



Strategies for Determining Main Idea & Details

to support comprehension in nonfiction-Gr. 3

Taken from *The Reading Strategies Book* by Jennifer Serravallo

8.1 One Text, Multiple Ideas (or Topics)

Who is this for?

LEVEL
any

GENRE / TEXT TYPE
nonfiction

SKILLS
synthesizing,
determining
importance



Hat Tip: Navigating
Nonfiction in Expository
Text: Determining
Importance and
Synthesizing (Calkins and
Tolan 2010c)

222

Strategy When you read the first section, chunk, or chapter, state what it's mostly about (so far) in one sentence (or one word, for readers up to level M). As you read on, notice whether the next part offers more information about the same idea, or if the author has moved on to a new idea. Collect each new main idea (or main topic for readers up to level M) as you go. For levels R and above, at the end of the reading, you may be able to put the separate main idea statements together into one, more complex statement.

Teaching Tip This strategy can be used for any text level with some slight tweaking of the language. For children at lower levels (up to level M), their books are typically about one topic, and may contain subtopics. For readers at levels M to R, the whole book will likely be about one main idea. At around levels R and higher, you'd want to include the last sentence in the strategy, offering the option to synthesize multiple ideas into one complex idea. Keep this language tweaking based on complexity in mind as you read all the lessons in this chapter.

Lesson Language We are all familiar with this class favorite, *Bugs! Bugs! Bugs!* (Dussling 2011). When we first started reading it, remember how we noticed that the author comes right out and tells us a main idea on the first page? She tells us that even though bugs look scary, they are really just dangerous to other insects, not people. I might think, "Oh. That must be what the whole book is about, since that's what she wrote in the introduction." Sometimes that's true—what's stated in the introduction is what the whole book will be about. But I also know I need to be aware, always thinking, always paying attention. I can think about each page as I read and consider if it fits with that same first idea, or if the author has gone on to a new one. We learned about the praying mantis and the dragonfly and how they hunt and eat other bugs. Yes, those still go with the first main idea. But about halfway through, listen to this: "Some bugs hunt other bugs. Not to eat themselves, but to feed their babies." She seems to switch gears a bit. Let's see if the next page is still about how we don't need to worry about bugs, or if there is a new idea, that bugs hunt to feed their young. I see the fact that the hunting wasp feeding its babies is on this page. So it seems like this book is really about more than one main idea: That we don't need to be afraid of bugs, and that bugs hunt to feed themselves and their young.

Is the Author Switching Gears?

Think:

Do the pages go together? ☐ ☒
Is this a new idea? ☒ ☐

Say:

This book is really about thing thing thing

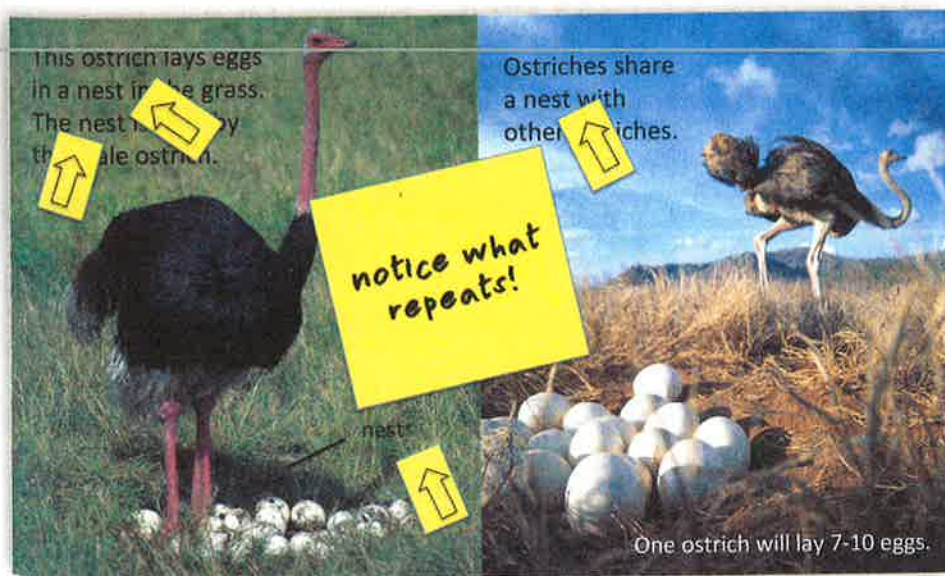
8.2 Notice What Repeats

Strategy To figure out what a book is mostly about, it's helpful to pay attention to the word or words you see again and again. On each page, notice what repeats. Think, "Does this word tell me what the book is mostly about?"

