

PARENT TEACHING TIPS

. . . on the Importance of Learning Main Ideas

By Bill Welker, EdD

Since their elementary school days, all students have been exposed to the concept of “main ideas.” In my professional opinion, recognizing main ideas is the most important ability your child can acquire in school. As a matter of fact, understanding main ideas is a skill needed in every subject area.

Today we will take an in-depth look at main ideas and their relationship to outlining and summarizing.

Main Ideas

The ability to identify a main idea (the major point of a chapter, section, or paragraph) is necessary for outlining or summarizing textbook material and classroom lectures. To simplify the teaching main ideas, we will examine them in the context of paragraphs.

Finding main ideas in paragraphs involves either the literal or interpretive levels of comprehension. This depends on whether the main idea is actually stated in the paragraph. A stated main idea is usually found at the beginning of a paragraph, but it could also be located in the middle or at the end of a paragraph. Moreover, the textbook author develops the main idea with supporting “details” throughout the entire paragraph.

However, with some paragraphs, the main idea is not directly stated, but implied. In this case, the details will assist by pointing the way to the main idea. While reading, the student must use (1) the details and (2) his or her background knowledge and experiences to interpret the main idea of the paragraph.

To be quite honest, learning to locate main ideas involves a great deal of practice. As you read, you must constantly be thinking in terms of “What is the main idea?” Keep in mind, the main idea (stated or unstated) usually performs one of the following functions:

- It sums up the entire paragraph.**
- It answers the major question of a paragraph.**
- It defines the important term of a paragraph**

Now let’s examine the significance of main ideas when outlining or summarizing.

Outlining

Outlining is a means of organizing ideas and showing how they fit together. Outlining is similar to writing a telegram or texting. In sending a telegram or text message, a person selects only the most important words or ideas to be communicated to the receiver. When outlining, a student selects only the most important ideas from a larger piece of written material or a lecture. Usually, an outline presents an abbreviated format for something the student will expand upon a later time. Below is a generic outline:

I. Main Idea

A. Detail supporting I

B. Detail supporting I

1. Detail supporting B

2. Detail supporting B

a. Detail supporting 2

b. Detail supporting 2

Summarizing

A summary is really an enlargement of an outline. It is also a shortened form of material you read in a textbook or heard at a lecture. Regarding textbook readings, summaries can be constructed by locating and combining the main ideas of important paragraphs into summary statements. Take note; illustrated paragraphs, which give only more examples, do not add new ideas. So, they do not need to be incorporated into the overall summary.

Furthermore, try to limit the number of sentences used for textbook readings or lectures. Also, minimize the number of words written in each summary sentence if they are not needed for conveying the meaning of the passage. Consider the following example of summarizing:

Original Sentence: A match carelessly thrown on the ground by a thoughtless camper, can cause the destruction by fire of many acres of trees and forestland that will take decades of work to restore.

Summary Sentence: A carelessly thrown match can destroy a forest.

Well-constructed outlines and summaries are helpful for examination-review purposes regarding your child's textbook assignments and lectures. But never forget that "main ideas" are the crucial elements to know regardless of what study-skill technique you decide to use.

Parent Proverb

“Superstition is the religion of feeble minds.”

- Edmond Burke

Next Month’s Column: “Learning Inference Skills”

(Editor’s Note: Dr. Bill Welker is a retired reading specialist who was a K-12 classroom teacher for 40 years. He was selected as a “Teacher of the Year” by the Wheeling Area Chamber of Commerce. Dr. Welker is the first educator from Ohio County Schools inducted into the West Virginia University College of Education and Human Services’ Jasper N. Deahl Honors Society for career achievement and community involvement.

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