

Main idea and details

The topic of a paragraph or article is what it is about, told in one or two words. The **main idea** is the most important idea about the topic. For example, an article on the topic of trees might have as its main idea that *many tall trees have wide, strong roots to support them*.

Sometimes there is a sentence that states the main idea directly. But if it is not given, you have to work it out and tell it in your own words. Other sentences in the passage usually contain **supporting details** that tell more about the main idea.

Knowing the main idea and listing the supporting details helps you better understand what you read.

Tip

The main idea is the most important idea. Details support this main idea. To be sure you have the main idea, ask yourself, 'Do all the details tell about the main idea?'

Read about plant roots in this short article. As you read, think about the topic, the main idea, and the supporting details.

Roots come in all shapes and sizes. Some roots are long and skinny. Others are fat and round. Many roots look like tangled string. No matter how they look, roots play a very important part in helping plants live and grow. Roots act as anchors and hold plants in the soil. Trees could be blown away by wind if they did not have roots. Other plants could be washed away by rain. Roots also take in the water and nutrients that plants need to live and grow.



Complete this table. Write the topic and the sentence from the article that tells the main idea. Then write two supporting details.

Topic	
Main idea	
Detail 1	
Detail 2	



As you read the following article about plants and their root systems, look for the main idea and supporting details in each paragraph.



Plants with roots above ground



by Robert Newell

Not all plants have their roots under the ground. Mangrove trees grow in thick, wet mud. They grow special roots above the ground to help them survive. Big, curved *buttress roots* and thin, arched *prop roots* help the mangroves stand in wet, shifting soil. *Pencil roots* and *knee roots* stick up above the mud to help the roots get the air they need.

Sturdy roots make mangrove trees very useful. People often tie their boats to mangrove trees when a storm is on the way. One storm in Darwin, Australia, destroyed almost every boat in the Darwin harbour. Only two boats were saved. These boats were safely tucked away among the mangrove trees.

Some roots are not hidden in water or soil. Instead, they grow above the ground for special reasons. *Silt roots* grow out and downwards from tree trunks, like legs. They help plants stay in soil that is very thin. *Pillar roots* grow straight down from tree branches. They help the tree to grow over a wider area.

Some plants live in trees or on top of rocks. They are called *epiphytes*. Their roots are called *aerial roots*. They never touch the ground. Most epiphytes grow in very wet places, such as rainforests. The aerial roots cling tightly to tree branches and absorb water from dew and rain. Living high in trees helps epiphytes get the light they need.



The roots of a mangrove tree, note the larger buttress roots and the small prop root.



Epiphytic orchids in a mountain rainforest, Kota Kinabalu Malaysia.



Understanding the text

1 Why do some plants have roots above the ground? Give two reasons.

2 What is one main difference between stilt roots and pillar roots?

3 Why do you think that boats are safer in a storm if they shelter among mangrove trees?

Developing comprehension skills

4 What is the topic of this article?

- safety in a storm types of above-ground roots
 different types of trees mangrove trees

Each of these statements is the main idea of one paragraph, or a supporting detail. Tick the right circle for each one.

	Statement	Main idea OR supporting detail?
Paragraph 1	5 Knee roots help the mangrove tree get more air.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail
	6 Mangrove trees have above-ground roots to help them survive.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail
	7 Mangrove trees grow in muddy water.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail
Paragraph 2	8 Storms can destroy boats, even in a harbour.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail
	9 There are lots of mangrove trees in Darwin Harbour.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail
	10 Mangrove trees can provide a safe place for boats during a storm.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail

Paragraph 3	11	Some roots grow above the ground to help make trees more stable.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail
	12	Stilt roots grow out and downwards from tree trunks to help plants stay in thin soil.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail
	13	Pillar roots help some trees to grow over a wider area.	<input type="radio"/> main idea <input type="radio"/> supporting detail

14 The last paragraph of the article is about plants that do not touch the ground at all. Complete the table for this paragraph.

