Success Center
Directed Learning Activity (DLA)

Finding the Topics, Main Ideas, and Supporting Details in Textbook Passages

R005.1
Directed Learning Activity: Finding the Topics, Main Ideas, and Supporting Details in Textbook Passages

Description: Finding the topics, main ideas, and supporting details in textbook passages is a sophisticated reading task. Locating and comprehending the topics, main ideas, and supporting details will help you to understand the points authors are attempting to communicate.

Why should we care about finding the topic, main idea, and supporting details in a textbook passage? Because they are the keys to good reading comprehension. If you cannot locate these features in a passage, you will likely have trouble comprehending and remembering the passage. This means you will have trouble taking a quiz, writing an essay, or participating in a classroom discussion based on the material.

By learning to identify, define, and distinguish between topic, main idea, and supporting details in a passage, you will be able to improve your comprehension when reading a textbook.

Step One: Understanding the Definitions of Topic, Main Idea, and Supporting Detail

The topic is the general subject matter of a reading passage – who or what the passage is about. Typically, the topic can be stated in one word or a few words.

As you read, it is always important to ask, “What is the point the author is trying to make?” The main idea of a passage is what the author wants you to know about the topic. It is the broadest, most important idea that the writer develops throughout the passage. It is the author’s controlling point about the topic – that is, it “controls” related sentences that work together to make a single point.

In reading, supporting details are also important. They hold up a main idea by giving reasons, examples, steps, evidence, or any other needed information. Supporting details explain, develop, and illustrate the main idea.

Think about a paragraph as a well-planned house of ideas. The topic, then, is the roof covering all the rooms. The main idea is the frame of the house. The supporting details are the different rooms.

Step One: Identifying Topics and Main Ideas

After reading the paragraph below, fill in the outline following this paragraph by writing the topic and main idea in the spaces provided.

Many heroes are everyday people who simply rely on courage and hope. The father who gives one his kidneys to his young daughter is just one instance of such a hero. Another inspiring example is the young person who refuses to let a friend drink and drive. Consider the teacher who chooses to teach in a high-crime neighborhood. Even the young man who lost his arm in an accident, yet learns to be a top-notch motorcycle technician is a living model of an everyday hero.

To find the topic, ask yourself: “Who or what is the one thing the author is writing about in this paragraph?”
To find the main idea, ask yourself: “What is the controlling point the author is making about the topic?” Remember: The controlling point is the single idea the author wants us to know about the topic.

Topic:

Main Idea:

Supporting Details:
1. Father who gives a kidney to his young daughter.
2. Young person who won’t let a friend drive drunk.
3. Teacher in a high crime area.
4. Young man who lost his arm, yet learned to be a technician.

How did you identify the topic?

How did you identify the main idea?

Step Two: Identifying Supporting Details
To identify supporting details, a reader turns the main idea into a question. This question could ask who, what, when, where, why, or how? Supporting details will answer the question. For example, if we were trying to identify the supporting details in the paragraph in Step One, we could ask, “What type of people are examples of ‘everyday heroes’?” You’ll notice that the four supporting details identified for you in Step One answer that exact question.

An author often uses signal words or transitional words to draw readers’ attention to each new detail in a paragraph or passage. Words that signal new details in a paragraph or passage include: first of all, additionally, also, first, second, third, finally, last, next, for example, next, and another.

Read the following paragraph, which was adapted from a textbook about interpersonal communication. Look for supporting details using what you have learned about signal words. The main idea is in bold.

How to Communicate Equality
In communication, the term equality refers to an attitude or approach. Equality treats each person as an important and vital part of the process. **The following four suggestions will help you express equality in any situation.** (1) First, avoid “should and ought” statements. Two examples are “You really ought to call your mother more often” or “You should learn to speak up.” These statements put the listener down. Second, make requests (be polite) and avoid demands (don’t be rude). Third, avoid interrupting. This signals an unequal relationship. It also implies that what you have to say is more important than what the other person is saying. Finally, acknowledge the other person’s point of view before stating your own. Say, “I see,” “I understand,” or “That’s right.” These statements let the other person know you’re listening and understanding.

