

Identifying the Main Idea

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Lesson Objective

In this lesson, you will learn how to find the main idea in a short text. You will learn *what* the main idea is and *where* to look for it. You will also learn *how* to express it. First, let's look at *who* creates the main idea.

Pre-Reading

A. Warm-Up

The *main idea* is what the author wants you to remember the most. You can find the main idea in many types of writing. Here are a few examples:

- a paragraph
- an article
- a book
- a song

“Everything begins with an idea.”

—Earl Nightingale

Can you think of any other types of writing that have a main idea?

B. Vocabulary Preview

Match up as many words and meanings as you can.

Check this exercise again after seeing the words in context on page 3.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. main idea | a) a detail that helps you find an answer |
| _____ 2. topic | b) information that authors use to make a point or tell a story |
| _____ 3. clue | c) the subject of the text |
| _____ 4. supporting details | d) to restate information in a simple way |
| _____ 5. summarize | e) what the author wants you to remember most |

Reading

1. The **main idea** is what the author wants you to remember most about the text. A week after reading a story or book, you should still be able to remember the main point.
2. To find the main idea, first think about the **topic**. Sometimes a picture tells you the topic before you even read a word. Sometimes the title gives the topic away. A topic sentence is another **clue**. The topic sentence is often the first sentence in a paragraph. Repeated words are also main idea clues.
3. Every text has **supporting details**. Often there is one detail that is the most important. This detail helps you figure out what the main idea is. You can work backwards to find the author's main idea by looking at the details. An easy way to find the main idea is to remember this formula: *topic + most important point = main idea*.
4. Once you know the main idea, you need to know how to express it. There are lots of types of main idea questions, but they all have a similar answer. They all want you to **summarize** the main idea in your own words.
5. Now you know how to identify the main idea of a reading. Can you express the main idea of this text?

Synonyms

Here are some other words that mean *the main idea*:

- the main point
- the central point
- the key point
- the main focus
- the main takeaway

Identifying the Main Idea

Now let's review some clues that can help you find the main idea of a text.

A. Clues

1. Picture	
Function	Tip
A picture often tells you what the reading is going to be about (topic) before you read. A picture may also be an example of a supporting detail.	Notice the placement of the picture. A picture near the <i>top</i> or <i>bottom</i> often represents the general topic. A picture <i>beside</i> a paragraph usually goes with a specific detail.
2. Title	
Function	Tip
The title often tells you what the reading will be about.	Be careful. When reading fiction, the title will not always help you find the main idea.
3. Topic Sentence	
Function	Tip
The first sentence of a paragraph is usually the topic sentence.	This is often the main idea of a single paragraph. It is not the main idea of a larger work.



Identifying the Main Idea cont.

A. Clues cont.

4. Supporting Details	
Function	Tip
This information proves the author's point.	Collect the details and look for a common theme.

5. Repeated Words	
Function	Tip
These words give clues about what the author thinks is most important.	Look for repeated words throughout the text. Be sure to look at the beginning and end of a paragraph or text.

B. Where Is the Clue?

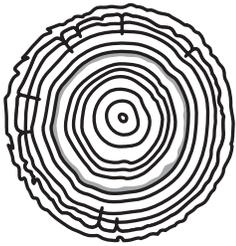
Work with a partner. Consider each type of main idea clue. Where could you find it?

#	Clue	Where to Find It
1	topic sentence	
2	supporting details	
3	picture	
4	title	
5	repeated words	

Guided Practice

A. Finding the Main Idea

Read the text below.
Underline any clue that helps you find the main idea.
Compare your clues with a partner's clues.



Did you know that trees tell their own life stories? Under the bark, some trees have growth rings. The rings tell how old the tree is. The dark circle in the center of the trunk is the oldest wood. The light- and dark-colored rings show the beginning and end of each growing season.

B. Expressing the Main Idea

Remember the formula you learned.

topic + most important detail = main idea

This can help us answer a main idea question about the paragraph above.

topic = *tree rings*

most important detail = *growth rings tell us how old a tree is*

Example

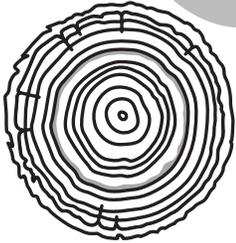
Q: What is the paragraph mainly about?

A: The paragraph is mainly about how tree rings tell us the age of a tree.

Guided Practice cont.

C. Practice

Read a related paragraph. Identify the main topic and the most important detail. Then answer the questions.



Not all trees have growing seasons. In tropical climates, trees grow all year long. There are no rings to see because the wood is always growing. In climates with seasons, trees grow most in the spring. The dark rings mark the beginning of slower summer growth. Together, one light ring plus one dark ring equals one year of life as a tree.

1. What is the topic?

2. What is the most important detail?

3. What is the author's main point?

Vocabulary Review

A. Complete the Sentences

Complete the sentences using vocabulary from page 2.

1. An author makes his or her point with several _____ details.
2. The _____ sentence is usually the first sentence in a paragraph.
3. A picture gives you a _____ about the topic before you read the text.
4. The topic plus the most important detail equals the _____ .
5. Write one sentence to _____ the main idea in your own words.

B. Matching

Match the vocabulary to the tip.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. main idea | a) Find it by adding the main topic plus the most important detail. |
| _____ 2. topic sentence | b) By finding a common theme in these, you can find the main idea. |
| _____ 3. supporting details | c) A picture at the top of the text can help you know the topic. |
| _____ 4. clue | d) You will often find these at the beginning and end of a text. |
| _____ 5. repeated words | e) Find it in the first sentence in most paragraphs. |

More Practice

A. Reading for the Main Idea

Read the text and fill in the chart on the next page.