Topic	
Main idea	
Detail 1	
Detail 2	
Detail 3	

Working with words

Write the word from the box that matches each definition.

absorb	aerial	arched	harbour	pillar	stilt	survive
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- 15** a tall, often round, stone or concrete post in a building _____
- 16** an area of sheltered water on a coastline _____
- 17** one of a pair of poles for walking high above the ground _____
- 18** to keep living, especially when life is hard _____
- 19** curved in the shape of an arch _____
- 20** of the air, or happening in the air _____
- 21** to take in (water, ideas, etc.) _____



Writing about your favourite tree

Find out as much as you can about a favourite tree, and then write a short article about it. Describe its main features and where it grows, and say why it is special to you. Write the main idea at the beginning or the end of your writing.

Drawing conclusions

As you read a story or an article, you may need to work out some things that the author doesn't tell you. Think about the details that the author does give you. Then combine those details with what you know from your own experience to make a decision or **draw a conclusion**.

Drawing conclusions helps you to better understand events and why they happen, and characters and why they act the way they do.

Read this short story. Use what you know as well as the details in the story to draw conclusions about the people and events.

When I was a kid my dad made me a wonderful billycart. He used the wheels from an old pram we found in the shed. Dad said it was his own pram, but I wasn't sure if he was just joking.

Dad used some fruit boxes, which he cut up and nailed together. Mum gave me a couple of old pillows to sit on. With some rope to turn the wheels, I was ready to go. And boy, did I go fast! Down the road outside our house, straight into the paddock at the bottom of the hill. I had such fun with my old billycart.



Who do you think might be telling this story?
What do you know about them? What can you imagine?

Tip

You can test your conclusions using the details in a story or article. Also ask yourself, 'Does this conclusion make sense?'



Read this story about a special blue oil. Use details and your own experience to draw conclusions about the characters and the events.

© The blue oil ©

by Barbara Giles

The back of Bill's Bicycle Shop was a wonderful place. Bits and pieces of bicycles lay everywhere. Tyres, old and wrinkled and cracked, hung from the roof of the shed.

Pots of paint that didn't slosh any more bent down the shelves. Dusty cobwebs got across your face, the floor was dusty earth. The door was always open, probably because it wouldn't shut.

Bill was usually found sitting on a box in the sun, or in the shade of his huge apricot tree. Or he would be rummaging among his bits and pieces for something to mend a kid's bike.

He didn't open his shop any more.

'I don't need customers now. I've retired,' he used to say.

So the shop stayed shut. The window was so dirty you couldn't see inside.

People said, 'What a mess. Should be made to clean it up.'

But Bill didn't care.

Neither did the kids.

They brought their bikes and trikes and bilycarts and skateboards along to Bill to be mended and oiled.

Oil.

Bill's special. Blue. It made things run well, better than anything else.

Bike racing men used to come to him to get it.

'Naw, don't make it any more. Can't get the special ingredient.'

But he still had some for the kids.

Sometimes their mothers complained.

'That horrid grease. Makes your socks blue. Won't come out. You are not to go to Bill again. Your dad will fix it.'



Understanding the text

1 How did Bill help the local kids? Write two ways.

2 What was Bill's blue oil used for?

3 What were the mothers unhappy about?

Developing comprehension skills

4 Why do you think that Bill had retired?

- He was quite old.
- He was sick of mending bikes.
- He didn't have anything left to sell.
- No one wanted a bike any more.

5 Why do you think that some people wanted the shop window cleaned up?

6 Why do you think that Bill didn't care about the mess in his shop?

7 Bill looked after the kids' bikes. What is another possible reason why the kids kept going back to his shop?

8 What conclusion can you draw about the kind of person Bill was?

9 Write two details from the story that would help you conclude that Bill's blue oil was indeed special.

Working with words

Write the word from the box that matches each definition.

cobwebs complain customers grease ingredients retire rummage

- 10 people who buy things in a shop _____
- 11 to stop doing something, especially working in a paid job _____
- 12 a thick, oily substance _____
- 13 groups of sticky threads made by a spider to catch insects _____
- 14 to poke around looking for things _____
- 15 each item in a mixture of things, especially for cooking _____
- 16 to say how annoyed or unhappy you are _____

Making
the reading
and writing
connection



Writing about visiting Bill's shop

Imagine that you take your bike to Bill's shop to be mended. Use the conclusions you have drawn about Bill to write a conversation you have with Bill. You might be looking for a special part for your bike, or you might need his blue oil for a special purpose.

