Britannica Expedition:LEARN!

Teacher Toolkit

Main Idea and Details: Grades 6–8

OVERVIEW:

As students enter middle school, the texts they encounter become more complex and nuanced. The ability to identify and explain the main ideas within a multi-paragraph content area text is an essential skill. It is a critical step in students' ability to derive meaning from a text so that they can acquire content knowledge. Content area teachers can support students by providing explicit instruction on how to find the main idea within discipline-specific texts. Once students have been taught the nuances of the genre and the thinking steps involved in identifying and explaining the main idea and key details, they should be provided with ample opportunities to practice the skill. Students should work with a variety of texts and make use of graphic organizers and scaffolded support as necessary.

The following strategies are designed to teach students how to identify and explain the main ideas within complex, discipline-specific texts. While each of the mini-lessons below are based on passages and lessons within *Expedition: Learn!*, they can be adapted to meet the needs of your classroom.

Mini-Lesson I

Determine the GIST (30 minutes)

Background: Teaching students to identify the gist, or big ideas, of sections within a text is an effective reading strategy that scaffolds and supports the identification of the main idea(s). The strategy asks students to restate the big ideas in their own words, as this helps them monitor their comprehension and integrate important information across sections of a text. The following lesson provides specific teaching suggestions for modeling the strategy using the article "A Complex Leader" in the *Expedition: Learn!* lesson "Abraham Lincoln"; however, instruction can be adjusted to align with a different topic.

- Distribute a **Get the Gist organizer** to each student. Share that gist statements are short, concise, and state the most important idea of a section.
- Model how to use the organizer. Read aloud the introduction and first section ("Lincoln's Early Years") of the article. After reading, think aloud as you work through the steps on the organizer to write a gist statement. For example:
    - *The first step is to determine who or what the section is about. This section was about Abraham Lincoln, so I will write "Abraham Lincoln" on my organizer.*

- *The next step is to identify the most important information in the section about Abraham Lincoln. There are a lot of details about Abraham Lincoln's early life. The details describe the type of person he was. I think the most important details are that he was eager to learn and very honest. I am going to add those to my organizer.*
- *Now I can write a gist statement for this section using the most important information. I want the gist statement to be short and concise. "As a young boy and man, Abraham Lincoln was eager to learn and honest."*

- Invite students to practice the strategy with a partner, reading the section "Lincoln and the Question of Slavery" together and then using the organizer to write a gist statement.
- Facilitate a discussion, strategically inviting partners to share their gist statements. Model adding to the organizer. For example:
  - *This section was about the issue of slavery. The most important ideas in this section are that Lincoln wasn't for or against slavery, that he believed enslavement should not be allowed in new states, and that he worried the disagreement over slavery would tear the U.S. apart.*
  - *Sample gist statement: Lincoln worried the issue of slavery would divide the country, and he argued that slavery should not be allowed in new states added to the United States.*
- Share that once students have written a gist statement for each section of the text, they can use these statements to write the main idea of the text. Model thinking aloud to combine the gist statements and write the main idea. For example:
  - *Abraham Lincoln was an honest politician who did not want slavery in new states because he feared the issue would divide the country.*

Mini-Lesson II

Determining Importance (30 minutes)

Background: As students read more complex, content-specific texts, they are likely to come across texts that contain a lot of information and facts. It can be difficult to learn to distinguish between the details that are important and support the main idea(s) and those facts that are merely interesting. Research has shown that information that is interesting is often more memorable for readers even when that information is extraneous. The following reading strategy encourages students to evaluate the information they are reading to determine if it is important (and related to the main idea) or if it is interesting but unrelated. The following lesson provides specific teaching suggestions for modeling the strategy using the article in the *Expedition: Learn!* lesson "What are Greenhouse Gases?," but instruction can be adjusted to align with a different topic.

