MAIN IDEAS VS. DETAILS

Smarter, Faster Reading

College reading assignments can be dense and dry. Their overwhelming number of facts and details can make it difficult to stay awake, let alone locate keep track of what’s important. However, being able to distinguish between the main idea (or the thesis) and the supporting details of an argument or chapter is key to successful reading and writing in college.

Often times the problem is not what we’re reading, but how we’re reading. This worksheet seeks to help you identify main ideas and supporting details so you can focus on the key points of any lecture or text.

Putting Details and Main Ideas Together

Every textbook, lecture, or article has a main point, goal, or thesis. Sometimes the main point is to explain:
Ex: “Today we will discuss how to calculate standard deviation.”

Sometimes the author’s goal is to persuade you to believe something:
Ex: “I believe that one should never eat seafood at Taco Bell, and you should believe this too.”

Sometimes the author just wants you to think about something new:
Ex: “If a tree falls in the woods, and everyone hears it, then why didn’t Ted get out of the way?”

Regardless of what the author’s goal is, they will need to provide proof, arguments, or explanatory facts to accomplish this goal.

To think about it another way, if my goal is to get you to my house, then I need to provide directions, otherwise you’ll never get there, and I will have failed. Essays work the same way; authors have an idea that they want to convey, and the facts, arguments, and details are the directions to get the reader or listener there.

Your goal as a student is not to get lost in the details, so we’ve provided a few basic steps to locate a main idea and understand how the details work to support that goal.

Reading for Main Ideas

The best way to stay on track is to determine the main idea before you really dig into a text. Some good places to start include the following:

1. Headings:
   - Most textbooks will have clearly designated headings and subheadings. When taking notes, first look at the main heading and those subtopics within it.
   - As a simple example, a chapter on “Dogs” could focus on any number of topics. The author could explore different breed types, tips for caring for a dog, how dogs compare to different pets, etc. You will determine the chapter’s focus by quickly surveying the other chapter headings and asking, “How do these ideas fit together? What is their common theme?” At this early phase in your reading, don’t pay too much attention to details.

2. Introductions:
   - Sometimes your readings will not have distinct chapter or section headings. In this case, read and analyze the introductory paragraphs before reading the remainder of the text.
   - Introductory paragraphs are typically used to make a formal claim that the remainder of the article or chapter will seek to defend. In other words, the introduction should say something that the author wants to prove or explain.
3. Conclusions/Summary Paragraphs

--Sometimes authors take a while to get to their point. Hopefully, however, they've figured it out by the time the article or chapter ends. If the introduction and headings don't make it clear what the main idea or ideas of the text are, skip ahead and read the last few paragraphs.

--Sometimes chapters in textbooks add summary pages to help you review main points. Instead of reading them last, use these lists to preview your reading.

**Digging In**

After you've got the main points, ask some of the following questions:

1. How do I think these ideas will fit together?

2. What is the author's main goal? To educate me? Persuade me?

3. What does the author think about his or her topic? Is the author biased or objective?

4. What information or ideas will the author need to present to successfully make his or her case?

**Reading with a Purpose**

Now that you've determined the answer to these questions and the author's main point, you'll have a general guide for your work. While you might have to reevaluate your initial ideas as you come across new details, you'll be able to better focus on important points and how the argument or chapter flows together.

A good strategy is to identify major opinions and claims, and those details that provide evidence or explanation for each claim. Marking certain sentences with an “E” (evidence) or “C” (claim) can help you keep track as you write your notes.

**Practice Makes Perfect**

Try analyzing the following paragraphs with your coach or on your own.

1. Underline the main point.

2. Ask yourself, what is the author's main goal? What does the author think about his or her topic? What information or ideas will the author need to present to successfully make his or her case?

3. Mark each relevant piece of evidence with an “E.”

4. Review with the following questions, “Now that I've read the whole text, what is the author's main point? What does the author think about his or her topic? What information did the author provide to support his or her point?”

What does the word *patent* mean to you? Does it strike you as being something rather remote from your interests? If it does, stop and think a moment about some of the commonplace things that you use every day, objects that you take for granted as part of the world around you. The telephone, radio, television, the automobile, and the thousand and one other things (even the humble safety pin) that enrich our lives today once existed only as ideas in the minds of men. If it had not been possible to patent their ideas and thus protect them against copying by others, these inventions might never have been fully developed to serve mankind.

If there were no patent protection there would be little incentive to invent and innovate, for once the details of an invention became known, hordes of imitators who did not share the inventor's risks and expenses might well flood the market with their copies of his product and reap much of the benefit of his efforts. The technological progress that has made America great would wither rapidly under conditions such as these.

The fundamental principles in the U. S. patent structure came from England. During the glorious reign of Queen Elizabeth I in England, the expanding technology was furthered by the granting of exclusive manufacturing and selling privileges to citizens who had invented new processes or tools: a step that did much to encourage creativity. Later, when critics argued that giving monopoly rights to one person

---

infringed on the rights of others, an important principle was added to the patent structure: The Lord Chief Justice of England stated that society had everything to gain and nothing to lose by granting exclusive privileges to an inventor, because a patent for an invention was granted for something new that society never had before.

In colonial times patent law was left up to the separate states. The inconsistency, confusion, and unfairness that resulted clearly indicated the need for a uniform patent law, and the men who drew up the Constitution incorporated one. George Washington signed the first patent law on April 10, 1790, and less than four months later the first patent was issued to a man named Samuel Hopkins for a chemical process, an improved method of making potash for use in soapmaking.

In 1936 the Patent Office was established as a separate bureau. From the staff of eight that it maintained during its first year of operation it has grown into an organization of over 2500 people handling more than 1600 patent applications and granting over 1000 every week.

The Patent Office in Washington, D. C., is the world’s largest library of scientific and technical data, and this treasure trove of information is open for public inspection. In addition to more than 3 million U. S. patents, it houses more than 7 million foreign patents and thousands of volumes of technical literature. Abraham Lincoln patented a device to lift steam vessels over river shoals, Mark Twain developed a self-pasting scrapbook, and millionaire Cornelius Vanderbilt invented a shoe-shine kit.

The patent system has also helped to boost the wages of the American worker to an unprecedented level; he can produce more and earn more with the computer, adding machines, drill press or lathe. Patented inventions also help keep prices down by increasing manufacturing efficiency and by stimulating the competition that is the foundation of our free enterprise system.

The decades of history have disclosed little need for modification of the patent structure. Our patent laws, like the Constitution from which they grew, have stood the test of time well. They encouraged the creative processes, brought untold benefits to society as a whole, and enabled American technology to outstrip that of the rest of the civilized world.

Additional Exercises

1. Make an appointment with a coach. Bring an especially difficult reading assignment. Ask your coach to help you identify main ideas and to create an outline to guide your reading.

2. Print news editorials or articles and try to identify the main point. Then try to identify supporting details.

3. Review sample GRE or MCAT reading comprehension questions online. These tests ask students to identify a passage’s main idea and supporting points and to understand how the argument works.