Teaching Tip Up until about level J, books often don't have a main "idea" but rather a "main topic"—it's the difference between saying the book is about "baseball" (topic) and the book is about how "baseball is an important part of American culture" (topic + idea). For younger readers, or children reading at lower levels, asking them to determine a main idea may be too challenging of a task considering the complexity of the text.

Prompts

- What repeats on each page in the words?
- What repeats on each page in the pictures?
- What is this book mostly about?
- State the main topic.
- Look for what's the same.
- Put a finger on any words that are the same on these couple of pages.
- You found a repeating word! Now, what's the topic?



Who is this for?

LEVELS

A-I

GENRE / TEXT TYPE

nonfiction

SKILL

determining
importance

8.3 Topic/Subtopic/Details

Who is this for?

LEVELS

J and above

GENRE / TEXT TYPE

expository nonfiction

SKILLS

summarizing,
retelling

Strategy First, find the topic—what the whole section or chapter is mostly about. Next, find a subtopic or a smaller part of the topic. Finally, list details that you learned that connect to the topic and subtopic.

Lesson Language In nonfiction texts, it's important to have an idea of the overall structure and to know which information supports which topics. Topics are sometimes even broken up into subtopics, with information supporting those smaller pieces. Sometimes these topics and subtopics are separated with headings and subheadings. Keep a chart or outline to help you keep track of the information the author is presenting.

Prompts

- Check the headings or subheadings.
- What's the *topic* of this section?
- What's the *subtopic* on this page?
- Tell me what it's mostly about.
- What details support that subtopic?
- Headings will have a larger font than subheadings.

Topic	Subtopic	Details
cactus	Animals like to live in cacti.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every year animals come and makes new homes. • Different animals like rats, birds and bats live in the cactus.
cactus	cacti are really big	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cacti can grow to 108 feet tall. more than 50 animals can live in the cacti.



Hat Tip: *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement*, second edition (Harvey and Goudvis 2007)

8.5 Boxes and Bullets

Who is this for?

LEVELS

J and above

GENRE / TEXT TYPE

expository nonfiction

SKILLS

**synthesizing,
determining
importance**

Strategy Draw a box and several bullets beneath it on a sticky note or in a notebook. As you read, think about the information you just read. Ask yourself, "Does this sentence say what this part is mostly about (box), or is this a detail (bullet)?" Write or mentally place the information you read on the graphic organizer as you learn it.

Teaching Tip This is another strategy that you can modify the language to be about topics and details (below level M) or about main idea and details (at around level M and above).

Lesson Language Nonfiction expository texts have an architecture—a way they are built. When authors are trying to teach you something new, it's common that they will have big topics and ideas, and then give you more information by giving you details that fit with those big topics and ideas. Sometimes the main idea comes first, and then they follow it with the details. Other times, you'll need to read all the details and then you'll come to the main idea in the conclusion. Sometimes the main idea is stuck somewhere in the middle. As you read, it helps your understanding if you can organize the information, figuring out which of the sentences are "bullets"—or supporting details or facts—and which of the sentences are "boxes"—or main ideas or topics.

Prompts

- Say back the information you just read.
- Do you think that information is the main idea, or a detail?
- How do you know if it's a main idea or detail?
- Check to see if the other information on the page is a part of that sentence.
- Check to see if that sentence supports the other information on the page.



Hat Tip: Navigating Nonfiction in Expository Text: Determining Importance and Synthesizing (Calkins and Tolan 2010c)

Day of the Dead	
Name <u>Ellie</u>	Date <u>10-8</u>
Boxes and Bullets	
Main Idea: Day of the Dead celebrates the people who have died.	
Supporting Details	
• They tell stories about their family history.	
• They wear skulls to wake the dead.	
• They visit their family graves.	

8.7 Paraphrase Chunks, Then Put It Together

Who is this for?

LEVELS

L and above

GENRE / TEXT TYPE

nonfiction (article)

SKILLS

determining
importance,
paraphrasing,
synthesizing

Strategy Stop after every paragraph or short section. Think, "How can I say what I learned in my own words?" Jot a note in the margin. At the end of the article, read back over your margin notes and think, "So, what's this whole article mostly about?"