- Introduce the strategy to students, sharing the importance of determining what is essential within a text in order to understand the big ideas the author is communicating. Emphasize that authors often include extra details that are designed to interest the reader, but these do not add to our understanding of the main idea.
- Invite students to write the title of the passage on a sheet of paper. Share that the first step is to read the passage and determine the main idea or the main point the author wants them to know. Model the process, reading aloud the article "The Greenhouse Effect." After reading, think aloud to determine the main idea and record it on the board. For example:
  - *The first part of the passage explains the greenhouse effect and how a greenhouse works to trap heat and keep the temperature where a grower needs it to be. The next section discusses how the Earth's atmosphere is like a greenhouse, trapping the heat. In the last section, the author discusses the types of gases that occur in the atmosphere and how human activity can impact the level of these gases. I think the main idea of the passage is: "Gases found within the Earth's atmosphere trap heat and keep the Earth's temperature at a level that can sustain life. Human activity can influence the type and amount of gases, which can cause the Earth to become too warm."*
- Share that once the main idea has been identified, students' goal is to identify the important details within the text that help develop the main idea. Ask students to create a T-chart below the main idea, labeling the two columns "Important" and "Interesting."
- Ask students to reread the passage with a partner, stopping periodically to discuss the facts and details the author includes. As they discuss the details, students should ask themselves if the detail is essential to understanding the main idea or if it is just an interesting detail, adding it to the corresponding column. For example:

- "Important":
  - *Earth's atmosphere is the mass of gases that surrounds the planet, and it acts in the same way as the walls and ceiling of a greenhouse.*
  - *The heat absorbed and trapped by atmospheric gases warms Earth's surface and the lower atmosphere.*
  - *Earth's atmosphere acts as a blanket, keeping the temperature at a level that can maintain life.*
  - *Gases occur naturally in the atmosphere, but humans can cause more gases to be released.*
  - *Large-scale burning of fossil fuels can release more carbon into the atmosphere.*
  - *Fluorinated gases are not naturally found and come only from human activity.*
- "Interesting":
  - *Greenhouses create a controlled environment where plants thrive.*
  - *Some solar radiation reflects off the atmosphere and returns to space, some is absorbed by the atmosphere, and some passes through the atmosphere and strikes Earth's surface.*
  - *Methane comes from decaying swamps and wetlands, as well as livestock.*

- Debrief the task, asking students to discuss why it is important to distinguish between the details that are important and those that are only interesting.

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Mini-Lesson III

Using Text Structure to Determine Main Idea (40 minutes)

Background: As students move through the grades, the texts they encounter become more specific to the discipline in which they are found. Being literate within a discipline means that students are able to read, learn from, and discuss information contained within these texts. This can pose a challenge for some students, as each text has its own way of presenting the main idea. Teaching students to analyze the genre and structure of the text can help them learn to identify and explain the main idea. Students should be given exposure to a wide range of content for practice. The more exposure students have, the more adept they become at reading disciplinary texts, and the more they can develop their content knowledge. The following lesson provides specific teaching suggestions for modeling the strategy, using the passage "The Rise of Labor Unions" in the *Expedition: Learn!* lesson "The Labor Reform Movement," but instruction can be adjusted to align with a different topic.

Note that beginning in elementary school, students are introduced to text structure. Some students may benefit from a review of the different types of text structure on the **Text Structures anchor chart** prior to engaging in this lesson.

- Remind students that the way an author organizes information within a text is known as text structure. Share that because each type of text presents information in different ways, one strategy to help them better understand the main idea of a text is to pay attention to the text structure.
- Share with students that the first step is to conduct a first read of the text to determine its topic and structure. Conduct a first read of the article "The Rise of Labor Unions." After reading, model thinking aloud to determine the topic and structure of the passage. Consider recording where it is visible to students. For example:
  - *The topic of the article is factory work in the 1800s and the impact of unions. The text structure is problem and solution.*
- Emphasize that in a problem and solution text, the author explains a problem and then presents a solution or solutions to the problem.
- Invite students to create a T-chart, labeling one side "Problem" and the other "Solution." Share that as they read, they can use this T-chart to keep track of the important information.

