

Recognizing Important Information

Can you focus and identify on the key points in a lecture?

Can you decide what to underline in a textbook?

Can you identify key points in your textbook?

The main idea is the most important point the author wants you to understand in the paragraph. It is also known as the topic sentence. The main idea is the one central idea which the author wants you to understand about the subject matter. Once you identify the main idea what you are reading will become clear. As a student, it is imperative that you be able to identify and discriminate between main ideas and supporting details.

Selecting the Main Idea Benefits you in four ways:

- By actively searching for the main idea you will focus your concentration on what you are reading or hearing.
- The main idea is the “glue” that holds the details of the paragraph or the presentation together, enabling you to recall more details explaining it.
- Identifying the main idea is an aid to studying.
- Knowing the main ideas of separate paragraphs or lecture/discussion topics will allow you to create effective summaries of longer selections.

Selecting the Main Idea While Reading

When you read, locate the main idea by asking these questions in this order:

- What is the subject matter?
- Who or what is the passage about?
- What does the author want me to understand about the subject?
(Remember the answer is the main idea)
- Does the first or last sentence of the paragraph answer the question:
 - What does the author want me to understand about the subject?
- If the above answer is no, then look within the body of the paragraph for a sentence that states the main idea.

Ferris State University
Educational and Career Counseling Center
Starr 313, 591-3057

Check again to be sure the main idea says something about the subject matter and the sentence you selected covers all the important information in the paragraph.

Additional Tips for Locating the Main Idea While Reading

- **The first paragraph of a reading** will usually tell you what you are going to be reading about. Look for main ideas here.
 - Usually the topic sentence is the first sentence of the paragraph.
 - Sometimes it can be the second sentence or the last sentence of the first paragraph.
 - If it appears at the end of the paragraph, the previous sentences build up to the main idea.
 - If it is within the paragraph, it is preceded by one or more introductory sentences.
 - Occasionally, the main idea is neither the first or the last but one of the other sentences in the paragraph.
 - If a passage is difficult it may be tempting to select a sentence just because it contains familiar or interesting information.
 - Always remember to select the sentence which answers the questions “What does the author want me to understand about the subject matter?”
- **Pick out key terms and concepts** and make a “quiz sheet” outlining the bare bones of the course.
- **Sometimes there is an implied main idea.** Read over the details of a section and ask yourself, “What’s the main point?”
- **Examine** the table of contents, section headings of chapters, chapter summaries and chapter quizzes for main ideas.

Selecting the Main Idea in Class

As you pay attention in class, locate the main idea by following these steps in this order:

- **Listen** to the lecture/discussion carefully.

Ferris State University
Educational and Career Counseling Center
Starr 313, 591-3057

- **Determine the subject matter** of the lecture/discussion by asking “WHO” or “WHAT is the lecture/discussion about”?
- **Answer the following question** – “What does the speaker want me to understand about the subject?”
- **Find a single sentence to summarize** the lecture/discussion that answers the question. That one sentence summary is the main idea of the lecture/discussion.

Additional Tips for Locating the Main Idea in Class

- **Examine** the table of contents, section headings of chapters, chapter summaries and chapter quizzes for main ideas before you go into class to help organize your notes and to make finding the main idea easier.
- **Listen carefully** and write down the lesson/lecture points your professor says will be covered in the class, it will help you organize your notes. This includes any information contained on a PowerPoint, on an overhead or written on the board. Anything your professor writes down you should be writing down as well.
- **Survey notes from your readings** before each lecture to listen for additional information about topics. Raise questions in your mind as your professor speaks. If anything is unclear, raise your hand for immediate clarification.
- **Listen for any main ideas** your professor may highlight by using:
 - Little phrases such as “And now let us turn to...”
 - Statements such as the main point is...” or “remember this...”
 - Statements they repeat or emphasize
 - A change in their tone of voice or rate of speaking.
- **Summarize** in your own words what you have heard in class and write it down. Organize and review your notes immediately after class. Add main headings as needed.
- **Talk with classmates.** They may pick up things you miss and vice versa.