



## Recognizing and Formulating Main Ideas

The ability to recognize and formulate main ideas is the most important of the study skills. It lays the foundation for note-taking, summarizing and paraphrasing, textbook skills, test preparation and study, and research and report-writing. When students process information using main ideas, they are better able to organize, comprehend, remember, and express that information. Thinking in terms of main ideas is like having a key that unlocks the system for processing information. Students who do not recognize and formulate main ideas tend to get lost in the details or become overwhelmed with too much information.

Main idea skills are also essential to good writing. Students cannot construct good paragraphs unless they know how to group detail sentences into single paragraphs with main ideas. They cannot organize their thoughts into a composition or answer an essay question unless they can group their ideas into main idea categories. The ability to develop outlines and other graphic organizers before writing is rooted in the ability to determine main ideas.

Thinking in terms of main ideas is a useful skill in everyday life, and it is helpful for teachers to introduce the concept of main idea by providing examples of things around us that are organized this way. For example, items in the supermarket can be found in certain areas of the store, such as the dairy, produce, or bakery, and the food aisles are stacked with like items such as cereal or canned vegetables. The large signs on the walls of the store and the lists at the front of each aisle serve to remind customers of the location of items they need.

On a smaller scale, most people organize their clothes in a dresser by grouping like-items: socks and underwear in one drawer, shirts in another, pants in another. Kitchen items are usually grouped into cabinets by category: glasses and plates, canned goods, and pots and pans. Similarly, information on newscasts is presented by category: national news, local news, sports, and weather. Many radio and television stations even assign a different anchor for each segment of the news. Teachers should point out to students that just as information and things in daily life are organized by main ideas, information from lectures, books, and library research can also be organized by main ideas.



A main idea can be the category for a list of items, the topic of a paragraph, the theme of an essay or lecture, the topic of a textbook chapter, or the thesis of a term paper. The process for determining a main idea is the same whether a student is categorizing a simple list of items or identifying main themes in a college essay. Students should follow these three steps:

- Identify the details
- Compare the details to determine what they have in common
- Use your own words to create a statement about what they have in common (the main idea)

This process should be introduced to students in the first grade, and reinforced and developed in each successive grade as reading and lecture material becomes longer and more complex.

When categorizing a list of words, the words become the details. These are compared in order to determine the common category, which then becomes the main idea. When reading a paragraph, the sentences become the details, and these must be compared in order to determine the main idea. In most paragraphs the main idea is already stated as a topic sentence. However, many paragraphs do not have a topic sentence, and the main idea must be inferred and stated in the reader's own words.

For multi-paragraph material, there will be a hierarchy of main ideas. For example, in a reading selection with four to eight paragraphs, the main ideas from all the paragraphs are compared to determine the main idea of the whole selection. For lengthier selections of several pages or more, the main ideas from all the paragraphs are compared to develop section main ideas, and then the section ideas are compared to determine the main idea of the whole selection. Many textbooks provide headings and sub-headings (usually highlighted in bold print) which can help identify section main ideas. However, some lengthy material does not include bold headings, and students must infer the entire hierarchy of main ideas and state it in their own words.

## **Teaching Main Idea Skills**

It is important to introduce the concept of main idea by using structured examples. Eventually students will learn to formulate main ideas from all types of reading and listening sources, some of which may be disorganized or poorly written. Initially, however, students should use organized material to develop and practice the ability to discern main ideas and put them in their own words. Teachers should follow this progression to introduce and teach main idea skills:



1. Categorize and find the main idea for lists of words.
2. Identify main ideas in paragraphs with topic sentences.
3. Infer and formulate main ideas in paragraphs without topic sentences.
4. Identify the main ideas in paragraphs and the overall main idea of multi-paragraph selections.
5. Identify the paragraph, section, and overall main ideas of lengthier selections.
6. Practice main idea skills at the categorizing, paragraph, and multi-paragraph levels using a variety of sources (e.g., material from science, social studies, and literature).

### *Categorizing Main Ideas*

The purpose of categorizing is to demonstrate that people, places, things, and ideas can be grouped together into main ideas. Teachers should introduce categorizing by listing similar items and asking students what they have in common. For example:

**Fruit** is the category (main idea) for apple, orange, and banana

**Emotions** is the category (main idea) for anger, love, and sadness

For younger students and students having difficulty generating the category in their own words, include the category in the list of details. For example:

Brown, Orange, **Colors**, Yellow, Blue, Green

Teachers can provide further practice by instructing students to separate the details into two related main idea categories. For example:

**List:** Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Tojo, Churchill

**Category 1:** Leaders of the Allied countries in World War II (Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill)

**Category 2:** Leaders of the Axis countries in World War II (Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo)

Although there are specific workbooks available for practicing categorizing skills, most content material used in regular classes offers plenty of opportunities to categorize. Students will see more value in learning this skill if it is related to information they are already studying. Some examples by subject:

**Science:**

Plant or animal species  
Types of weather, cloud formations  
Lists of elements in physics  
Parts of the human cell

**Social Studies:**

Countries or states by geographic region  
Customs from different cultures  
Grouping similar events

**English:**

Parts of speech  
Sentence types  
Vocabulary  
Characters in literature

**Math:**

Types of measurement  
Types of word problems  
Algebraic formulas  
Geometric shapes

*Main Ideas in Paragraphs*

The next step in the progression of developing main idea skills is to recognize main ideas at the paragraph level. Once students can identify main ideas in paragraphs and state the ideas in their own words, they are better able to understand, organize, and remember most reading material. A paragraph is the most basic unit of discourse and is usually constructed around a single main idea. The comprehension of lengthy reading selections requires the ability to micro-unit those selections into paragraphs with main ideas. Another common term for describing paragraph main ideas is “chunking.” Chunking means grouping together detail sentences, which share a main idea.

Teachers should introduce this skill by using well-structured paragraphs with a topic sentence that clearly states the main idea and detail sentences that