

Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

What's the Big Idea? Finding and Understanding the Main Idea

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What Makes a Good Reader?

Good readers read grade-level or above grade-level materials fluently (quickly and accurately) either silently or aloud, decode (figure out) new words, understand the meaning of new words in context, understand multiple-meaning words in context, recall details, and, most of all, understand the *main idea*. What is the main idea? The main idea is a message about the topic that the author is sending the reader—minus all the details. It is the most important thing the text says about the topic. All fictional and nonfictional stories, paragraphs, poems, and articles have a main idea. *Understanding main idea is essential for reading comprehension.*

When Do Students Learn About Main Idea in School?

In very early grades, elementary classroom reading materials and teachers *introduce* finding the main idea to students simply by looking at the first sentence of a paragraph. However, as students move into upper grades, they may continue to claim or believe that the first sentence in a paragraph is always the main idea. This is *not* the case. Most all texts have one sentence within a paragraph or passage stating the author's message, or main idea. The main idea can appear at the beginning, middle, or end of a paragraph or passage.



Finding the main idea becomes more difficult in the upper grades where the main idea may be *explicit* (a complete sentence taken directly from the text) or *implied* (summarized by evaluating the details in the text). The sentences in the text may have too much detail to pick one main idea or so little information that there is no obvious message.

How Do I Help My Child Recognize the Main Idea?



1. Read the text to the child or have him/her read it aloud.
2. Ask the child, "What is this passage/story/paragraph about?"
3. Have the child explain the passage/story/paragraph to you in one short sentence.
4. Look for a sentence in the text that fits best with your child's summary.

The main idea should:



- Be a complete thought.
- Create a mental picture of the author's message.
- Reveal the "big idea" or a deep understanding of the author's message.
- Not be too general or too detailed.

There are many activities you can do with your child to help him/her find the main idea and supporting details of different texts. Ask your child's teacher to share materials with you that are age-appropriate for your child. As well, look online for free parent resources to help your child with main idea and reading comprehension at all grade levels.

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