Sequence: order of events

The order in which events happen is called the **sequence**. As you read a story or article, you may find words and phrases that will help you work out the sequence. For example, words such as *first*, *then*, *later*, *Tuesday* and *in the afternoon* tell when things happened. Dates tell you a specific month or year.

In some stories and articles, two or more events happen at the same time. Words such as *meanwhile* and *during* can be clues that more than one thing is happening at the same time. If there are no clue words, ask yourself what happens first, next, and last to work out a sequence that makes sense.

As you read the article, look for clue words and the order of events.

Dr George Bass was born in England in 1771. He trained and worked as a doctor in the Navy, and then travelled to the new colony of New South Wales in 1795. Over the next couple of years he explored the coastline of south-eastern Australia in a small whale boat. Through his observations, he became convinced that Tasmania (then called Van Diemen's Land) was not joined to the mainland of Australia. In 1798–99 he proved his theory by sailing, with Matthew Flinders, all the way around that island. In 1800 Bass sailed back to England, but then returned to Australia. In 1803 he set sail towards Tahiti. He was never heard from again.



What words or phrases give clues about the sequence of Bass's life?

About how old was George Bass when he proved his theory about Tasmania being an island?

Tip

When you read, look for clue words and phrases that tell when events happen. Also, picture the events in your mind and see if the sequence makes sense.

On
your
own

Read about Cathy Freeman. Look for words and phrases that help you understand the sequence of events in her life.

Cathy Freeman

— Champion runner



by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith

Born in Mackay, Queensland, 16 February 1973, Cathy Freeman ran her first race when she was eight years old. She won her first gold medal at the Commonwealth Games at the age of sixteen in 1990. In that same year, she was awarded the title of Young Australian of the Year. Then, in 1991, she was named Aboriginal Athlete of the Year. In the following year, Freeman travelled to Barcelona, Spain. There, she became the first Aboriginal track athlete to represent Australia in the Olympic Games.

In 1998, Cathy was awarded one of Australia's greatest honours when she was named Australian of the Year. During the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Freeman was given the honour of lighting the Olympic flame at the opening ceremony. She went on to win a gold medal in the 400-metre race. After carrying both the Australian and Aboriginal flags around the track, she said, 'I just want to show I am proud of who I am and where I come from.' She retired from racing in July 2003.



15 September

We watched the opening ceremony on TV at Nick's house. It was FANTASTIC. It just got better and better. But there was still one big secret—who would light the Olympic flame? Even when the torch was brought into the Olympic stadium, still no one knew. Then suddenly there she was—in a silver bodysuit, holding the Olympic torch high. It was Cathy Freeman!

Understanding the text

1 Where were the Olympic Games held in 1992?

2 Why did Cathy Freeman carry two flags around the track after she won the 400-metre race?

3 Which of Cathy Freeman's awards and honours do you find most inspiring? Why?

Developing comprehension skills

4 Complete this timeline. Write a year or an event from Cathy Freeman's life on each line.

Year	Event
1973	
1990 (a)	
_____ (b)	Won first gold medal
1991	
_____	First Indigenous Australian track athlete to represent Australia in the Olympic Games
1998	
2000 (a)	
2000 (b)	
_____	Retired from racing

Use information from the article to answer these questions.

- 5 What year were the Olympic Games held in Barcelona? _____
- 6 In what year did Cathy Freeman start racing? _____
- 7 How old was Cathy Freeman when she retired from racing? _____
- 8 In what year was the diary entry written? _____

Working with words

The words in the box come from both articles in this unit. Write the word from the box that matches each definition.

ceremony coastline flame honour observations represent theory

- 9 to act on behalf of a person or country _____
- 10 red or yellow burning gas _____
- 11 to show someone great respect _____
- 12 a special set of actions to mark an important public event _____
- 13 an idea or explanation of something _____
- 14 things that you notice _____
- 15 the place where land and sea meet _____

Making
the reading
and writing
connection

Writing about a person's life

Find out information about another Australian person's life. It could be somebody famous, or someone you know well. Write about important times in that person's life. Use words and phrases that will help readers to understand the sequence of events.