

# Reading Informational Text: Finding Main Ideas for Lessons

## Common Core Standards

*Reading: Informational Text—Key Ideas and Details, RI.3.2–5.2; Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, RI.3.10–12.10*

*Reading: Foundational Skills—Fluency, RF.3.4–5.4*

*Speaking & Listening—Comprehension and Collaboration, SL.3.1–12.1*

**NOTE:** *The examples in this activity are about the American Revolution in New Jersey, but you can adapt them for use with other topics and states.*

Remind your class that one tricky thing about main ideas is that they can be found at different levels in a textbook. For example, a section can have a main idea, but so can a smaller piece of text like a paragraph or a larger one like a chapter or even a book. It's important to know how to look for main ideas at these different levels. Fortunately, a textbook often gives readers this information using clues such as titles and headings.

Write the following examples on the board from a previous lesson for student practice:

1. The Revolutionary War was long and difficult.
2. The Battle of Monmouth happened on such a hot day that George Washington's horse died.
3. New Jersey became a center of activity during the war, with many battles fought there.
4. Governor Franklin moved out and General Washington moved in with his army, and there were many battles fought after that in New Jersey, including two battles at Trenton, one at Princeton, a winter in Morristown, the Battle of Monmouth, another winter in Morristown, the Battle of Springfield, and some help from African Americans and women during the war.

Ask students to pick the sentence they think makes the best main idea and why. You may want to set this up as a matching activity, putting these options to one side of the board: (a) Too narrow, (b) Too broad, (c) Too many ideas, (d) Just right. After some discussion, students should be able to conclude that the first example is too vague. On the other hand, the second example is too narrowly focused to be a good main idea, covering just one topic—and not the most important one in the lesson. The fourth example tries to cover too much. It lists too many ideas, jumping all over the place. But the third example is about

right since it takes in the events of the entire lesson and focuses on what matters most. Point out that a main idea sentence for a lesson can't describe everything in a lesson, but it can give 1–2 important points that will act as a good summary.

Next, have students work together in pairs to come up with four main ideas for the current lesson. One should be too broad, one should be too narrow, one should include too many ideas, and one should be just right. Students can then trade main idea pages with another pair to see if they can guess which main idea is which. Meet as a class to discuss the main ideas and outcomes. Put some of the best main ideas on the board and talk about what makes them work.

As a follow-up, you can assign students to work in pairs to find main ideas for even larger pieces of writing: books. Discuss the challenges of writing a main idea for something that big. Here is an example for students to consider:

*Charlotte's Web*—A clever spider comes up with a plan for saving the life of a young pig.

Practice on a few other familiar books together before assigning students to come up with main idea sentences for 3–5 other books individually or in pairs. The books can be fiction or nonfiction. Then meet as a class so students can share examples of their main ideas for books. Discuss how readers can decide what is important enough to put in a main idea.

Note that this lesson is not just about the task of finding main ideas; it is about prioritizing information and expanding or contracting the concept of main idea using critical thinking. It also includes practice summarizing.

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## Differentiated Instruction

The reading activity can be differentiated in the following ways to accommodate students of varying abilities.

### STRUGGLING LEARNERS

Use the strategies above, but let students choose from a menu of options for a second practice topic from a previous lesson before working on main ideas from the current lesson. For example:

1. The colonists let the king know they were tired of how the British government was treating them.
2. Fighting broke out in Lexington and Concord, after which the Second Continental Congress was held, a Declaration of Independence was written, and William Franklin was sent to prison.
3. Paul Revere warned colonists in Lexington and Concord that the British soldiers were coming.
4. Fighting began in Lexington and Concord, and colonial leaders sent the king a special Declaration of Independence.

Set this up as a matching activity, putting these options to one side of the board: (a) Too narrow, (b) Too broad, (c) Too many ideas, (d) Just right. In the examples given, the first one is too broad or vague; the second covers too much; the third is too narrow, focusing on just one topic; and the fourth is just right, emphasizing two key events that officially started the Revolutionary War.

Have students work together in pairs to come up with four main ideas for the current lesson. One should be too broad, one should be too narrow, one should have too many ideas, and one should be just right. (Students will need to mix up the order of these options in their work.) Students can then trade main idea sheets with another pair to see if they can guess which main idea is which type. Meet as a class to discuss the main ideas. Put some of the best main ideas on the board and talk about what makes them work.

### GIFTED LEARNERS

Divide students into pairs or small groups and assign them to write a main idea for each of the lessons they've covered up to this point in the year, excluding the ones they just worked on. Then have them meet as a class to vote on the best main idea for each lesson until you have narrowed the list to a group of top picks. Give selected students time to argue for their candidates, identifying specific reasons each main idea sentence should win before voting on a main idea for each lesson. This will help students practice analyzing carefully what makes a good main idea.