Lesson 2: Theme, Main Idea, and Details

The main idea of a reading passage is its most important idea. It is the idea around which the rest of the passage revolves.

Writers use details to help make their ideas clearer for the reader. For example, nonfiction writers use details to support the main idea. Fiction writers use details to help readers imagine a setting, character, or action.

The following tips will help you identify the main idea and important details in a passage.

TIP 1: Read the entire passage first.

When you first read an article or story, read every word. You don’t need to remember every detail. Just get the big picture: What is the passage mostly about? How is the selection organized? Try to make a “mental map” of the selection as you read, getting a general idea of where things are located.

Practice this tip as you read the following story.

Kids Making a Difference

by Stacy Dreyer

You’re only one person. On top of that, you’re a kid. What can you do to help make the world a better place?

In 2002, Becca Robison faced the same problem. Becca loved science and came home from her first science camp with dreams of becoming an astronaut. The girls in her Utah neighborhood told Becca that being an astronaut was a boy’s job. Becca didn’t get angry, but she did decide to change some minds. She started Astrotots, a free science camp for girls. She was only 11 years old, and she held the first camp in her own backyard. Today Becca is 18, and Astrotots camps operate in ten states and even in India.

Becca is committed to changing attitudes about girls in science. Her camps focus on imagination and creativity. Astrotots is aimed specifically at poor and at-risk girls, ages 4 to 10. Becca shows these girls that science is a valuable and interesting career path. She insists that science can be a way out of poverty.
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CCS: RL.6.2, RI.6.2, RI.6.10

Becca has a goal to establish camps in all 50 states and then spread out across the world. To date, over 1,000 at-risk girls have benefited from Becca’s camps, and she has received many awards for her dedication. In 2006, she received the American Eagle Live Your Life Award, which came with a $25,000 donation for Astrotots.

Eleven-year-old Alice from Tampa Bay, Florida, is another young person making a difference. When Alice heard about the tsunami that struck Thailand in 2004, she wanted to do something to help. She considered starting a lemonade stand but worried that selling lemonade wouldn’t get her much money. A school project gave her another idea.

The kids in Alice’s class had made special Mother’s Day gifts—flip-flop sandals decorated with ribbons, buttons, and bows. Alice’s mom suggested that Alice sell flip-flops instead of lemonade. From this idea, Frou Frou Flip Flops was born. Four years later, Alice’s little company is still going strong.

Alice donates 91 percent of her profits to charities like the American Cancer Society, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and Locks of Love. Her first donation was to the Thailand tidal wave victims, and then, a few years later, she helped Hurricane Katrina victims. Alice has sold hundreds of pairs of flip-flops, each pair decorated by hand. She even has her own Web site where people can request custom orders. Alice proves that a little creativity can make a big impact.

So, what can you do? In every community, people your age have the chance to make a difference. Think about what message your community needs to hear or just what needs to be done. Talk about it with your friends to see what they think. Write a letter to the editor of your newspaper.

Sometimes it’s easiest to work with programs that already exist. There may be clubs in your area to join, such as 4-H clubs or other service organizations. Look around. You might be surprised at what you find. For instance, in Austin, Texas, a group called Kids Feeding Kids puts on “fun”-raisers such as fairs to make money. The money goes to help feed the country’s poorest children. Young people help plan and staff the events themselves.

If there’s no program to join, you can start your own project, just as Becca and Alice did. You may have to forge ahead on your own, but if you lead, others will follow.
TIP 2: Identify the main idea of the passage.

Sometimes a selection will tell you its main idea in one sentence. At other times, the main idea won't always jump out at you. Sometimes you need to look at clues the writer puts in.

1. What is the main idea of the passage “Kids Making a Difference”?

TIP 3: Notice which details are most important.

You'll find a lot of details in just about any selection you read. It's the details that come together to create the meaning of the selection. Not all details are equal, however. Some are more significant (important or meaningful) than others. The most significant details are the ones that clearly and strongly support the main idea of the selection. You can think of these as supporting details.

