

READING & LISTENING FOR MAIN IDEAS

INTRODUCTION

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Many students are not active readers or listeners. Though they hear what the teacher says and read the words on a page, they do not fully or accurately process the information. These students often make statements such as, "I listened to the teacher, but I didn't remember it for the test", or, "I read the chapter twice, but I couldn't answer the questions in class the next day."

In order to be active learners and remember information, students need to:

- listen and read for meaning
- distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information
- organize details for easy sorting, prioritizing, and studying

The key to applying these strategies is learning how to recognize main ideas and formulate them in your own words. Although this appears to be a basic skill that should be taught in school, the fact is that many teachers focus more on teaching content than on teaching specific learning skills and strategies such as main ideas. Also, as the student moves from grade to grade, teachers tend to assume that he has already learned these strategies in an earlier grade. You can help your child develop main idea skills.

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We use main idea skills everyday. For example, we can easily find items in the supermarket because products are arranged in main idea categories, such as dairy, bakery, and produce. We know to tune in to the second half of a news broadcast to hear the weather because news stories are grouped into main idea categories, such as national news, local news, sports and weather.

Children in primary grades can begin to identify main ideas by categorizing lists of objects and words. As students progress from grades three to five, they can learn to discern main ideas at the paragraph level. Over time, students learn to apply main ideas to longer, multi-paragraph material – ranging from a page in a sixth-grade textbook to a twenty-page college-level thesis paper. But sometimes students have difficulty with this skill because they cannot “chunk”, or sort, information into units of main ideas. Instead, they become overwhelmed by details.

Identifying main ideas is the most basic study skill, and it is needed in order to take notes, summarize, and apply textbook skills. You can help your child by pointing out tangible examples of details grouped by main ideas, such as the supermarket example noted above. For example, how is the food or dishware in the kitchen cabinets organized? How are the clothes stored in dresser drawers? How are non-fiction books sorted in a library? If you feel you are able to provide more advanced instruction to your child in main idea skills, you can use the following progression as a guide (just click on the title below to open):

- Categorizing
- Main Ideas in Paragraphs: The Topic Sentence
- Main Ideas in Multi-Paragraph Material: A Hierarchy
- Helpful Hints for Locating Main Ideas

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