

Lesson 3 Finding Main Ideas

Writers Communicate with Readers

Writing is a form of communication. Writers, in other words, have something to say to readers. What the writer is talking about, the main point of what the writer is saying, is the main idea.

Without a main idea, nothing very much is said—nothing of importance, anyway. Think of someone chattering endlessly without really telling you anything. “Get to the point!” you say. Or, “What in the world are you talking about?” What you are asking for in such cases is the main idea of the conversation. If there is no main idea there is no real conversation. It is all small talk.

In good writing you shouldn’t have to search for the main idea. A good writer makes the ideas jump out at you. Everything either points to the main ideas, leads up to them, or explains them.

Previews and Main Ideas

One reason that previewing is so useful is that it helps you find main ideas in your reading before you start to read. A headline and sub-headings often tell at a glance what the main ideas are. It isn’t always that easy, but previewing will certainly provide clues to main ideas so that you know them when you see them.

Main Ideas and Details

Some people have trouble deciding what is a main idea in a piece of reading and what is a detail about a main idea. This should not be a big problem. Recall what was said about topic sentences in Lesson 2. Decide which sentence is the most important statement in a paragraph or in a group of paragraphs. What is the writer talking about?

Details explain a main idea. Details may be in the form of facts, explanations or descriptions. What is the following short article about? And what are some of the details?

It was a great day for the Clemson Tigers when they became college football’s national champions. The big win came in Clemson’s victory over Nebraska in the Orange Bowl. This was the school’s first national championship in 86 years of gridiron play.

This first sentence tells what the article is about. The main reason for the article is to tell you about Clemson’s big win. So this is the main idea. Where they won—the Orange Bowl, and what team they beat—Nebraska, are details. The fact that this was their first championship in 86 years is also a detail.

Finding Main Ideas

Main Ideas and Details *(cont.)*

Find the main idea in this paragraph.

The town of Concord is where they fired the shot “heard ‘round the world.” But the people of Concord have become fed up with guns, handguns at least. Concord has joined five other towns in an effort to ban ownership of pistols by private citizens.

This time the main idea is not the first sentence. The first sentence points to the main idea. It starts you thinking about guns, which is the main point of the article. Concord is fed up with guns. That is the main idea and it appears in the second sentence which is also the topic sentence of the paragraph.

The last sentence tells what Concord is doing about handguns, so this is a detail.

Putting Many Ideas Together

There is almost always more than one important idea in any reading material longer than a paragraph or two. Long news articles and chapters of books are packed full of ideas. But you can still point to one thing, the most important thing, that is the main subject of the whole article.

What you want to do with long articles, or chapters of a book, is organize the ideas in your mind. Here is how it is done:

1. Keep the main subject of the reading in mind. You may have found this in your previewing. Write it down if you have to. Hang on to it.
2. Watch for the most important idea in each long paragraph or group of short paragraphs. (You can find these in topic sentences.)
3. Work with one long paragraph at a time or a few short ones. Do not do too much at once or you may get lost in a tangle of ideas and details.
4. Think how each idea you find ties into the main subject (main idea) of the whole article.
5. If you are doing study reading where you must remember important ideas for a test later on, make an outline from the main ideas you find. (Once again, use the topic sentences.)

Finding Main Ideas

Exercise C

Read the following news article. Find the main ideas in the story and complete the exercise below.

Police Officer K-9 Knows Her Job

Boots is a four-year-old German Shepherd, often called a police dog. She weighs in at a sleek 90 pounds, all muscle, according to her handler, Sgt. Paul Rizzo of the Gailsburg Police Department. "Boots is a police officer who really knows her job," Rizzo said. "Nobody wants to argue with Bootsy when she shows her teeth."

To prove his point, Sgt. Rizzo ordered the dog to speak. Boots barked and growled deep in her throat. In the process she showed a gleaming set of canine teeth that you wouldn't want to tangle with.

"Her teeth are like my club," Sgt. Rizzo explained. "She won't use them unless she's ordered to or unless she has to in self-defense." At a word from her handler Boots was instantly quiet and lay down to relax at his feet.