To figure out which details are the most important, think about which details are most closely linked to the main idea. The most important detail will be the one that most clearly supports the main idea.

2. Which detail is most important to the main idea of “Kids Making a Difference”?
   A. Becca Robison went to her first science camp in 2002.
   B. Becca Robison grew up in a neighborhood in Utah.
   C. Alice thought about starting a lemonade stand.
   D. Alice donates 91 percent of her earnings to charities.

3. Which of these could be another title for this article?
   A. You’re Just a Kid
   B. How to Win Awards
   C. Helping Kids Avoid Drugs
   D. Making a Better World

4. Which subheading would be best for paragraphs 2 through 4 of this article?
   A. Looking Out for Each Other
   B. Writing to Your Newspaper
   C. Supporting Girls in Science
   D. Changing the Laws
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CCS: RI.6.2

TIP 4: Scan the selection to find key words from the question.
To answer a detail question, you will need to look in the selection for key words from the question. You can do this by scanning, or quickly looking over the selection.

5. Read the following question. Circle any words in the passage that might help you find the answer.
Why did Alice start the company Frou Frou Flip Flops?

6. Why did Alice start the company Frou Frou Flip Flops?
A. because girls were not allowed to be astronauts
B. because girls needed positive activities to get involved in
C. because she wanted to help people in Thailand after a tsunami
D. because she wanted to change attitudes about girls in science

Some students try to answer reading questions just by scanning—without reading the selection first. Scanning can help, but it can also lead you straight to the wrong answer if you don’t have the big picture first.

TIP 5: Notice the order in which events happen in the selection.
Sometimes, to make a story more interesting, writers will describe events out of order. You can expect order-of-events questions to be fairly straightforward, but you'll still need to read carefully to be sure.

7. Which of the following happens first in the passage?
A. Astrotots operates in ten states.
B. Becca came home from her science camp.
C. Astrotots was first held in Becca's backyard.
D. Becca turned 18.

To answer this one, you need to scan the first paragraph. What does she do first?
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TIP 6: Think about the details that give information about important individuals or events in the passage.

When the passage is told in story form—even if it is nonfiction—you should pay attention to key people and events. These details will help you understand the overall ideas in the passage.

8. What is the significance of Alice’s school project?
   A. It gave her the idea that resulted in Frou Frou Flip Flops.
   B. It gave her the idea to begin Astrotots.
   C. It made her realize that selling lemonade would not earn her enough money.
   D. It made her realize she should donate money to tsunami victims.

TIP 7: Summarize a passage to show you understand it.

An important way of showing that you understand a passage is by summarizing it. Summarizing is briefly retelling something.

After reading a long paragraph or a bunch of short paragraphs, stop and ask yourself, “What is this part of the passage mostly about?” If part of the selection doesn’t make sense, read it again. But don’t spend too much time on small details. As you read more of the selection, the part that confused you might make sense.

It is natural for your own ideas, opinions, and judgments to affect the way you read a passage. But it is important that you are able to summarize the main ideas and important details of a passage without adding your opinions, judgments, or reactions.

For example, imagine that you are reading a newspaper article about a new landfill site that is being developed near your community. You and your family oppose the landfill because you do not believe it is safe. When you read the newspaper article, you are so caught up in your own opinion that you are not able to recognize the reasons the other side has for their proposal. In the end, you are unable to understand the issue.

Here’s another example. You are reading a novel for school. The main character, Cassandra, is a young woman who is often frightened at night. Before you get very far in the novel, you decide that you do not like the character Cassandra because you think she lacks courage. You are not going to be able to fully understand the character of Cassandra if you judge her too harshly early on in your reading.