- Model the process, reading aloud the first section, "The Rise of Labor Unions," and then thinking aloud to add to the T- chart. For example:
    - *Problem:*
        - *People worked long hours for little pay.*
        - *Workplaces were often dirty and dangerous.*
    - *Solution:*
        - *Workers in many industries began establishing labor unions to protect workers' rights and fight for improved working conditions.*
- Release students to continue reading the passage with a partner, stopping to discuss when they encounter either a problem created by industrialization or corporate greed, or a solution to that problem.
- Facilitate a discussion, inviting students to share the problems and solutions they identified. For example:
    - *Problem:*
        - *Workers faced unfair wages, a lack of benefits, and too many hours.*
        - *Owners did not want to give in to workers' demands because they would lose money*
    - *Solutions:*
        - *Workers in the labor union went on strike.*
        - *Owners fired unionized workers and replaced them with non-union employees.*
- Invite students to review the information gathered to write a main idea statement that explains what the author wants them to know about the labor reform movement. For example:
    - In the United States in the 1800s, factory work was dangerous and underpaid, so workers organized into labor unions to fight for better pay and better working conditions.

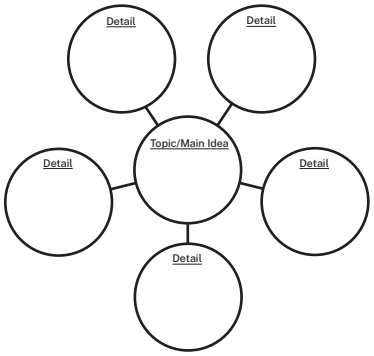
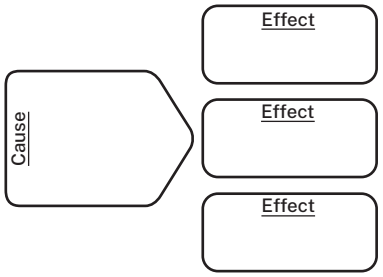
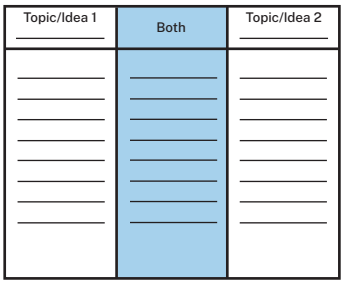
Check for Understanding

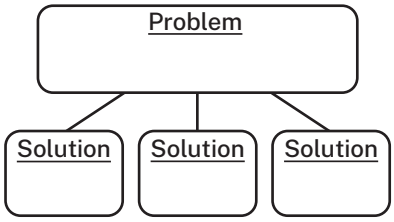
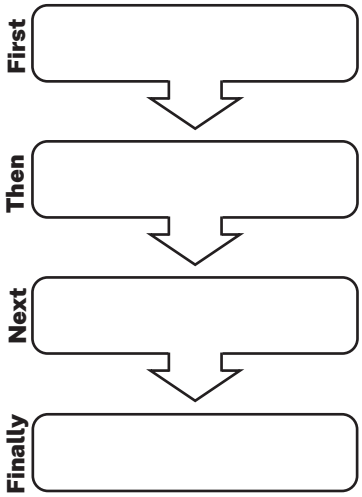
If you observe ...	Then try ...
students struggling to distill their gist statements into a main idea	asking students to restate their gist statements in six words or fewer. This allows students to get to the most essential idea of each section and makes the gist statements easier to combine.
students having difficulty determining if something is important or merely interesting	inviting students to try to explain the main idea to someone without including that detail.
students having trouble identifying the text structure	teaching students to recognize signal words related to each structure.

Get the Gist

Section	Who or what the section is about	Most important information	Gist statement
1			
2			
3			
4			

Text Structures

Type	Clue Words	Example	Visual
Description The text explains a topic, idea, person, place, or thing.	*for example* *for instance* *such as* sensory words adjectives	what plants need to grow	
Cause and Effect The text tells about an event or cause and the results or consequences	*because* *led to* *since* *so* *that is why* *the effect of* *therefore* *the reason that*	how landforms impact where people live and work	
Compare and Contrast The text tells how two or more things or ideas are alike and how they are different.	*-er / -est* *more, less* *similar* *also, too* *on the other hand* *however* *same* *like*	types of renewable energy—solar and wind	

Type	Clue Words	Example	Visual
Problem and Solution The text states a problem and one or more ideas that might help solve the problem.	*challenge* *answer* *issue* *problem* *question* *trouble* *conclusion*	reducing pollution to protect the environment	
Sequence/ Chronological The text gives steps in order or tells the order in which events happened.	*first* *then* *next* *finally* *after* *before* *during* *in the end* *meanwhile* *step* *stage* *level* numbers in sequence	steps in the engineering design process