

Main idea and details

Every paragraph, story or article that you read has a **topic**—what the piece of writing is about. The **main idea** is the most important idea that the writer wants you to remember about the topic. Writers sometimes state the main idea in a topic sentence. A topic sentence can appear at the beginning, middle, or end of a piece of writing. Recognising the main idea can help you understand and remember what you read.

Supporting details are smaller pieces of information that tell more about the main idea. As you read, use supporting details to help you identify the main idea.

Read this passage about looking at stars. As you read, work out the main idea from the supporting details.

Stars in other galaxies are very far away. It can take billions of years for their light to reach Earth. By the time their light is visible to us, these stars might no longer exist. They may have collapsed or exploded in space.

Although we cannot travel back in time, scientists have found a way for us to look at the past. Using telescopes, astronomers can take pictures of stars whose light has just now reached our solar system. Some of these stars are 12 million light years away. A light year is the distance light travels in one year. That means we are looking 12 million years into the past.



Is the main idea of this passage stated or unstated?

Which sentence best expresses the main idea of the passage?

- Some galaxies are billions of light years away from Earth.
- We can use telescopes to see very long distances into space.
- Some stars no longer exist by the time we see them.
- Looking at the stars is a way of looking at the past.

Write one detail that supports the main idea.

Tip

When the main idea of a piece of writing is not stated, you can work it out by looking at the supporting details. Ask yourself: 'What idea do all these details tell about?'

If an author does not state the main idea of a paragraph or an article directly, you can create a topic sentence that summarises the main idea. Ask yourself, 'What idea do all these details tell about?'

As you read this article, think about the main idea.

Here is the history of life on Earth as if it had all happened in one 24-hour day, starting at midnight and continuing until it is midnight again. Instead of years, the world's history is measured in hours.

In this model, Earth was created at 12 a.m. However, the first living organisms did not appear until approximately 6.30 a.m.

Fishes appeared at 9.15 p.m.

Dinosaurs appeared on Earth at 10.50 p.m. but were extinct by 11.40 p.m.

This clock shows 11 p.m., the time when mammals first appeared.

People first walked on Earth in the last 40 seconds before midnight. All the rest of human civilisation from ancient times until today is squeezed into the very last 0.1 second on the clock.



Is the main idea of this passage stated or unstated?

Which sentence best expresses the main idea of the passage?

- Living organisms have been on Earth for most of its history.
- There was life on Earth long before the dinosaurs.
- Humans have only been on Earth for a very short part of its history.
- The history of the Earth can be divided into different sections.

Write two details that support the main idea.

Read this article about a famous science experiment. As you read, look for the main idea and supporting details.

The pitch drop experiment



by Francesca Bruni

This might not look very exciting, but it is an experiment that has been in progress at the University of Queensland in Brisbane since 1927.

The very thick goo in the funnel is *pitch*, which is like the bitumen used to surface roadways. Pitch looks like a solid, but is actually a liquid. The experiment is designed to show that pitch is a liquid, and to demonstrate how slowly it flows.

Imagine putting your finger under the bottom of a funnel, then filling it with water. When you take your finger away, what will happen? The water will flow out almost immediately. Water has a very *low viscosity*. Pitch is at the other end of the scale. It has an extremely *high viscosity*, and flows so slowly that at room temperature it appears solid.

In this experiment, only eight drops have dripped out of the funnel in almost 80 years. The first one fell in December 1938, and the eighth one in November 2000.

If you want to have a look at the experiment, you can view it live on a web cam at this website: <http://www.physics.uq.edu.au/pitchdrop/pitchdrop.shtml>. No one has ever seen a drop fall, but you never know, you could be the first! It is more likely, however, that all you will see is some students moving around the room. The 9-volt battery, by the way, is not part of the experiment. It has been placed next to the bell jar to give an idea of scale.



Understanding the text

- 1 About how often has one drop of pitch fallen from the funnel?

- 2 Approximately how tall is the bell jar covering the funnel?

- 3 Think about milk and honey, which are both liquids. Which one has a higher viscosity? Use information in the article to justify your answer.