Do you see how your own opinions can get in the way of really understanding a passage? You need to try to fully understand a passage before you judge the ideas, characters, or events in it. When you write a summary of a passage, ask yourself whether you can hear your own opinions in it. If you do, try again.
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10. Write down your own three simple steps you can use to remember how to summarize a passage.


Use Complete Sentences

When answering open-ended questions, remember to answer using complete sentences. Do not write one-word answers or phrases. Sometimes it helps to rephrase part of the question before you answer. Suppose the question asks: What is the main idea of the passage? Begin your response by saying: The main idea of the passage is.... This way, you are almost sure to be using a complete sentence to answer the question.
Interpreting What You Read

In the next part of this lesson, you will learn how to make good inferences. You’ll also practice making comparisons and contrasts, determining causes and effects, and pinpointing problems and solutions. All of these skills will help you interpret (understand the meaning of) the things you read.

This passage is about how the Civil War separated two friends but didn't destroy their friendship. Read the selection. It will be used to help you understand the following tips.

Friend Against Friend

by Anne Elliot

The Civil War (1861–1865) divided not only the nation, but friends and families as well. When the Southern states declared their independence, soldiers from the South had to choose whether to be loyal to the Union or to their home states.

On a spring night in 1861, a small party took place at an army post in Los Angeles (which was just a small town at that time). In many ways, it was just an ordinary party: People played music, sang songs, told jokes, and talked about the good times they had enjoyed together. But this party was different from most. In a few weeks, the people laughing together at this party would be fighting a war against each other.

The people at the party were army officers and their wives. For many years, these officers had served together in the United States Army. Now, the United States was splitting apart. The Civil War had just begun, and therefore many of the officers from Southern states had chosen to go home and serve in the Confederate army. Their friends who would be fighting for the North decided to throw them a farewell party.

It was hard for the officers to say goodbye, especially for Captain Lewis Armistead and Major Winfield Hancock. Armistead was from Virginia, Hancock from Pennsylvania. That had never been an issue before. They had been close friends for more than 15 years.

At first, it had seemed unlikely that these two men would be friends because they were so different. Armistead was several years older and considered himself a Southern gentleman. Unlike Armistead, the younger Hancock had a reputation as a person who loved parties, eating, and dancing. He often teased Armistead the way a boy might tease his big brother.

But over the years, the two friends went through tough times together. They both fought in the Mexican War, and Hancock had comforted Armistead when Armistead lost his wife and child to illness. Armistead and Hancock became almost like family to each other.
But now they would be separated, maybe for years, maybe forever. Armistead would be serving in the Confederate army; Hancock would fight on the side of the Union. In a tearful good-bye, Armistead gave his old friend a new major’s uniform and gave Hancock’s wife, Almira, his personal prayer book. Armistead said he wished God would strike him down if he ever attacked Hancock. Both men hoped they never would have to fight against each other.

Their hope stayed alive for more than two years. Hancock and Armistead were involved in many battles, and each did well. The two friends were both promoted to general. But they had never faced each other in the same battle. All that changed, however, one hot summer day.

The Battle of Gettysburg took place on July 1–3, 1863. It was the best chance the South had to win the war. For the first two days, the fighting was fierce, but neither side could claim victory. On July 3, the Confederates tried one last time. They decided to charge the Northern position, hoping to break through and win the battle. One of the leaders of this charge was Lewis Armistead. He knew that the man commanding the Northern troops across from him was his old friend, Winfield Hancock.

Armistead hated the idea of fighting his friend, but he had been ordered to help lead the charge. He and his men, along with thousands of other Southern troops, formed a line more than a mile long and got ready to head toward the Northern position. Armistead placed his black felt hat on his sword and held it up to guide his troops forward through the smoke and confusion of the battle. Slowly, the long line started walking across an open field toward the enemy. Soon, the Northern guns started to take their toll. The Southern soldiers moved more quickly, but they continued to lose men with every step.

