



Main Idea and Details: Grades 3–5

Overview:

The main idea of a text is the most important idea or concept the author wants to convey. Sometimes the author explicitly states the main idea; other times, it is implied through the details the author includes. The ability to identify and explain the main idea is the foundation to students' being able to think more deeply and critically about a text. Research shows that explicitly teaching students to identify the main idea and relevant details is an essential first step in developing their ability to retell and summarize—a skill identified as one of the most effective strategies in comprehension and writing development (Shannahan and Seita, 2024). Being able to identify the main idea is a prerequisite for self-monitoring for understanding, determining importance, generating higher-level questions, and analyzing text structure.

Both science and social studies require students to read and comprehend a variety of texts. The following strategies are designed to scaffold and support students in identifying and explaining the main idea and details in informational texts, beginning with explicitly stated main ideas and progressing to those that are implied. While each of the mini-lessons below are based on lessons within *Expedition: Learn!*, they can be adapted to meet the needs of your classroom.

Mini-Lesson I

Distinguish Between Main Idea and Topic (20 minutes)

Background: When students first learn how to identify the main idea of a text, many struggle to distinguish between the topic (subject) of the text and the main idea (or what the author is saying about the topic). In addition, while students may comprehend the text, many have difficulty putting the main idea into words. The following mini-lesson provides explicit instruction in distinguishing between the topic and main idea of the text. In addition, students practice putting the main idea into words using teacher-provided sentence stems. Note the teaching suggestions below are based on the *Expedition: Learn!* lesson "Extinct Plants and Animals," but instruction can be adjusted to align with a different topic.

- Introduce the academic vocabulary to students by providing definitions and examples.
 - Topic: the subject of the text. It is often just a single word or short phrase. For example:
 - *cats, trees, American Revolution, planets*
 - Main Idea: what the author wants you to know about the topic. It is the big takeaway from the reading and is usually written as a sentence. For example:
 - *Cats are easy pets to have.*
 - *There are different species of trees that grow in different parts of the world.*



- Explain that the first step to finding the main idea is determining the topic. Emphasize that the topic can often be determined by previewing the passage and text features. Read aloud the title of the lesson, the title of the first passage, and each of the section headers. Engage in a think-aloud to model evaluating the text features to determine the topic of the lesson.
 - *I notice that the title of the lesson, passage, and section headers all mention the word extinction. I am predicting that the topic of the lesson has to do with extinction. I also notice that all of the pictures include an animal. I wonder if the topic of the text is about animals that are extinct.*
 - Note that while in this case the topic aligns very closely with the title, it is important for students to look beyond the title when determining the topic, as not all texts follow this rule. They should understand that it can be a helpful strategy, but it doesn't always hold true.
- Share with students that once they have identified the topic, they can use it to help them find the main idea. Emphasize that the main idea cannot be determined until they read the text. Share that as they read, they should consider what the author wants them to know about plant and animal extinction.
- Conduct a shared reading of the first text, stopping as necessary to monitor student comprehension. After reading, facilitate a discussion to help students the author's intended main idea about animal extinction. For example:
 - *Plants and animals can become extinct for many different reasons.*
- Encourage students to practice identifying the main idea with a partner using the second article, "Evidence of Extinct Plants and Animals." Reinforce the following steps:
 - Preview the text, reading the title, section headers, and text features to determine the topic. Record the topic.
 - Read the text with a partner, stopping at the end of each section to discuss and record what you learned about the topic.
 - After all sections have been read, review your notes and determine the main idea. Ask yourself, what does the author want me to know about ___?
 - As needed, provide students with sentence frame to help them share the main idea:
 - The main idea of the passage is ___.
 - The author wants the reader to know ___ about extinction, so the main idea is ___.
- Monitor partner discussions, and then facilitate a whole-class discussion to help students add to their original main idea. For example:
 - *Fossils can teach us about extinct plants and animals.*
- Debrief the lesson by asking students to discuss the following with a partner or in a small group.
 - What is the difference between the topic and the main idea of a text?
 - How can we use the topic to help us determine the main idea?

Mini-Lesson II

Identify Supporting Details in a Text (20 minutes)

Background: Students often have trouble identifying the most important details within a text, as it is often difficult to distinguish between what is interesting and what is important. Finding supporting details requires students to not only understand what they are reading but also to think critically about the details and consider why they are important. Learning how to find the supporting details within a text is a crucial skill in science and social studies as it helps students find the evidence that validates a claim or conclusion. Additionally, when writing, supporting details provide clarity for the reader, and learning how to identify these details while reading can help students become stronger writers. Note that the teaching suggestions below are based on the *Expedition: Learn!* lesson "Daily Life in the American Colonies," but instruction can be adjusted to align with a different topic.