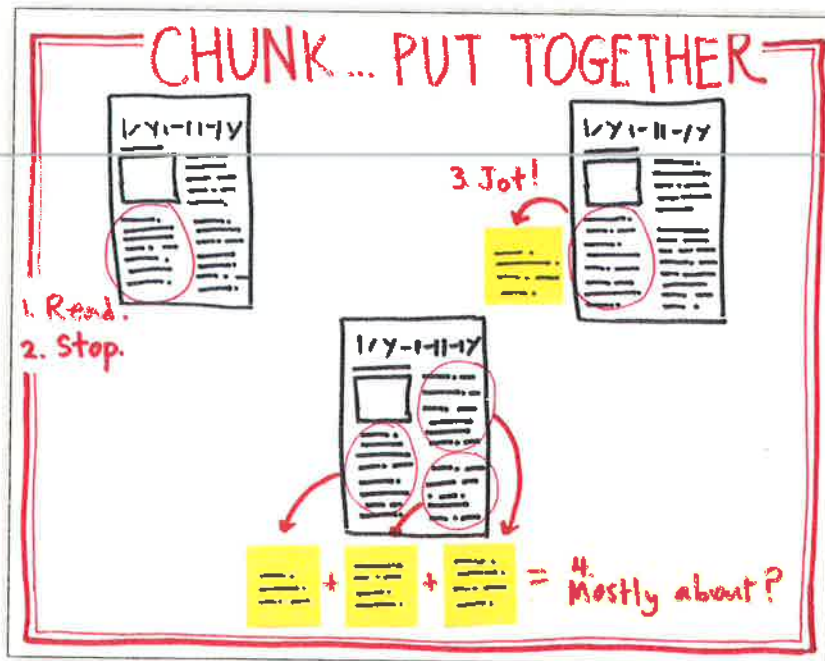
Teaching Tip Part of the challenge for many readers as they move to expository nonfiction from reading stories is that the pace of their reading needs to slow down. Strategies like this one that ask readers to stop and chunk the information as they go helps to slow them down and monitor their comprehension before moving on. It also supports their ability to synthesize the information, as they are stopping throughout the text to pull together smaller amounts of information rather than reading the entire text before stopping to think about main ideas.

Prompts

- Stop there. Jot a note.
- What's most important in what you just read?
- Say it in your own words.
- Don't write the same thing the author wrote; think and try to say it on your own.
- Look back across your notes.
- What is the *whole* article about?
- That main idea statement takes into account most of the information you just read!
- It seems like slowing down to think is helping you to think about main ideas as you go.



Hat Tip: *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement*, second edition (Harvey and Goudvis 2007)



8.15 Why Does the Story Matter?

Who is this for?

LEVELS

M and above

GENRE / TEXT TYPE

narrative nonfiction

SKILLS

determining
importance,
synthesizing



Hat Tip: The Rhetoric of Teaching: Understanding the Dynamics of Holocaust Narratives in an English Classroom (Juzwik 2009)

Strategy In narrative nonfiction, true information told in stories, the main idea may be a question of what's most important about the story as a whole. After reading a true story we can ask ourselves, "What are the lessons this person has learned as a result of his or her victory or struggle?" or "What traits am I learning about this person?" or "Why does the author think the experiences of this person matter enough to write a story about him or her? What should we take away?"

Lesson Language In *Boycott Blues* (Pinkney 2008), the author tells the story of Rosa Parks and other civil rights leaders. Based on all the details of the hardships that the leaders faced and how they kept persevering, as well as some of the final lines: "Now you see the power of the won't-stop shoes / Now you know the story of the boycott blues . . . Bye-bye boycott blues" (34), I think one possible thing the author might think is important about this story is that it was because of the ongoing efforts of a few that many today enjoy greater freedoms. I think the author feels gratitude toward those who came before her.

Prompts

- What's important about this story?
- Think about why the author told the story.
- Look for a theme at the end, like you would in a fictional story.
- What seems to matter about this person or story?
- State what you're going to take away from this story.

As Readers Of Biography, We...

Preview The Text

• Think, "What do I already know about this person?"

• Think, "What details should I focus on? What relates to their big victory or big struggle?"

Read Closely

• Follow our "tracking a theory" steps

• Use facts that precisely match evidence!

Find the Hidden Meaning

• Ask, "What was my subject's big decision?"

• Ask, "What did my character choose NOT to do?"

• Ask, "What can I learn from their choice?"

8.16 What? and So What?

strategy A main idea is more than a topic. To state the main idea, it's important to know what the text is about (the topic) and then to be able to say so what about it. The "so what" can be the angle, idea, or perspective that the author brings to the topic.

Lesson Language The main idea of a text is more than just what the text is about (the topic). You can say this book is about whales. Or this one is about animals adapting. Or that this one is about celebrations in Central America. You would probably be able to say that without even reading the book! The title gives you that. Figuring out the main idea often requires a little thinking and a little work. The work you do as a reader to figure out the main idea is to collect all the information, notice what the author writes about and how he or she writes about it. And then, to step back from the text to ask yourself, "So what?" Your answer to "so what" might be about why the author wrote it. Or what unique perspective the author is bringing to the topic. Or, about how of all the books out there in the world on this topic, what makes this one unique? For example, in the book *Exploding Ants: Amazing Facts about How Animals Adapt* (Settel 1999), each section tells about a different animal and something interesting about how it's adapted. So, I could say the topic is "animal adaptation." But so what? So what about that topic? What's the author's angle? What does the author think about animal adaptation? Well, the author seems to be sharing not just any kind of adaptation, but gross ones. Ones that have to do with things like bloodsucking or swollen body parts or making homes in disgusting places such as dung. The author is not including, for example, facts about how a polar bear is white to blend in with the snow—something with no gross-out value. Still, I think the author is saying that it's kind of amazing and cool, even though it's also gross. So if I put all that together I'd say, "Although some animal behaviors are gross to humans, they are critical to their life on earth."