Police Dogs Are Not Vicious

"Boots is not mean or vicious," Sgt. Rizzo said. "No trained K-9 officer is. Like other police officers, she was trained to earn



Boots shows her teeth Photo by Bob Laramie

respect by doing her job well and with a minimum of force.

"Boots can help control a crowd or hold a criminal just by showing her teeth. She can also find a missing child or sniff out illegal drugs."

Sgt. Rizzo scratched Boots behind the ear and she licked his hand. "On duty she's all business," Rizzo said. "But when she's off duty, she's a cream puff."

1. The main idea of the story is that
 a. Boots is a police dog. c. Boots is good at her job.
 b. Boots is really a cream puff. d. Boots can control crowds.
2. Another important idea in the story is that Boots is well trained. On the back of this paper, list at least two details that show this is true.

Finding Main Ideas

Practice Using Your Newspaper

1. Find three articles in your newspaper that interest you. Select three different kinds of articles—one may be news, one sports, one an information article, etc.
2. Write the main idea of each article in your own words.
3. Write down one other idea that you find in each article besides the main idea.

Article 1

Newspaper _____ Date _____ Page _____

Main Idea _____

Another Idea _____

Article 2

Newspaper _____ Date _____ Page _____

Main Idea _____

Another Idea _____

Article 3

Newspaper _____ Date _____ Page _____

Main Idea _____

Another Idea _____

Now Try Your Newspaper

Keep an idea file for at least one week.

Here is how:

1. Each day, clip one article from your newspaper which you find interesting.
2. Underline one or more important ideas in the article.
3. Attach the article to a sheet of paper.
4. Write your own feelings about the ideas on the sheet of paper. Write down an idea of your own about the subject.
5. Keep your clippings and comments together in a large folder or envelope. Or, you may prefer to start an Idea Scrapbook.

Answer Key

Page 9—Exercise A

1. c; 2. a; 3. b

Page 13—Exercise B

1. The article is about Henry Aaron and other candidates for baseball's Hall of Fame.
2. The article will tell about Sebastian Coe and why he is an outstanding sportsman.
3. The article will be an account of Mary Higgin's terrible experience.
4. The article is about parents trying to see what is good about the high school and what may be wrong.

Page 17—Exercise C

1. c

Page 21—Exercise D

1. Some details: school officials say they want control; students call it censorship; nine books removed; case goes to the Supreme Court. (There are other details.)
2. The main idea: There is a dispute about banning books. It is local control of education or is it censorship?

Pages 25 and 26—Reviewing With Max Kirkwood

A. Previewing:

1. b; 2. a

B. Topic Sentences:

1. The trouble is, I have no friends.
2. Loneliness affects more people than you might think.

C. Finding Main Ideas:

1. d; 2. c

D. Details About Main Ideas:

1. a; 2. c

Page 31—Exercise A

1. c
2. jumping bean; leap frog: hop-plane, for example.

3. a) The word amphibious could be defined as "two-way life."

b) The dictionary says it means "able to live or operate both on land and in the water."

c) An amphibious assault ship would be a ship that can launch an attack both on land and from the water.

4. a) Pegasus was a winged horse.

b) The Pegasus myth comes from ancient Greece.

Page 37—Exercise B

1. b; 2. b; 3. d; 4. c; 5. c; 6. a; 7. a

Page 46—Exercise C

Use your dictionary to check your answers.

Page 56—Reviewing with Max Kirkwood

Use your dictionary to check your answers.

Page 62 and 63—Exercise A

1. a & c
2. Michael Ortiz probably loves animals and wants to help them.

Page 68—Exercise B

1. b; 2. d

Page 72—Exercise C

1. 18 students
2. a tape recorder
3. Getting four days of interviews into one story seems to be the hardest part of the project.
4. Students are learning how to organize information. (last sentence)

Page 75—Exercise D

1. a; 2. d; 3. c; 4. c; 5. a; 6. c; 7. c

Page 78—Reviewing with Max Kirkwood

- 1-3 (Any thoughtful answer should be considered correct for these questions.)
4. In his first sentence Max Kirkwood says there are good treatments for acne.
5. a dermatologist
6. benzoyl peroxide; tretinoin; tetracycline; Accutane