Developing comprehension skills

- 4 Is the main idea of 'The pitch drop experiment' stated or unstated?

- 5 Fill the gaps in the sentence below to make it true. Your completed sentence should state the main idea of the article. You can use your own words, or choose from those in the box below.

The pitch drop experiment has _____ that pitch is a _____ ,
even though it looks like a _____ and flows extremely _____.

demonstrated fast gradually liquid proved shown slowly solid substance water

- 6 What is the main idea of paragraph 3?
 - Water is not at all like pitch.
 - Different liquids have different viscosity.
 - You can do experiments with water and pitch.
 - Some liquids look like solids at room temperature.

Read the following passage. Think about the main idea.

Calendars measure time in months and years. Clocks measure time in days and hours. The first timepieces were made about 4000 years ago.

Objects in sunlight cast shadows of different lengths and different angles throughout the day. Early clocks used shadows cast by the Sun on buildings or sticks. People could tell the time by looking at the shadow's length and angle. This led to the invention of sundials by the Babylonians. The shadow cast by a pointer would move across the sundial surface, which was marked with lines to show the hours of the day.

Water clocks, also called *clepsydras*, were used in ancient Greece and Egypt. Unlike a sundial, a clepsydra could show the time indoors or at night. Water dripped at a constant rate from one container to another. The containers

were marked inside—as one filled, the other emptied, measuring the passing hours.

The hourglass is another ancient timepiece. It was similar to the clepsydra, but it used sand. The sand flowed at a steady rate from one section of a glass container to another.



This is one of the containers of a clepsydra.

7 Is the main idea of this passage stated or unstated?

8 Write the main idea in your own words.

9 Write two supporting details that tell more about the main idea.

Supporting detail: _____

Supporting detail: _____

10 What if the following statement had been the main idea of the passage?

'The clocks we use today are very different from the clocks of the ancient world.'

What kinds of details would the author have needed to include to support this main idea?

11 Which is the best title for this passage?

- Clocks and calendars
- Babylonian inventions
- Timepieces of long ago
- Telling the time by the Sun

Working with words

Each word in the box has at least two meanings. Match each one to a definition given below. Then circle the definition that goes with the word as it was used in the passages above.

cast fall jar live low pitch scale

- 12 a thick black sticky substance or the amount of slope _____
- 13 near the base or bottom or one of the sounds made by a cow _____
- 14 a small outer covering on fish or reptiles or a set of numbers for measuring or comparing _____
- 15 the actors in a play or movie or to throw, as a fishing line or a shadow _____
- 16 a container like a bottle, often made of glass or to clash or go badly together _____
- 17 American word for autumn or to descend or drop _____
- 18 still burning or broadcasting so viewers see or hear something as it happens _____

**Making
the reading
and writing
connection**



Writing about time

Write a short story or an article based on the main idea of the importance of knowing the exact time for some reason. For example, you could write about baking bread and cakes, catching a plane on time, or working out the winner of a race.

Drawing conclusions

As you read a story or an article, you **draw conclusions** about characters, events, ideas and other details. Your conclusion is the opinion or decision you reach after thinking about what you have read. To draw conclusions, think about details from your reading, and combine those facts with what you know from your own experience. Ask yourself questions such as, ‘What is the author’s point? What do I know about this character or the subject of this article? What can I conclude from these details?’

Tip

When you draw a conclusion, think about the facts and what you already know. Make sure you can back up your conclusion with information from the text or reasons of your own.

Read the following passage. As you read, look for facts and details that will help you draw conclusions.

Antarctica and the Arctic are the regions around the south and north poles.

The international Antarctic Treaty came into effect in 1961. The treaty is an agreement for Antarctica to ‘continue forever to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes’. A great deal of scientific work is undertaken in Antarctica, and the people who live there for short periods include electronic engineers, physicists, astronomers and communications people.

The Arctic region is home to people from northern Norway, Canada, Arctic Russia, the Aleutian Islands, Greenland and Alaska (US). Mining is permitted, and people work as miners, as well as in scientific fields. Traditional activities such as fishing, craft and reindeer herding are also carried out.



