ELA | GRADES 3 TO 5 | STUDENT PACKET

Main Idea and Key Details

Find the main idea of a paragraph, pick supporting details, and write a short summary

IN THIS PACKET YOU WILL LEARN TO

- ✓ Tell a topic from a main idea
- ✓ Find key details that support a main idea
- ✓ Write the main idea of a paragraph in your own words
- ✓ Write a short summary of a passage

Name _____

Teacher _____

Class _____

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Topic, Main Idea, and Detail

LEARN

Read this page with your teacher. A topic is the subject. A main idea is the point the writer makes about that subject. A detail is a fact that supports the point.

ONE SHORT PARAGRAPH

Beavers build lodges in ponds. They cut trees with their teeth, pile the logs in the water, and leave an underwater door so they can come and go in safety.

1. The topic is beavers, or beaver lodges.
2. The main idea is that beavers build lodges in ponds.
3. Each sentence after the first one gives a detail about how they build.

Main idea: Beavers build lodges in ponds.

WORDS TO KNOW

topic	The subject of a text, usually a word or a short phrase, such as beavers.
main idea	The most important point the writer makes about the topic, written as a complete sentence.
key detail	A fact or example that supports the main idea.
summary	A short retelling of the main idea and the most important details, in your own words.

How Details Support a Main Idea

LEARN

A key detail answers a question about the main idea. Read the steps, then try the practice item under the passage.

A way to test a detail

1. Write the main idea as one sentence.
2. Read a detail and ask whether it helps a reader believe the main idea.
3. If the detail helps, keep it. If the detail is only interesting, it may belong in a different paragraph.

Why Owls Hunt at Night

by Trailpost

1 Owls hunt at night because their bodies are built for the dark. Their huge eyes gather dim light, and their ears sit at two different heights so they can hear a mouse under leaves. Soft fringe on their wings lets them fly with almost no sound, so the mouse hears them only when it is too late.

1. Which sentence is the main idea of the paragraph?

- A Owls have huge eyes.
- B Owls hunt at night because their bodies are built for the dark.
- C Mice live under leaves.
- D Owls have soft wings.

Find the Main Idea

GUIDED PRACTICE

Read the passage, then answer each question in a complete sentence or by circling a choice.

Sea Otters and Kelp

by Trailpost

1 Sea otters help keep kelp forests alive. They eat sea urchins, and sea urchins eat kelp. When otter numbers drop, urchins chew the kelp down to the rocks, and the forest thins. When otters return, the kelp grows tall again and small fish come back to hide in it.

1. What is the topic of this passage?

- A sea otters and kelp
- B small fish
- C rocks on the ocean floor
- D how urchins swim

2. Which sentence is the main idea?

- A Sea urchins eat kelp.
- B Sea otters help keep kelp forests alive.
- C Small fish hide in kelp.
- D Otter numbers can drop.

3. Write two key details that support the main idea.

_____

_____

_____

Main Idea Practice

PRACTICE ★

Read each paragraph, write the main idea as a complete sentence, and then write one key detail that supports it.

The Library Cat

1 Many small libraries keep a cat on staff. The cat greets readers, sleeps in a sunny window, and keeps mice out of the book room. Visitors often come back to see the cat as much as to borrow a book.

1. What is the main idea of this paragraph?

2. Write one key detail that supports that main idea.

School Gardens

1 A school garden teaches science that students can taste. They plant seeds, measure rainfall, and later pick lettuce for lunch. Teachers use the garden to talk about insects, soil, and how food gets to a cafeteria.

3. What is the main idea of this paragraph?

Two Main Ideas in One Text

PRACTICE ★★

This passage has two paragraphs, and each one has its own main idea. Write each main idea, then tell how the two ideas fit together.

City Bees

by Trailpost

1 Bees can live in cities if people give them flowers. Roof gardens, window boxes, and park plantings give bees nectar from spring to fall. A balcony with three pots of herbs can feed a small hive for a week.

2 City bees also face hard days. Exhaust from cars, a lack of water, and late frosts can wipe out a young hive. Beekeepers in towns set out shallow water dishes and plant early blooms to help the bees last.

1. What is the main idea of paragraph 1?

2. What is the main idea of paragraph 2?

3. How do the two main ideas fit together?

Sort Main Ideas and Details

CUT AND PASTE

Cut out the twelve sentence cards. Glue each card under Main idea or Key detail.

Main idea	Key detail

✂

The mother returns with food from the sea.	Volcanoes change the land around them.
Penguins take turns warming the egg.	Recycling saves room in the landfill.
Paper can be made into new notebooks.	Lava can bury a whole forest in one night.
The father holds the egg on his feet for weeks.	Ash from a blast can travel for hundreds of miles.

Match the Paragraph to Its Main Idea

MATCH

Read each paragraph on the left. Find the main idea on the right that fits it, and write the letter on the line.

PARAGRAPH		MAIN IDEA
1. A cactus stores water in its thick stem so it can last through dry months.	_____	**A** A cactus is built to live with little rain.
2. Firefighters crawl low because smoke rises, and the cleaner air sits near the floor.	_____	**B** The moon keeps old footprints because it has no wind.
3. The moon has no wind, so footprints from 1969 are still there.	_____	**C** Firefighters stay low to breathe cleaner air.
4. Bats use echoes to find moths in the dark.	_____	**D** Bats hunt by listening to echoes.
5. A diary from 1804 can tell us what a child ate for breakfast.	_____	**E** Old diaries help us learn about daily life in the past.
6. Salt on a winter sidewalk melts ice by lowering the freezing point of water.	_____	**F** Salt melts ice by changing the freezing point.