Prompts

- What's the topic of the book? Check the title.
- What's this section mostly about?
- That's the topic. What's the main idea?
- What's the author's angle or slant?
- What do you think the author is trying to say about that topic?

A Main Idea is MORE Than a Topic!



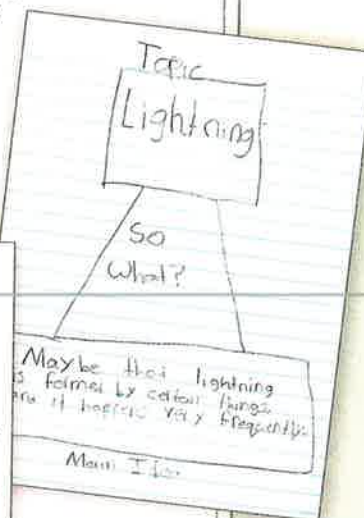
What: Triceratops

So what?: Even though T. is extinct, scientists can still study fossils to learn about them.



What: Arctic Fox

So what?: A.F. have many ways to survive in the cold, harsh weather of the Arctic.



Hat Tip: Independent Reading Assessment: Nonfiction series (Serravallo 2013a)

Who is this for

LEVELS

M and above

GENRE / TEXT TYPE

nonfiction

SKILLS

determining importance, synthesizing

9.6 Consistently Ask, "How Do I Know?"

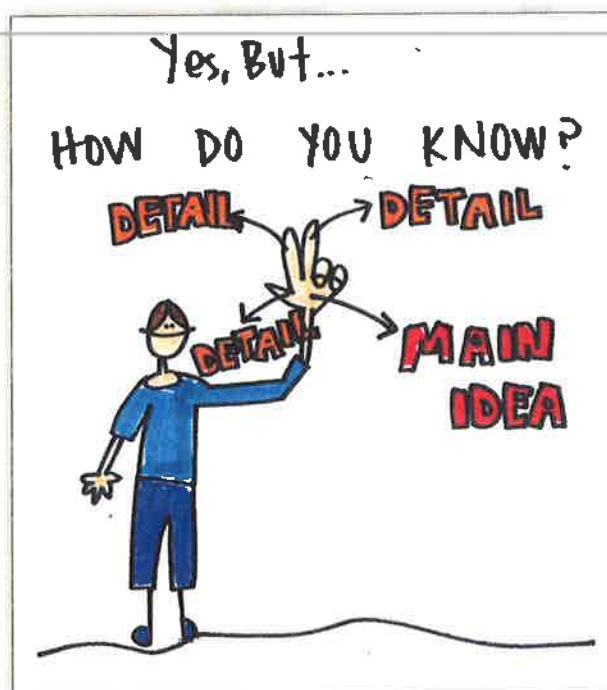
Strategy To find the details in the text that match with the most important ideas being presented, you'll have to sort through them all. After reading a section or whole book, you can start by saying what the whole book is mostly about and touching your palm. Then, ask yourself, "How do I know?" and see if you can go back to the text to say back the facts that are most connected to the idea, listing them across your fingers.

Teaching Tip This lesson can be modified to be about the "topic" with supporting details instead of "main idea" with supporting details, for those students who are reading books at levels A-L.

Lesson Language *I think this first chapter in Ancient Greece (Newman 2010) is mostly about (Touch palm.) how even though ancient Greeks lived thousands of years ago, we can still feel their influence today. How do I know? Well, I know because (Touch one finger.) it says in the book that our laws and government are rooted in what the Greeks did. It also said that (Touch another finger.) math and science, subjects we study in school, came from the Greeks. Also (Touch a third finger.), many building designs that we still use today started in ancient Greece. All of these facts connect to that one main idea.*

Prompts

- State your idea.
- Name detail(s) that match that idea.
- Explain how you know.
- How does that detail connect to the main idea?
- Explain the connection.



Who is this for?

LEVEL
any

GENRE / TEXT TYPE
expository nonfiction

SKILLS
determining
importance,
summarizing



Hat Tip: Inside Information: Developing Powerful Readers and Writers of Informational Text Through Project-Based Instruction (Duke 2014)