Do you think that mining is permitted in Antarctica? How did you come to this conclusion?

Do you think that the following is a reasonable conclusion? Explain your answer.

‘People hunt reindeer in Antarctica.’



Read about hydroponic gardening in Antarctica. As you read, draw conclusions about life at Mawson, one of Australia's Antarctic bases.



Gregory's Greengrocer's

16 June 2003

This week's story is written by Michele S, chef at Australia's Mawson base.

It is the smells that tempt you, the colours that astound you, the anticipated taste and the joy of watching something grow—and so quickly too! The delight that no sneaky little possum jumped up and gobbled your prized new growth while you slept.

Hydroponics is the stuff of my dreams, being the number one customer at Gregory's Greengrocer's. I love the daily additions to my pantry of fresh herbs, cucumbers, lettuces, bok choy, silver beet and now tomatoes.

The salads at lunch seem to have more fresh groovy green bits than in the summer just after the resupply of the station. It is certainly a joy to see all the colour, and relish the crisp crunch in your sandwich.

Behind the door of an unassuming little building we find our hydroponics oasis. We took over the hydroponics immediately on arrival in December. Greg and I have planted, sowed and cleaned, watered, mopped up countless leaks and made a number of changes since then.



We now have the place ticking over at such a rate that I often don't have any frozen vegetables on the menu.

Whoever thought of trying hydroponics in Antarctica was a great expeditioner and they can come over to Mawson for dinner anytime. Midwinter's dinner is just around the corner, I am sure we can find a spare seat.



Understanding the text

1 Why is Michele so keen on her and Greg's hydroponic garden?

2 Do you think that 'Gregory's Greengrocer's' is a real fruit and vegetable shop? Justify your answer.

3 About how long after Michele wrote this article was the 2003 Midwinter's dinner?

Developing comprehension skills

4 What conclusion can you draw about Greg?

- He is a chef. He enjoys gardening.
- He doesn't eat meat. He likes frozen vegetables.

5 What conclusion can you draw about the hydroponics facility at Mawson base?

- It has been in place a long time.
- It operates all year round.
- It is the only hydroponics facility in Antarctica.
- It produces a lot of vegetables.

6 Do you agree or disagree with the following conclusion? Explain your reasoning.

'Michele does all the cooking for the expeditioners at Mawson base.'

In the top box is a conclusion you might draw after reading ‘Gregory’s Greengrocer’s’. In the three boxes below, write facts you know and details from the article that support this conclusion.

Conclusion
Hydroponic gardening has made a big difference to the people living at Mawson base.

7 _____

8 _____

9 _____

Working with words

Write the word from the box that matches each definition.

customer greengrocer’s hydroponics midwinter oasis relish tempt

- 10** growing plants in liquid with nutrients rather than in soil _____
- 11** shop that sells fresh fruit and vegetables _____
- 12** to enjoy wholeheartedly _____
- 13** an area with water and trees in a desert _____
- 14** the period around the shortest day of the year _____
- 15** to persuade, especially by offering something special _____
- 16** person buying something _____



 **Writing about working in Antarctica**

Would you like to work in Antarctica when you grow up? Think about what you know, and the conclusions you can draw from Michele’s story, to answer this question. Write about what else you would like to know before you could come to a conclusion about working there.

Sequence: order of events

When you read a story or an article, it is easier to understand what is happening if you can identify the **sequence**, or order, in which events take place. In some pieces of writing, the events follow a normal time order—one event follows another. In other stories, authors refer to actions that happened in the past, actions that are happening now, or actions that will happen in the future.

As you read, try to keep track of the order of events. Look for clue words such as *first*, *next*, *then*, *later*, *finally*, *meanwhile*, *yesterday*, *today*, and *afterwards* to determine the order of events.

As you read this story, picture the order in which the events occurred.