Main Idea Riddle

RIDDLE

Read each tiny paragraph and write the one-word topic. Use the first letter of each topic, in order, to answer the riddle.

What does a strong main idea sentence have to be?

_____ _____ _____ _____ _____
1 2 3 4 5

CODE TABLE

Ants	Bee	Cactus	Earthworms	Library	Owl	River
A	B	C	E	L	O	R

1. These desert plants store water in thick stems. Topic: _____
2. This building holds books that anyone in town can borrow. Topic: _____
3. These animals loosen soil as they tunnel underground. Topic: _____
4. These insects turn nectar into a sweet food people eat. Topic: _____
5. Rain collects in this low place and flows to the sea. Topic: _____

Read and Find Details

APPLY

Read the passage once for the big idea, then read it again to find details, and answer in complete sentences.

Each Snowflake Looks Like Itself

by Trailpost

1 A snowflake starts as a speck of dust high in a cold cloud. Water freezes onto the speck and grows six arms, because ice crystals form in hexagons. As the flake falls, the air around it changes, and each arm grows a little differently.

2 Scientists say two flakes can look alike if they fall through the same air, but that is rare. Most flakes that land on a mitten have their own shape. That is why people still say each snowflake looks like itself.

1. What is the main idea of paragraph 1?

2. Write one key detail from paragraph 2 that supports the idea that flakes are usually unique.

Write a Summary

WRITE ABOUT IT

Read the passage, then write a summary of three sentences. Use the sentence starters if they help, and keep extra stories out of the summary.

Music Under the Street

by Trailpost

1 In some cities, musicians play in subway stations for the people who wait for trains. They set out a case for tips and play songs loud enough to hear over the rumble. A good station has high ceilings, so the sound carries, and a steady crowd, so the case fills.

2 Cities often hold auditions for these spots. Players who pass get a vest or a sign that shows they have permission. That system keeps the music going and keeps the platforms from filling with more players than the space can hold.

1. Write a summary of three sentences, with the main idea first and two key details after it.
Musicians play in subway stations. They _____. Cities hold auditions because _____.

Find the Mistake

ERROR ANALYSIS ★★

Each box shows a student's main idea for a paragraph you have already read. Explain what is weak about it, then write a stronger main idea.

Jordan's main idea for Sea Otters and Kelp

This paragraph is about the ocean.

1. Why is Jordan's sentence too wide, and what is a stronger main idea?

2. Write a strong main idea sentence for Sea Otters and Kelp.

YOUR WORK

Priya's main idea for Why Owls Hunt at Night

Owls have huge eyes, and they have ears, and they have soft wings.

3. Why is Priya's sentence a list of details, and what is a stronger main idea?

4. Write a strong main idea sentence for Why Owls Hunt at Night.

YOUR WORK

Explain Your Thinking

WRITE ABOUT IT

Answer each question in complete sentences. Use the words topic, main idea, and detail in your writing.

1. How can you tell a main idea from a key detail? Use Sea Otters and Kelp or City Bees as your example.

   A main idea is the point the writer makes, such as _____. A key detail is a fact that supports that point, such as _____.

2. Why does a summary leave some interesting facts out?

Mixed Review

REVIEW

Read the passage, then answer each question in a complete sentence.

The Quietest Place

by Trailpost

1 An anechoic chamber is a room built to swallow sound. Thick foam pyramids cover the walls, the floor, and the ceiling, and they trap echoes before they bounce back. People who sit in the room for a few minutes begin to hear their own heartbeat.

2 Labs use these rooms to test speakers, microphones, and even the rattle of a car door. If a speaker still sounds clear in a room with no echo, it will sound clear in a living room too.

1. What is the topic of this passage?

2. What is the main idea of paragraph 1?

3. Write one key detail from paragraph 2.

Exit Tickets

CHECK

Your teacher will cut this page on the dotted line so each student gets one ticket. Read the paragraph and answer both questions.

Main Idea Exit Ticket

Name _____

Foxes in Town

1 Red foxes now live in many towns. They hunt mice in parks at night and sleep under porches by day. People see them more often because the foxes have learned that towns have food and fewer large predators.

1. What is the main idea?

2. Write one key detail from the paragraph.

Main Idea Exit Ticket

Name _____

Foxes in Town

1 Red foxes now live in many towns. They hunt mice in parks at night and sleep under porches by day. People see them more often because the foxes have learned that towns have food and fewer large predators.

1. What is the main idea?

2. Write one key detail from the paragraph.

How Did I Do?

SELF-CHECK

Read each skill and put a check in the box that fits you best. Then answer the two questions at the bottom of the page.

Skill	I can do this on my own.	I can do this with a little help.	I am still learning this.
I can tell a topic from a main idea.	☐	☐	☐
I can find key details that support a main idea.	☐	☐	☐
I can write the main idea of a paragraph in my own words.	☐	☐	☐
I can write a short summary of a passage.	☐	☐	☐
I can fix a main idea that is too wide or that is only a list of details.	☐	☐	☐

1. Which skill do you want to practice more, and why?

2. Which passage from this packet helped you the most, and what was its main idea?