- Introduce the academic vocabulary to students by sharing the [Main Idea and Supporting Details anchor chart](#). Share both the definition and an example of each word, ensuring that students understand the connection between the main idea and supporting details—just as the legs of the stool support the seat, the supporting details support the main idea.
 - *Main idea*: what the author wants you to know about the topic. Can also be referred to as the central idea. For example:
 - *Cats are the best pets for people who aren't home during the day.*
 - *Supporting details*: support the main idea by giving important facts, examples, and other information that explains more about it. Also known as key or relevant details. For example:
 - *Cats use a litter box, so they don't need to be taken outside during the day. They are independent, so they don't need people around them. They often like to sleep a lot and play with toys by themselves.*
- Emphasize for students the importance of supporting details within a text. Share that these details make the writing clear and provide the evidence to support the author's point.
- Share that the topic of the lesson is colonial life. Conduct a shared reading of the first article.
- Facilitate a discussion, asking students to identify the main idea. Record the main idea on the board or a piece of chart paper. For example:
 - *Life on a farm in the colonies was hard and required a lot of work from everyone.*
- Reinforce for students that the key details are the facts and information that support the main idea. In this case, the facts and details show the reader why life was hard on colonial farms.
- Conduct a second read of the passage, stopping to model finding details that support the main idea and recording the details under the main idea. As each detail is identified, model how to self-monitor, asking students, “Does the detail ____ show us that life on colonial farms was hard work?” For example:
 - *"The text says that men managed the crops, raised livestock, and hunted. I know this is a supporting detail because it explains what hard work the men were doing and supports the main idea that everyone on a farm did hard work."*
 - *"The text says that women managed the home, raised children, preserved food, and gathered eggs and milk. That's a lot of things to do at once. This is another supporting detail that supports the main idea of how family farmers worked hard because it gives examples of the hard work women did."*
 - *"The text says that children helped their parents and went to school. Doing both things was probably very challenging. This is another detail supporting the main idea with an example of how everyone on a family farm worked hard."*
- Release students to practice identifying supporting details. Ask them to read the second article, “Colonial City Life,” stopping at the end of each section to discuss and record the details that support the main idea. To scaffold the task and help students focus on identifying supporting details, provide the main idea to students prior to reading:
 - Cities and the work people did within them was important to the colonies.
- Monitor partner discussions. As needed, prompt students to revisit their details, asking, “Does that detail show how cities or the work people did was important to the colonies?”
- Debrief, asking students to share out the key details they identified. For example:
 - *Cities were major trade centers where ships from other colonies and countries loaded and unloaded cargo.*
 - *Skilled workers in cities built goods like ships and clocks, made shoes, and made items out of iron.*
 - *Cities on the coast helped to protect the colonies from attacks by enemy ships.*
- Reinforce the importance of the key details in understanding the text.

Mini-Lesson III

Identify and Explain Two or More Main Ideas Within a Text (30 minutes)

Background: As students read more complex texts, they are expected to identify when a text contains more than one main idea and explain how each one develops. This can be challenging as the main ideas are often implied, and students must follow several steps to determine if the ideas they have identified are of equal importance. One strategy is to focus on different sections of the text, stopping to jot the big idea of each section on a sticky note or graphic organizer. Students can then review these notes to identify where big ideas surface. Note that the teaching suggestions below are based on the *Expedition: Learn!* lesson “What is a Trait?” but instruction can be adjusted to align with a different topic.

- Distribute a [Multiple Main Ideas organizer](#) to students. As needed, define the academic vocabulary for students, emphasizing that when they read longer, more complex texts, they may find more than one main idea.
- Share with students that one way to identify multiple main ideas in a text is to stop at the end of each section to summarize and record the main point of the section. Remind students to pay attention to section headers and text features, as these can help them determine the big idea.
- Model the process, reading the first section of the article “What Are Traits?” After reading, think aloud to identify and record the big idea from this section. For example:
 - *The title of the section helps me know that the topic is about traits. The section discusses how animals and plants all have traits. The image highlights types of traits in plants. I can summarize all this information and say that the big idea is, “All living things have traits, or characteristics.”*
- Release students to read the remaining sections with a partner, stopping after each section to discuss the big idea identified in each section.
- Facilitate a discussion, debriefing the big ideas from the other two sections of the passage. For example:
 - *Offspring share a mix of inherited traits from their parents or other relatives.*
 - *Traits can be acquired through outside influences.*
- Share with students that once they have identified the big ideas from each section, they should consider how they can write main idea statements that include these big ideas. Model the process as needed. For example:
 - *All living things have similar and unique traits.*
 - *Traits are either inherited or acquired.*
 - *Invite students to practice identifying more than one main idea using the second passage in the lesson.*

Check for Understanding

If you observe ...