Why did it have to rain on the day of my mum's big party? We had been having beautiful autumn weather, and Dad had set up a spit for roast lamb in the backyard. Just as we were leaving the butcher's at about 2 o'clock, it started to *pour*—the sky was emptying in bucketfuls.

We crossed our fingers, hoping it would stop, but it rained on and off all afternoon. In the end we gave up. We borrowed our neighbour's picnic shelter, and put a tarp between the garage and the back door. Then we took the big food table back inside, and moved the furniture out of the way.

It kept raining all night, but it was still a great party. No one will forget it, that's for sure!



Put the story's events in order by numbering them from 1 to 6.

- _____ Everyone enjoys the party.
- _____ We take the food table inside.
- _____ We borrow a picnic shelter.
- _____ Dad sets up the spit.
- _____ It starts to rain.
- _____ We go to the butcher's.

Tip

Look for clue words that make the sequence of events clear. Words such as *first*, *then*, *later*, *after* or *finally* signal the order of events. Phrases such as '*In the past ...*' or '*She remembered when ...*' signal a flashback.

In many stories, the author starts the story at the beginning and tells events in the order in which they occurred. Sometimes, however, the author interrupts the normal sequence of events to describe something that happened in the past. This interruption is called a **flashback**. Flashbacks can help the reader to learn more about the people and details in a story or article. After the flashback, the author returns to the present and continues describing events in sequence. Flashbacks are often signalled by clue words and phrases such as *earlier*, *a year before* or *she remembered when*.

As you read this story, think about the sequence of events and look for any flashbacks.

My favourite event at the picnic races is the egg toss. After my sister collected her ribbon for coming third in the sack race, I pleaded with her to be my partner in the egg toss. She glared at me, giving me the you'd-better-not-muck-up-this-time older sister look, but then she relented. 'Okay, why not?' Last year, we'd been going really well, but then I threw her a lousy shot, and when she grabbed it, it broke all over her.

We joined the other kids at the starting line. You take one step back each time you catch the egg, and if it breaks, you're out. We were still in the game with only four pairs left. The MC

called out 'Now take two steps back each'. It was my turn to throw. I looked at my sister and took careful aim. Phew! She caught it. Two other pairs dropped their eggs, so now it was just us, and two friends from school. I heard an egg cracking in my friend's hand just as my sister threw ours. It came straight to me, and I caught it!

Later, when we were walking home, we all had a good laugh. 'What's for dinner, Dad? Scrambled eggs?'



Reread the story, and put a circle around clue words or phrases that tell the sequence of events.

Underline a sentence in the passage that signals a flashback.

What happened at this earlier time?



As you read the following play, try to figure out the order of events. Look for clue words.

Another Cinderella

by Michael Doneman

The story so far ...

The Prince has come to Cinderella's house looking for the bewitching creature who left a bag of builder's tools behind at his barbecue. The Pretty Sisters have failed the test, obviously knowing nothing about screwdrivers or hammers. The Prince is despondent until he notices Cinderella scrubbing the floor ...

Now read on ...

- ❖ **Prince:** Ah well, I think I will never have a Princess. *(Notices CINDERELLA for the first time.)*
And you ... who are you?
- ❖ **Cinderella:** My name is Cinderella.
- ❖ **Prince:** And can you tell me anything about these things?
- ❖ **Cinderella:** What, a screwdriver, a hammer and a pair of pliers ...? What do you want to know?
(The PRINCE gasps, advances and falls to one knee.)
- ❖ **Prince:** It is she! My princess engineer! My tank expert! You have made me a very happy prince indeed!
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Hey hey, hold on a minute! We hardly know each other!
- ❖ **Prince:** But wasn't it you at the barbecue?
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Sure it was. I came to fix the dishwasher, stayed on for a fox trot or two and then left when it was time for *Star Trek* on TV.
- ❖ **Prince:** Marry me!
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Marry you?! Why would I want to do that?
- ❖ **Prince:** To be a princess of course!
- ❖ **Cinderella** *(drawing him up to his feet):* Listen, Prince, I think you are a very nice fellow and all, but I have my heart set on engineering. Thanks just the same.
- ❖ **Prince:** You mean you won't marry me?
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Well ... no. *(Pause.)*
- ❖ **Prince:** Oh. Well. Perhaps we could get together some time and talk about gearboxes ...
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Sure. Love to.
- ❖ **Prince:** And the overhead supercharged muffler bearings ...
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Great. *(Pause.)*
- ❖ **Prince:** Bye ...
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Bye ...
- ❖ **Prince:** Let's go, Otto! I'll drive! *(They exit. There is an immediate and extended horrible metallic crunching grating din.)*
- ❖ **Cinderella:** Oh dear, his tank's broken down! *(She gathers up some tools and runs after them.)*