Finally, Armistead and a small number of his troops reached the Northern lines. With his black hat still on his sword, he captured a Northern cannon. Just as he did, however, he was shot. He fell to the ground wounded, and the rest of his men were captured or forced to retreat.

When Armistead was found by one of Hancock’s officers, he had a message for his old friend. He said, “Tell General Hancock from me, that I have done him and you all a grave injustice.”

As it turned out, Hancock had been wounded at almost the same moment that Armistead had. Both of the friends were hurt badly, but doctors thought each would survive. Hancock did get better, but Armistead died two days after being wounded.

While Lewis Armistead and Winfield Hancock never saw each other face to face after that night in Los Angeles, it’s clear from Armistead’s last words to Hancock that their friendship had survived one of the most terrible battles of the Civil War. Even a war that divided country, families, and friends could not destroy the friendship between these men.
TIP 8: Put together details from the selection to make inferences.

An inference is a guess that a reader makes based on facts or details in a passage. Inferences require you to “read between the lines” and go beyond what is stated. Good inferences are reasonable and are based on details in the passage. Often, all you need to do is add up the details to make an inference.

11. What was the main reason that Armistead and Hancock’s good-bye in Los Angeles was tearful?
   A. Armistead gave his personal prayer book to Hancock’s wife.
   B. The close friends were parting to fight on opposite sides in a war.
   C. Armistead was thinking back to when he lost his wife and child to illness.
   D. The men talked about the times they spent together in the Mexican War.

12. How do you know? Underline details in the selection that support your answer to Number 11.

Sometimes, you may need to make an inference based on a generalization. A generalization is a broad statement that applies to more than one specific situation. For example, you could make this generalization: When people cry, it is often because they are sad about something. You can use this general idea to help you answer Number 11. What were the biggest reasons Armistead and Hancock had for being sad on that night?

TIP 9: Use evidence from the text to support your inferences and responses.

Whenever you make an inference, your answer must be supported by evidence from the selection. The answers to inference questions aren’t stated directly in the selection. They are supported, however, by something in the selection: details, the author’s tone, and so on. You should be able to point directly to a place in the selection that supports any statement you make about a story or article.
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CCS: RL.6.1, RI.6.1

13. Which statement best describes Armistead and Hancock’s friendship?
   A. It was strong because of the difficulties the men shared.
   B. It was strong because the two men were so much alike.
   C. It was weak because the two men teased each other often.
   D. It wasn’t likely to last because the men were from two different states.

14. How do you know? Underline details in the selection that support your answer to Number 13.

Here are a few more questions that will help you practice looking for supporting evidence.

15. Which conclusion is best supported by the information in the selection?
   A. Armistead wanted Hancock to fight on the side of the South.
   B. Neither man believed that a Civil War should be fought over slavery.
   C. The men would not have been as close had they both been from the same region.
   D. Going through hard times together helped Armistead and Hancock grow closer.

16. Which statement about Hancock is best supported by the selection?
   A. He allowed himself to be wounded on purpose.
   B. He was an outgoing person who liked to have fun.
   C. He was angry that he had to go to war against the South.
   D. He did not feel as strongly about the friendship as Armistead did.

17. The author concludes that Hancock and Armistead’s friendship survived one of the most terrible battles of the Civil War. Which of the following is the best evidence for this conclusion?
   A. Hancock was wounded at almost the same time as Armistead was.
   B. Armistead led Confederate troops against Hancock’s Union troops.
   C. Armistead’s men were captured or forced to retreat at the end of the battle.
   D. Armistead sent a message of apology to Hancock after he was wounded.
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Predictions (guesses about what might happen) also need to be supported by evidence from the selection.

18. What would most likely have happened if Armistead had not been ordered to lead the charge against Hancock’s troops?
   A. Hancock’s troops would have lost the battle.
   B. Hancock would not have survived the battle.
   C. Armistead would not have fought against his friend.
   D. Armistead would have left the military after the battle.