Ask a question based on the main idea (in bold). Write it below.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

If you asked a question along the lines of “**What** are the four suggestions that will help me express equality in any situation?” or “**How** can the four suggestions help me express equality in any situation?” then you should be able to find the supporting details to answer your question.

Number the supporting details in the above paragraph. The first one has been done for you. As both the sample questions above suggest, you should find four.

**Step Three: Applying What You Have Learned So Far**

Underline the main idea in the following passage. Turn the main idea into a question. Write it below the passage. Number the main supporting details that answer that question.

**Body Language**

Body language is a visible sign of our emotions. For example, a man who is embarrassed about gaining weight may pull at the skin under his chin. Likewise, a woman who is embarrassed by her weight may smooth down her dress or slacks. When we feel afraid or defensive, we may fold our arms across our chests. Hands on our knees show our readiness to act. Hands on our hips reveal our impatience. Hands locked behind the back indicate self-control. Finally, hands locked behind the head indicate self-confidence. Of course, the meanings of our gestures vary from culture to culture.

Write a question based on the main idea: ___________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

Hint: You should number seven supporting details. You can find two of the details by looking for the signal or transition words to begin the sentence.
Step Four: Practicing on Passages From Actual College Textbooks

Now that you have practiced identifying topics, main ideas, and supporting details, test your understanding by reading the following passages from college textbooks.

Vitamins are organic compounds that help regulate our bodies’ functions. Contrary to popular belief, vitamins do not contain energy; however, they are essential to energy metabolism, the process by which macronutrients are broken down into smaller molecules that our body can absorb and use. Vitamins assist with releasing and using the energy found in all three macronutrients: carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. They are also critical in building and maintaining healthy bone, muscle, and blood; supporting our immune system so we can fight infection and disease; and ensuring healthy vision.

What is the topic? _____________________________________________________________

Underline the main idea in the paragraph.

Write a question based on the main idea. __________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

Number the supporting details.

How many did you find? ____

As the human population has grown, fresh water has become scarce in many regions of the world. Additionally, contaminated, untreated drinking water is a major problem in developing countries, where more than one billion people drink it. In both Africa and India, where water contamination poses significant threats, people are starting to use sunlight to kill disease-causing organisms. They place water in plastic bottles and shake them to increase the oxygen levels in the water. Then they put the bottles in a sunny spot, allowing the combination of oxygen, warmth, and ultraviolet light to create free radicals that kill bacteria. With no technology other than plastic, these people are generating safe drinking water.

What is the topic? _____________________________________________________________

Underline the main idea in the paragraph.

Write a question based on the main idea. __________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

Number the supporting details.

How many did you find? ____
Those who take the behaviorist perspective seem to understand how particular environmental stimuli control particular kinds of behavior. First, behaviorists analyze the antecedent environmental conditions – those that precede the behavior and set the stage for an organism to make a response or withhold a response. Next, they look at the behavioral response, which is the main object of study – the action to be understood, predicted, and controlled. Finally, they examine the observable consequences that follow from the response. A behaviorist, for example, might be interested in the way in which speeding tickets of varying penalties change the likelihood that motorists will drive with caution or abandon (behavioral responses). To conduct such a study, the psychologist would have to set up a control group, look for correlations between the level of penalties and motorists’ driving patterns, and check for reliability in the study’s results.

What is the topic?  _____________________________________________________________

Underline the main idea in the paragraph.

Write a question based on the main idea.__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________

Number the supporting details.

How many did you find? ____

Step Five: Reflecting on What You Have Learned

1. In your own words, what is the difference between a topic, main idea, and supporting details?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

2. Write three signal words that authors sometimes use to indicate supporting details.

   a. ____________________  b. ____________________  c. ____________________

3. How can you use your new knowledge of topic, main idea, and supporting details to help you comprehend your textbooks?

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PRINT STUDENT NAME STUDENT #

Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student articulated the distinction between topic, main idea, and supporting details.

_____ The student underlined the main idea and numbered the supporting details in all practice exercises.

_____ The student explained how this skill can be applied to comprehending college texts.

Additional Comments:

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PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME DATE

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE

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You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.