Then try ...

students having difficulty distinguishing between the topic and main idea

providing additional practice using short, high-interest texts. Remind students that the topic is a word or short phrase, while the main idea is a sentence that explains what the author wants you to know about the topic. Consider providing the following sentence stems to support students:

- The author wants the reader to know ___ about ___.
- The main idea of the text is ___.
- The topic is ___. The author wants the reader to know ___.

students having trouble identifying supporting details

asking students to turn the main idea into a question. They should then reread the text, recording details that help them answer the question. This helps students sort through the information as they look to answer the question.

students having trouble identifying more than one main idea

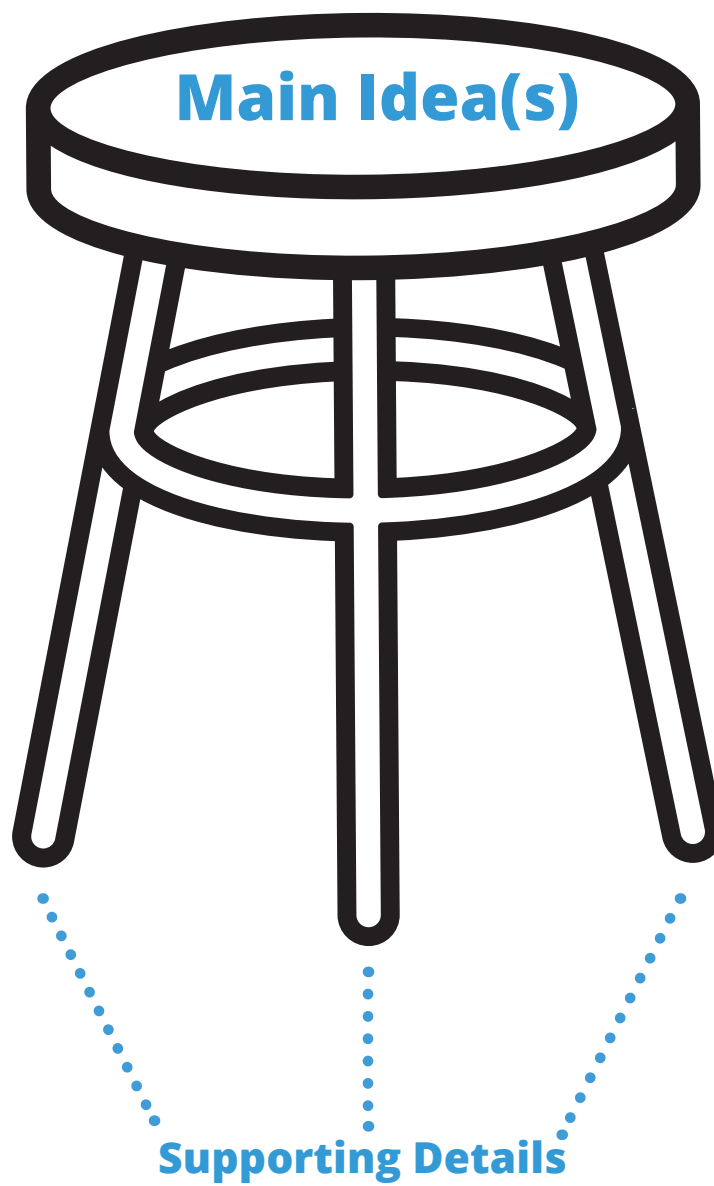
encouraging students to record important details on sticky notes or note cards while they read. After students have completed reading, invite them to move the cards to group related details. For each group, students should write a statement that explains how the details are related. This helps students identify the main ideas, and the kinesthetic activity engages multiple parts of the brain.



Main Idea and Supporting Details

What is the
main Idea?

The **main idea** (also called the central idea) is what the text is **mostly** about. It is what the author **wants you to know** about the topic of the text.



Supporting details give **more information** about the main idea.



Multiple Main Ideas

Title

Section: _____

Section: _____

Section: _____

Section: _____

Main Ideas