

Topic

The topic is the general idea of the article. It can often be expressed in a single word or phrase (e.g., “stress” or “performance-enhancing drugs”).

Main Idea

The main idea or thesis of an article is what the writer wants you to know about the general topic. For example, if the general topic is stress, the writer might want you to know that many college students experience stress.

Supporting Details

Supporting details are details that support or explain the main idea. A writer can support the main idea with reasons, facts, examples, or other kinds of information that explain a main idea. Without supporting details, a writer cannot convince his or her audience of the validity of the thesis. For example, if the writer’s thesis is that college students experience stress, the author might discuss stress at school, stress at home, and stress at work.

Sometimes a writer includes major and minor levels of supporting details. For example, perhaps the first major detail in the article about stress is that school contributes to a student’s stress. To develop this point, the writer can give examples of the stress of making new friends at school, the stress of deadlines for papers, and the stress of exams.

Remember, supporting details are always more specific than the main idea and minor details are always more specific than the major.

How to Determine the Topic

The topic answers the question, “Who or what is this selection about?”

Before you begin reading, look carefully at the title. Often the general topic is one of the words in the title. For example, in a textbook the writer will frequently use the title of each chapter to state the overall topic of that chapter. After you have read the passage one or two times, you will have a general idea of

what the passage is about. You may find, for example, that one word or phrase is used repeatedly. Often that word is the general topic of the article.

How to Determine the Main Idea

The main idea answers the question, “What point is the writer is making?”

Once you have found the topic, ask yourself what point the author is making about the topic. Look at the title to see if it gives you any hints. Remember, the main idea will be a more focused idea than the topic, but it is still a general idea that must be expanded through supporting details.

Sometimes keywords such as words that signal a list (e.g. several kinds of, various reasons for, some factors in, four steps,) or signal addition (e.g. one, first, next, also, for one thing) alert the reader to a main idea. A sentence such as “There are several causes of stress” not only states the main idea (there are several kinds of stress), but also indicates that the writer is about to list or name the causes of stress.

If the main idea is not stated but simply implied, you must first determine the topic and then look at all the specific ideas the writer has used to develop the topic. All the details should give you enough information to determine the main idea.

How to Find Supporting Details

Supporting details are those reasons, examples, facts, steps, numbers, or any other kind of evidence that explain or add to the main idea. As mentioned before, supporting details are always more specific than the main idea. Therefore, when you are looking for the supporting details, check to see that the idea is specific and refers to the main idea in some way.

Sometimes it helps to think of topic, main idea, and supporting details as degrees of specificity:

- The topic is the most general idea.
- The main idea is more focused than the main idea, but it is still somewhat general.
- The supporting details are always more specific than the main idea.

- The major details are more general than the minor details.
- The minor details are the most specific.

EX.

Topic: stress

Main Idea: many college students experience stress

Major Detail (example): exams cause stress for many students

Minor Details: not knowing what the exams are like at a post-secondary institution, managing job and studying, worrying that failing an exam will result in missing a year

Inferences

Inferences are ideas that are not directly stated in writing. When we pick up on something that is not directly stated we are “reading between the lines” and drawing conclusions based on the evidence given and what we already know.

We use this skill of “reading between the lines” or drawing inferences in life. For example, when you see a student in the hall walking very quickly towards a classroom door, you can reasonably guess that the student has a class in that room and the student is in a hurry to get to that class. No words are spoken, nor do they need to be. The student’s actions, your experience as a student, and logic all lead you to this conclusion. In other words, you made a reasonable guess based on what you saw.

In reading, we also make guesses based on the material given, our own experience, and logic.

When making inferences in reading:

- Be aware of the information that is actually stated.
- Use your own background and experience.
- Consider all the facts given and think carefully before you jump to a conclusion.

Inferences are an important part of reading literature. Writers don’t like to tell you everything about a character, but they will give you hints. Use these hints along with your experience and logic to draw conclusions.

Purpose

Three common reasons for writing are:

- To inform
- To persuade
- To entertain

Sometimes a writer will combine two or even all three of these purposes. For example, we are more easily persuaded about something if we are given facts or information. As well, we may enjoy an informative article more if the author has included some amusing or entertaining touches.

Tone

Tone is the writer's attitude and feeling towards his or her topic.

In writing, tone is expressed through the words and details the writer includes. Writers are very aware of word connotation – the emotional response a word may elicit – and chooses words carefully. For example, although the words policeman and cop mean essentially the same thing, the word cop has a more negative connotation for most people. Pay attention to the words used and their underlying emotional connotation when trying to determine the writer's tone.

Tips for Textbook Reading

When reading a textbook, you may find it helpful to follow the suggestions listed below. Remember, the purpose of a textbook is to inform the reader. Therefore, most textbook writers make use of headings, subheadings, graphics, italics, and questions to help the reader understand the material.

Before You Read: Preview the Chapter

- Read the title. Often the topic and sometimes the main idea are indicated by the chapter title.
- Read the headings and the subheadings.

- If the article is not too long, try reading the opening paragraph, the first sentence of each of the following paragraphs, and the concluding paragraph.
- Look at any graphics or charts the writer has included.
- If there are questions at the end of the chapter, read them.

While Reading

- Read the material at a slower than average pace if it is new material.
- Use a pencil to underline main ideas or important points you want to remember.
- Look up or note unfamiliar vocabulary to look up later.
- Write questions on the margin of the page about material you don't understand or find unclear.

After Reading

Check to see how much you remember. If the article or chapter is lengthy, take a portion of it and say aloud what you remember or jot down notes of what you remember. When you have finished, go back and be sure your information is correct. If you have not made notes on the material, do so now.

In order to commit the information to memory, you must review your notes on a regular basis.