

WHAT'S IN THIS SET

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Topic: Identifying main idea · Subject: ELA · Grade: 6th

10 problems · 5 BUILD THE FOUNDATION + 3 PUT IT TO WORK + 2 OWN THE THINKING

TIER GUIDE · WHAT TO WATCH FOR AS STUDENTS WORK

BUILD THE FOUNDATION

This tier builds students' ability to distinguish the main idea of a passage from supporting details and restate it in their own words.

Watch for: *Students who circle or underline a single detail or sentence from the text and label it the main idea without considering what the whole passage is about.*

PUT IT TO WORK

This tier asks students to identify the main idea when it is implied rather than directly stated in the text.

Watch for: *Students who can name what each paragraph is about individually but pause and self-correct when asked to unify those ideas into one overarching main idea, showing they are working toward synthesis rather than stuck in summary.*

OWN THE THINKING

This tier requires students to evaluate an author's choice of main idea and explain how specific details across the passage support, complicate, or sharpen it.

Watch for: *Students who spontaneously reference details from different parts of the passage to build their explanation rather than relying on a single section, signaling they are reading the text as a whole argument rather than a sequence of parts.*

FROM THE COUNCIL · A THOUGHT BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE

Before this lands on desks, remember what you are actually doing today — not sorting children into what they can and cannot do, but finding out what the current method has been hiding about them. Every ceiling a student seems to have belongs to an approach, not to the student. The tier is not a verdict. It is a new angle of entry, and some of what you discover today will surprise you, because the child was always more than what the previous method could reach. Stay honest about what you are seeing, and stay willing to let what you see change what you believed.

STUDENT PRACTICE WORK

Name: _____

Date: _____

Finding the Center: How to Identify the Main Idea in Any Text

WHY THIS MATTERS

This knowledge belongs to you — it was built by people who look like you, and understanding it puts economic and intellectual power in your hands.

Every time you read something, someone made a choice about what to center and what to leave out. Learning to find the main idea is not just a reading skill. It is a power skill. It is how you stop getting swept along by whatever someone wants you to believe and start asking, what is this really about? A man named Ida B. Wells-Barnett spent her life training people to read past headlines and find the real argument underneath. Before her, much of what Black Americans wrote, published, and argued was deliberately removed from libraries, burned, or left out of the historical record entirely. That erasure happened because ideas have power. When you can find the main idea of a text, you can find its power. That is yours to keep.

VOCABULARY · Write each definition in your own words.

main idea

In my own words: _____

supporting detail

In my own words: _____

central claim

In my own words: _____

1. Jessica reads this sentence: "Our neighborhood needs a community garden." What is the one big point Jessica is making? What question does it make you want to ask next?

(Think: what is she saying in one breath? What would she have to show you to prove it?)

2. Lauren reads this short passage: "Every Saturday, families on our block come together to sell homemade food, handmade jewelry, and local art. The money stays in the neighborhood. Kids learn how to run a table and make change. Elders pass down recipes and stories." What is the main idea of this passage? Notice how this uses the same structure as problem 1. What stayed the same? What changed?

SHOW YOUR THINKING: After each step, write one sentence explaining why that move is valid.

Answer: _____

3. Karin reads this passage: "Dominican hair salons in our community are not just places to get your hair done. They are where women share news, give advice, support each other through hard times, and build friendships that last decades. They are a form of community care that does not show up in any official budget but holds the neighborhood together." The passage has three sentences. Each one adds something different. What is the main idea, and how did you figure out it was not just the first sentence alone?

SHOW YOUR THINKING: After each step, write one sentence explaining why that move is valid. (Think: does the main idea always live in one sentence, or does it sometimes live in the relationship between all of them?)

Answer: _____

THE CORE IDEA

All three problems share the same root question: what is this whole thing really about? In problem 1, that was easy because there was only one sentence and one point. In problems 2 and 3, you had more sentences, more details, more texture, but the job did not change. The main idea is not always the first sentence. It is the point that all the other sentences are working to support, explain, or prove. Supporting details are the workers. The main idea is what they are all working toward. When you can see that relationship clearly, you can read anything and find its center, no matter how long it is or how complicated it gets.