19. How do you know?

20. What did Armistead mean by saying he had done Hancock and his troops “a grave injustice”?
   A. Armistead had acted wrongly toward them.
   B. Armistead had chosen the wrong battle plan.
   C. Armistead had not expected to be wounded.
   D. Armistead had hoped to be more successful in the fight.

21. Which of the following best describes Armistead?
   A. uncaring   C. jolly
   B. mature   D. wild

Alike and Different

You can use your inference skills to compare and contrast ideas in a selection.

To compare means to show how two or more things are alike and different. To contrast means to focus mainly on the differences between things.

The following tips will help you practice making comparisons and contrasts.
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CCS: RL.6.1, RI.6.1

TIP 10: Look for words or phrases that show comparisons.
Authors will often tell you when they are making a comparison. The following box gives just a few examples of words that show similarities and differences. Comparisons also can be made using the words more, most, less, and least, as well as words ending in -er or -est (bigger, sharpest).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alike, also, as well as, both, just as, like, same, similar, together, too</td>
<td>but, different, even though, except, however, instead, not, not like, though, unlike</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22. Go back to “Friend Against Friend” and circle any words or phrases that show similarities or differences.

23. What is one way in which Armistead and Hancock were alike?
   A. Both lost a child to illness.
   B. Both fought in the Mexican War.
   C. Neither wanted a career in the military.
   D. Neither wanted to serve in the Confederate Army.

TIP 11: Look for details that show comparisons.
Sometimes you may be asked to put details together in order to tell how things, characters, or events are different or alike.

24. List details from the selection that describe Armistead and Hancock.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Armistead</th>
<th>Hancock</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
25. What is one way in which Armistead and Hancock were different?
   A. Armistead was younger than Hancock.
   B. Armistead was married; Hancock was not.
   C. Armistead lived a quieter life than Hancock.
   D. Armistead fought for the Union, Hancock for the Confederacy.

**TIP 12: Make your own comparisons.**

Sometimes you’ll be asked to compare two things in a more general way. A single detail won’t be enough. You’ll need to put together several details to come up with a bigger picture and make a comparison. Try this on the following question.

26. Which of the following words best describes both Lewis Armistead and Winfield Hancock?
   A. cruel
   B. quiet
   C. dedicated
   D. thoughtless

**Causes and Effects**

Many stories and articles try to explain how or why something happened. That’s why reading material is often filled with causes and effects.

**TIP 13: Look for words that show causes and effects.**

Certain words are direct clues to cause-and-effect relationships (see examples in the box below). Spotting these words can help you notice causes and effects in a selection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause/Effect Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>caused, in order to, led to, since, due to, in response to, because, for this reason, therefore, was responsible for, so, as a result of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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CCS: RL.6.2, RI.6.2

27. Why did many of the U.S. Army officers from Southern states go home to serve in the Confederate Army?
   A. The Civil War had begun.
   B. They did not like living in California.
   C. The Mexican War was a bad experience.
   D. They no longer had friends in the North.

TIP 14: Use the word because to connect causes and effects.
Sometimes causes and effects are implied rather than directly stated. You will need to make your own connections in these cases. The most important connecting word is because.

28. In paragraph 6 of the selection, the author says, “The two friends were both promoted to general.” Use what you know from the selection to complete the following sentence.

The two friends were both promoted to general because

TIP 15: The theme is the general message or lesson of a story.
The main idea tells about the characters or situations in the selection. The theme refers to the meaning of the selection. Most themes have been around for thousands of years. They explain things like how to live your life, what it means to be a hero, what love is, and so on. Most themes are messages that anyone can relate to. Sometimes, the theme is called the moral of the story, or the lesson that the story is trying to teach.

29. What is the theme of “Friend Against Friend”?
   A. Wars between people will never end.
   B. It is impossible to remain friends forever.
   C. Loyalty suffers when people cannot be together.
   D. Nothing can destroy a true friendship.

Lesson Practice begins on the following page.