Julie's Plans for Tonight

Julie is going to have fun tonight. She is going to meet her friends downtown. First, they are going to have dinner at a restaurant. They are going to order the most expensive thing on the menu. They are also going to order the biggest dessert. Then they are going to go dancing. Julie is going to get dressed up. She's going to wear a new dress. She is also going to put on makeup. They are going to find a dance club that is open all night long. Julie is going to stay out really late tonight. She is going to party all night long.

Reminders

- look for main idea clues
- use the formula

More Practice cont.

B. Expressing the Main Idea

Complete the chart and questions based on the reading.

1	Clues	
2	Topic	
3	Most Important Detail	

4. State the main idea of the story.

5. What is the author's main point?

Assessment

Read the paragraph and answer the main idea questions.

A. Reading

Getting Acquainted

The general rules of etiquette differ from culture to culture. Making eye contact when speaking to someone is considered important in North America, but this may be considered rude in some Asian countries. Even the distance we maintain between two people when having a conversation can vary from culture to culture. It is also important to know that some topics of conversation may be acceptable small talk in one culture but unacceptable in another. The best way to learn the etiquette of a culture is to observe the people who are a part of it.



B. Comprehension

1. Which is the main idea of the reading?
 - a) Making small talk is hard when you don't know the language.
 - b) Etiquette differs by culture, and the best way to learn it is by watching people.
 - c) It's rude to make eye contact in some Asian countries.

2. What clues are in the reading to help you find the main idea?

3. Write the formula for the main idea of this reading.

4. What is another way to phrase question 1?

5. What are two other words for "main idea"?

Reading Assessment Tool

Name: _____

Description of Task	Skills	Date Completed	Score / Success	Level
	Reading, Writing			

✓	Assessment Criteria	Success		
		Yes	Almost	Not Yet
	gets the gist from short texts			
	finds clues to locate the main idea			
	identifies key details in a short text			
	summarizes the main idea			
	completes a reading task within an appropriate amount of time			

Notes

Self-Assessment

IDENTIFYING THE MAIN IDEA

Add check marks (✓) to show what you've learned in this lesson.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Can I...	Yes (very well) 	Yes (with help) 	Not yet 
find the main idea in a text?			
use clues to help me find the main idea?			
find the topic sentence?			
find important details?			
summarize the main idea in writing?			

My Notes

Answer Key

LESSON DESCRIPTION:

In this lesson, students learn how to identify the main idea in a short text. They learn clues, tips, and a helpful formula to find the main idea. This lesson includes vocabulary review practice, comprehension, and assessment.

LEVEL: Low Int

TIME: 3+ hours

TAGS: identifying the main idea, main idea, reading, reading in English, reading comprehension, academic vocabulary, graphic organizer

Pre-Reading

A. WARM-UP

Have a short discussion about types of text that have a main idea. Other ideas that may come up include scripts, commercials, letters, notes, forms, etc.

B. VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Give students a few minutes to try the vocabulary preview task. Take the answers up to learn how much your students already know about vocabulary related to finding the main idea.

1. e 2. c 3. a 4. b 5. d

Reading

Have students read the instructional text individually or in pairs or groups. Alternatively, you can read the text together as a class.

Identifying the Main Idea

A. CLUES

Have students read through the five clues that can help them identify the main idea of a text.

B. WHERE IS THE CLUE?

1. Find it in the first sentence of a paragraph.
2. Find these throughout the text.
3. Find this at the top of the text or beside some specific text.
4. Find this at the top of the text.
5. Find these throughout the text and especially at the beginning and end of the text.

Guided Practice

Give your students time to practice finding the main idea using a guide.

C. PRACTICE

Answers may vary.

1. The topic is tree rings.
2. The most important detail is that not all trees have growing seasons.
3. The author's main point is that tree rings show which trees experience seasonal growth and which ones grow all year.

(continued on the next page...)

Answer Key cont.

Vocabulary Review

A. COMPLETE THE SENTENCES

- | | |
|---------------|--------------|
| 1. supporting | 4. main idea |
| 2. topic | 5. summarize |
| 3. clue | |

B. MATCHING

1. a 2. e 3. b 4. c 5. d

More Practice

Assign the story and have students complete the exercise. You can reuse the chart on page 10 for more practice or assessment purposes using a reading of your choice.

B. EXPRESSING THE MAIN IDEA

Answers will vary. Suggested answers include:

- photo of dancing, title (Julie's Plans for Tonight), repeated words: going to (plans), night, tonight
- Julie's plans
- Julie is going to have fun with her friends.
- Julie has big plans to have fun with her friends tonight.
- The author's main point is that Julie has a lot of (previously made) plans to have fun with her friends tonight.*

*You could teach your students the difference between *main point* and *author purpose* here. The author's main purpose is to use *be going to* repeatedly in a story about future plans so learners can see examples of the simple future (*be going to*) in context.

Assessment

A. READING

Use the reading on page 11 (or choose a reading at an appropriate level for your students). Give your students a set amount of time to complete this task (e.g., 30 minutes). A ready-made assessment tool is available on page 12.

B. COMPREHENSION

- b
- title, image, repeated words (e.g., *culture, etiquette*)
- cultural etiquette + observe people to learn about it = Etiquette differs by culture, and the best way to learn it is by observing people.
- What is the reading/paragraph mainly about? What is your main takeaway from the reading? What is the author's main point?
- central idea, main point, main takeaway

Self-Assessment

When you are finished with this lesson, have your students reflect on their learning by filling in the chart on page 13.

SPELLING NOTE:

This lesson shows the American spelling of the words *Center* and *Colored*. Most other English-speaking countries spell these words this way: *Centre* and *Coloured*. Make it a challenge for your students to find these words in the lesson and see if they know the alternate spellings.