PUT IT TO WORK

4. Lauren reads the following passage.

5. Read the following passage.

6. Jessica wrote this argument.

7. Read these two perspectives.

QUICK JEWEL

In problems 4 through 7, you kept running into the same gap: a speaker makes a claim, then offers something that sounds like proof but does not fully close the argument. That gap has a name. It is called an unsupported assertion, and it shows up constantly in news coverage, school board meetings, and every political speech you will ever hear about your neighborhood. The skill you just practiced is not just an ELA skill. It is the skill of knowing when someone is trying to convince you

of something without actually earning your agreement.

OWN THE THINKING

8. PULL IT APART

A student wrote this argument. Find the exact flaw. Name why the reasoning or evidence fails.

Rewrite with stronger argumentation.

Problem: A student is arguing that a community investment fund directly caused a drop in local unemployment.

Step 1: Read the argument carefully. What claim is the student making?

Step 2: Look at the evidence. The student uses two numbers. What do those numbers actually prove on their own?

Step 3: Name the flaw. The student assumes that because one thing happened after another thing, the first thing caused the second. Does timing alone prove cause?

Step 4: Rewrite the argument so the evidence actually supports the claim. What would the student need to add to make this argument valid?

PULL IT APART

Find the error. Name it. Fix it.

Name exactly why the reasoning or evidence fails — what makes it weak, unsupported, or logically invalid? Then rewrite it with stronger argumentation.

The flaw I notice: _____

Why this mistake is easy to make: _____

9. CLAIM IT Create your own argument that satisfies ALL of these conditions.

- Takes a clear position on a real issue affecting their community - Supports the position with at least two specific pieces of evidence - Student explains how they know their argument meets all conditions Show your thinking and explain how you know it qualifies.

- Anticipates and addresses one counterargument

CLAIM IT

Build your own. Prove it works.

Show your thinking and explain how you know your argument meets the conditions. Your reasoning is as important as your claim.

Problem 1

RECOMMENDED: The main idea is that the Saturday block market keeps money, skills, and culture circulating inside the neighborhood. All four sentences connect to one shared purpose: the market is a form of community self-sufficiency. The first sentence introduces the event, and each sentence after it adds a different dimension of what the market does for the community.

Reasoning: *Students must identify what all sentences share, not just summarize the first one.*

KEY CONCEPT: *Main idea is what ties all sentences together, not the topic of any single sentence.*

PRACTICE TIP: *If you picked one sentence and called it the main idea, go back and test it against every other sentence. If even one sentence does not connect, your main idea is too narrow.*

TEACHER NOTE: *Watch for students who copy the first sentence as the main idea without checking whether later sentences expand, shift, or deepen the focus.*

Problem 2

RECOMMENDED: *The main idea is that the block market serves the community in multiple ways at once: economically, educationally, and culturally. The structure is the same as problem 1 in that no single sentence holds the full meaning. What changed is the focus shifts from commerce to community transmission of knowledge and culture.*

Reasoning: *Students should notice the parallel structure between problems 1 and 2 and identify what the new passage adds.*

KEY CONCEPT: *Main idea synthesis requires reading across all sentences, not just locating a topic sentence.*

PRACTICE TIP: *After you find what changed between two passages, ask yourself whether the main idea changed or only the details did. That distinction is where the skill lives.*

TEACHER NOTE: *Watch for students who describe what the passage is about rather than stating what the passage is arguing or showing across all sentences.*

Problem 3

RECOMMENDED: *The main idea is that Dominican hair salons function as a critical form of community infrastructure and care, even though that role is invisible in official systems. The main idea does not live in the first sentence alone because the first sentence only introduces the location. The second and third sentences transform that location into an argument about what salons actually do for community life. Without those sentences, you would only know where women go, not why it matters.*

Reasoning: *This problem asks students to distinguish between an introductory sentence and the full main idea that emerges across all three sentences.*

KEY CONCEPT: *Main idea sometimes requires reading all sentences in relationship to each other, especially when the first sentence is an introduction rather than a claim.*

PRACTICE TIP: *When you finish reading, cover the first sentence and ask yourself whether you still understand the main point. If yes, the main idea lives in the later sentences. If no, you need all of them together.*

TEACHER NOTE: Watch for students who identify the first sentence as the main idea and stop there. This is the most common error when a passage opens with context rather than a claim.

Problem 4

RECOMMENDED: The claim is that the community won the garden because they refused to be ignored, meaning sustained civic pressure produces results. The evidence includes three years of council meetings, four hundred signatures, and the fact that they broke ground last spring. The evidence is moderately sufficient. It shows consistent action and a concrete outcome, but it does not prove that their pressure specifically was the deciding factor. Other explanations, such as a change in city leadership or budget availability, are not addressed.

