Our minds naturally connect events that occur in sequence.** **If, after seeing and smelling freshly baked bread, you eat some and find it satisfying, then the next time you see and smell fresh bread, your experience will lead you to expect that eating it will be satisfying again.** **And if you associate a sound with a frightening consequence, then your fear may be aroused by the sound itself.** **As one 4-year-old exclaimed after watching a TV character get mugged, "If I had heard that music, I wouldn't have gone around the corner!"** (p. 313-314)

Passage from: Myers, David, G. (2007). *Psychology*. 8th edition. New York: Worth Publishers.

As you can see, the student created a color code for the main idea, explanations, examples, and evidence to help visually understand the passage. Remember to look for key words that signal examples, evidence, and other supporting ideas. Strengthening your awareness of signal words such as "for example, as, like, imagine" can improve your reading comprehension.



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### STRATEGY #3: Identifying Supporting Details First

When you struggle to locate the main idea of a paragraph, you can use this process of elimination strategy. By identifying the supporting details first, you can narrow down the paragraph's contents to arrive at the main idea. Here are instructions you can follow:

Locate the 3 E's--examples, evidence, and explanations--to identify the supporting details of the following passage. Then if there is a sentence left, consider whether it is the main idea. It helps to have various colored highlighters, one for each type of supporting material, and to create a color code as this student did here:

Examples

Evidence

Explanations

Signal detection can also have life-or-death consequences when people are responsible for watching an airport scanner for weapons, monitoring patients from an intensive-care nursing station, or detecting radar blips. Studies have shown, for example, that people's ability to catch a faint signal diminishes after about 30 minutes. But this diminishing response depends on the task, on the time of day, and even on whether the participants periodically exercise (Warm & Dember, 1986). Experience matters, too. In one experiment, 10 hours of action video game playing--scanning for and instantly responding to any intrusion--increased novice players' signal detection skills (p. 199-200).

Passage from: Myers, D. G. (2007). *Psychology*. (8th ed.). New York: Worth Publishers.

By first identifying the examples, evidence, and explanations, we then see that this paragraph's main idea comes at the start: "Signal detection can also have life-or-death consequences." If, however, all the sentences in a paragraph are identified as examples, evidence and explanation, perhaps there is an implied main idea--one that is not stated directly. You should then consider the context of the previous and subsequent paragraphs to determine the implied main idea. Remember to look for key words that signal examples, evidence, and other supporting ideas.



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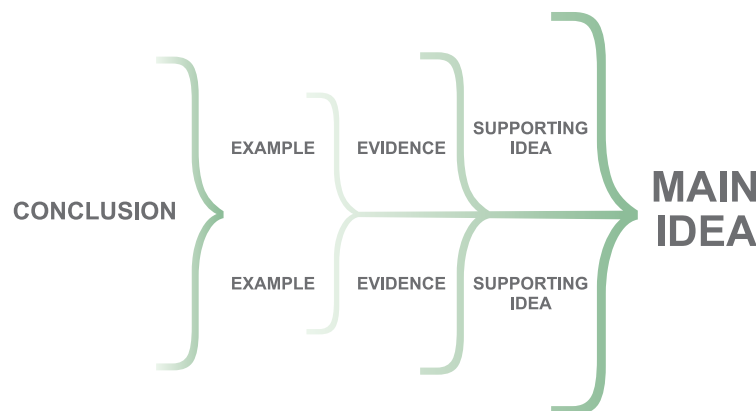
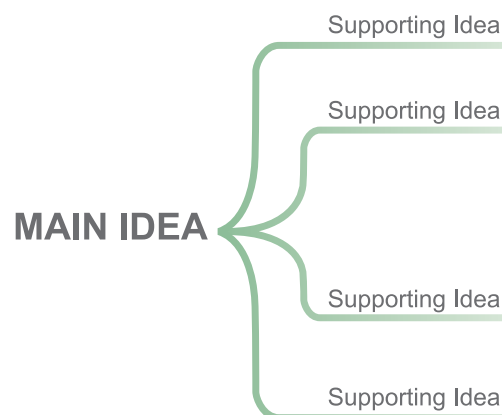
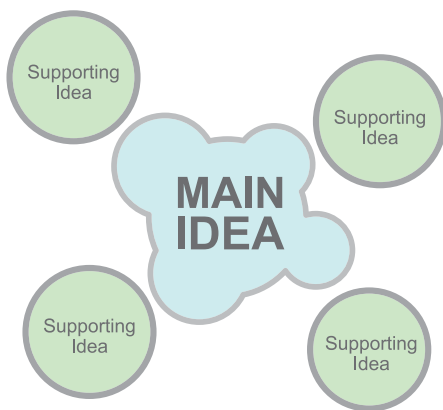
### STRATEGY #4: Using Concept Maps

A concept map is a specific type of graphic organizer, and while there are several types, most can be simply constructed with circles or squares that connect to one another and ultimately back to the main idea through graphic lines. These lines help you to determine the meaning as well as visualize connections between the main idea and supporting details. Concept maps can support you by helping build off your prior knowledge and reflect on your understanding while reading. They are easy to construct and can be used across all content areas.

Using a concept map helps you to visualize the connections between the main ideas and the supporting details. Concept maps do not have to be used only for paragraphs, but can be expanded to larger pieces of texts, and even be used for the entire text.

Entering “concept maps” into an online search engine will help you locate examples of concept maps that can be printed out and filled in. You can also benefit by constructing one of your own. You will see that this will encourage you to pay closer attention to the relationships between supporting ideas instead of making them fit into a predetermined form.

Examples:





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### Useful Resources

Finding/expressing main ideas.

<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/rst/pop5b.cfm>

This webpage provides good information for reading to find main ideas as well as expressing them in writing. It comes from Colorado State's Writing Studio (writing@csu), which is an excellent resource for writing and reading.

Doyle, B. Finding main ideas.

<http://www.clt.astate.edu/bdoyle/main%20idea.ppt>

This PowerPoint presentation focuses on terms used in the reading and writing processes. In the reading process slides, tips are given for locating a stated or implied main idea.

Mezaki, B. Reading Room.

<http://elearn.mtsac.edu/amla/readingroom/Default.htm>

This website includes six reading skills, among them finding the main idea and identifying supporting details. Also included are readings and exercises in multidisciplinary studies.

Van Blerkom, D. L. (2009). *College study skills: Becoming a strategic learner*. (6th ed.). Boston: Wadsworth Group.

This book is a great resource for students who want to learn more about how to learn in college. Of particular interest are the sections on understanding critical reading skills.

Yorke, C. FCAT Reading Skill: Determine the main idea, stated or implied.

<http://www.palmbeach.k12.fl.us/MULTICULTURAL/MulticulturalNew/FCATSkill/FCAT%20Main%20Idea.pdf>

This extensive pdf document provides ample background about locating main ideas--stated and implied—as well as several graphic organizers to help distinguish between the main ideas and the supporting details.

**\*\*Please bear in mind that documents on the web might change location or go away. If a link provided here does not work, try searching the key terms in a search engine or locating more of your own resources.**