Understanding the text

1 What is the equivalent of the glass slipper in this version of Cinderella?

2 Do you think the Prince is a good driver? Why or why not?

3 Do you think Cinderella will marry the Prince? Why or why not?

Developing comprehension skills

Think about the sequence of events in 'Another Cinderella'. Write one or two sentences in each box to tell what happened at the beginning, middle, and end of the play. Include events summarised in the introductory paragraph.

4 **Beginning**



5 **Middle**



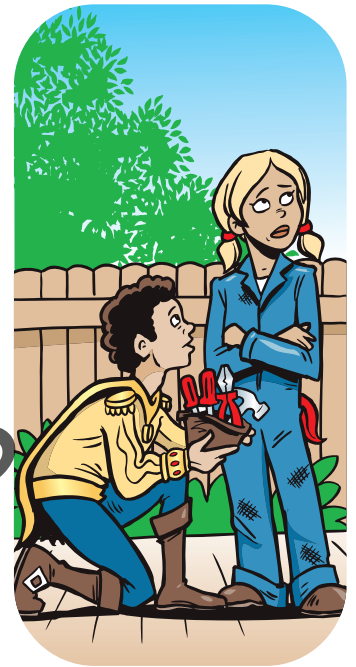
6 **End**

7 Which of these events had happened before the play starts?

- The Prince's tank broke down.
- The Pretty Sisters failed the test.
- Cinderella watched *Star Trek* on TV.
- Cinderella declined the Prince's offer of marriage.

8 Put these events from the play in order by numbering them from 1 to 6.

- _____ The Prince is convinced he has found his princess.
- _____ The Prince tells his servant that he will drive.
- _____ Cinderella refuses the Prince's offer of marriage.
- _____ The Prince asks Cinderella about the contents of his bag.
- _____ The Pretty Sisters do not know what a screwdriver is for.
- _____ Cinderella agrees to go out with the Prince some time.



Read these three extra pieces that could go with 'Another Cinderella'. Think about where each one would fit in the sequence of events of that story. They are not in the right sequence below.

A The Prince talks to his cousin the Duke on his mobile phone

I told you, remember, I met her at my birthday bash ... You probably didn't see her at all. She came to fix the dishwasher ... She's so gorgeous. She knows about mufflers and premium engine oils, and she worked out what was wrong with my tank. And she's going to add a custom spoiler and extra mirrors ... My driving has improved heaps since we've been going out ... We'll probably take it on the honeymoon ... Well, she hasn't said yes yet, but I'll keep asking till she does!

B The Prince sends an SMS to his friend Earl

Having b-day BBQ Sat. Bring yr girlfriend Rose Red. One day it will be my turn to get g/friend :(But party will be GREAT. Come early 2 C my new tank.

C Cinderella and her best friend Snow White are chatting online

C Well, would you believe it?! I have finally found someone who is interested in ME. He says I look cute in my overalls :)

SW WOW! Fantastic!!! Who is he? What's he look like? Where does he live? Where did you meet him? When will I get to meet him?

C Hey, one thing at a time. He is very handsome and drives a mean car (not very well, but I'm going to give him some lessons). He lives in the palace up the hill, which is where I met him ... and maybe we'll drive over to your place in the tank one day.

SW Tank? Palace?!!!!!! what's going on?

C Well, he's the Prince, so of course he lives in the palace. And the tank is his favourite car.