Reasoning: Students must separate what the speaker asserts from what the evidence actually demonstrates.

KEY CONCEPT: Evidence must directly connect to the claim it is supposed to support. Correlation between effort and outcome is not the same as proof of cause.

PRACTICE TIP: After you identify the evidence, ask yourself: could this outcome have happened without the cause the speaker names? If yes, the evidence is not sufficient on its own.

TEACHER NOTE: Watch for students who accept specific numbers as automatically strong evidence. Specificity makes evidence concrete, not necessarily complete.

Problem 5

RECOMMENDED: The claim is that the lending gap in this community is the deliberate result of historical banking policy, not chance. The evidence is the specific contrast between sixty percent of storefronts and less than ten percent of loans in the same zip code. That statistical gap is strong evidence that a disparity exists, but it does not fully prove intent or historical cause on its own. To fully support the claim, the speaker would need to cite specific policies, historical documentation, or a study that traces the mechanism behind the gap.

Reasoning: Students must evaluate whether numerical evidence proves what the speaker claims it proves, not just whether the numbers are real.

KEY CONCEPT: Specific numbers make evidence concrete, but they do not automatically prove cause, intent, or history. The argument is only as strong as the link between the evidence and the claim.

PRACTICE TIP: When you see numbers in an argument, ask yourself two questions: do these numbers prove what the speaker says they prove, and what is missing that would make the proof complete?

TEACHER NOTE: Watch for students who treat statistical evidence as self-explanatory. Students often assume that if a number is specific, the argument is proven. This is a critical distinction to reinforce.

Problem 6

RECOMMENDED: The claim is that Ember Charter should offer a small business class because it would help students build wealth rather than just find employment. One strength is that Jessica connects the argument to a real distinction, the difference between having a job and building wealth, which gives the argument a specific purpose. One weakness is that she offers no evidence that a class like this actually produces the outcome she describes. She asserts that students would graduate knowing how to build something, but she does not cite examples of schools where this worked, data on outcomes, or any specific program model. The argument would be stronger if she named a real example of a school that offers this and documented what happened for those students.

Reasoning: Students must distinguish between assertion and evidence, and between having a good idea and proving a good idea.

KEY CONCEPT: An argument is only as strong as its evidence. A logical-sounding claim with no evidence is still an unsupported assertion.

PRACTICE TIP: For every claim you make, ask yourself: what would a skeptic need to see before they believed me? Then make sure your evidence answers that question.

TEACHER NOTE: Watch for students who evaluate the argument based on whether they agree with the idea rather than whether the evidence is sufficient. Agreement and proof are not the same thing.

Problem 7

RECOMMENDED: Perspective A is better supported. It provides two types of evidence: a functional argument that vending removes a specific barrier, which is the storefront lease cost, and a community-grounded claim that dozens of families already depend on this income. Perspective B raises a real concern about regulatory fairness but offers no specific evidence. It does not name how many businesses are affected, what the actual economic impact is, or whether this problem has occurred in cities that legalized vending. To be fully sufficient, Perspective A would still need data on how many vendors operate and what their income looks like. Perspective B would need documented harm to brick-and-mortar businesses in comparable cities.

Reasoning: Students must evaluate evidence quality, not personal agreement, using specific details from both passages.

KEY CONCEPT: A stronger argument is not the one you agree with. It is the one that gives you specific, verifiable reasons that directly support the claim.

PRACTICE TIP: Read both sides and list the evidence each one provides. The side with more specific, connected evidence is better supported, even if you personally disagree with it.

TEACHER NOTE: Watch for students who choose a side based on personal belief and then work backward to justify it. Prompt them to name the evidence before naming the winner.

Problem 8

ERROR TYPE: False causation. The student treats chronological sequence as proof of causal relationship, which is logically invalid without additional evidence linking the cause to the effect.

KEY CONCEPT: In argument analysis, cause must be proven through a demonstrated mechanism, not inferred from timing alone.

Celebration: You found a real pattern in the data. Now what would you need to add to prove that the fund is the reason and not just something that happened at the same time?

TEACHER NOTE: Watch for students who accept before-and-after data as proof of cause in any argument. This error appears frequently in persuasive writing and in media coverage of community issues. It is worth naming explicitly and returning to across the unit.
