

Key Ideas and Details

Critical to Reading Comprehension

Resources for the Adult Education Practitioner



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Institute for the Professional Development of Adult Educators

RESOURCES FOR THE ADULT EDUCATION PRACTITIONER

Key Ideas and Details

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Table of Contents

Guiding Questions.....	1
Main Ideas and Details	2
Guidelines for Determining an Author’s Main Idea	4
Signal Words	6
Important Ideas: Summarizing	9
GIST It! (Generating Interactions between Schemata & Text)	10
Question Stems for Teaching Main Ideas and Details.....	12
Lesson Title: Finding the Central Idea and Supporting Details	13
Websites	20
A Few Videos.....	20

Guiding Questions

Think about the following guiding questions as you participate in today's session.
Write down your thoughts and be prepared to share your ideas.

Slide(s)	Guiding Questions	My Thoughts
4	Think about what you want to take-away from this session.	
7	What's the difference between a topic sentence, a key idea, a main idea, and a central idea?	
11	What is a common misunderstanding that students have about determining a main idea?	
13	What are supporting details? What is the difference between a major detail and a minor detail?	
14	How do supporting details connect with the main idea?	
17	Why is it important to teach the concepts of main/central ideas and supporting details?	
22	Identify the 7 steps to unpack a main idea.	
25	Define the different types of signal words.	
37	What was your favorite activity/graphic organizer? Why?	
43	Share the one thing that you found most useful from this session.	

Main Ideas and Details

What are Main Ideas and Details?

Main ideas are the most important central concept or claim that can be expressed visually in writing (often as a thesis or topic sentence) or orally in conversation.

Details are single ideas that illustrate a point, explain a concept, or otherwise support the central idea. Details can be facts, descriptions, examples, quotations, or anecdotes.

How Can the Mastery of Main Ideas and Details Improve Student Learning?

By understanding and utilizing the concepts of main ideas and details, students can make a conscious effort to organize and manage their learning. This can assist them with:

1. **Reading:** Understanding main ideas and details helps students improve reading comprehension, and it can also help them conceptualize the overall schema.
2. **Writing:** Mastery of main ideas and details helps students organize thoughts, so they can support the central idea and illustrate claims.
3. **Memory:** Organizing one's understanding of concepts into main ideas and details makes it easier to encode and then retrieve information at a later date.
4. **Note Taking:** Utilizing main ideas and details when taking notes can help to keep notebooks organized and easy to navigate.

How to Find the Main Idea

Finding the main idea is critical to understanding what you are reading. It helps the details make sense and have relevance, and provides a framework for remembering the content. Try these specific tips to pinpoint the main idea of a passage.

1) IDENTIFY THE TOPIC

Read the passage through completely, and then try to identify the topic. Who or what is the paragraph about? This part is just figuring out a topic like "cause of World War I" or "new hearing devices;" don't worry yet about deciding what argument the passage is making about this topic.

2) SUMMARIZE THE PASSAGE

After reading the passage through thoroughly, summarize it in your own words in **one sentence**. Pretend you have just ten to twelve words to tell someone what the passage is about - what would you say?

3) LOOK AT THE FIRST AND LAST SENTENCES OF THE PASSAGE

Authors often put the main idea in or near either the first or last sentence of the paragraph or article, so isolate those sentences to see if they make sense as the overarching theme of the passage. Be careful: sometimes the author will use words such as: like, however, in contrast, nevertheless, etc. that indicate that the second sentence is actually the main idea. If you see one of these words that negate or qualify the first sentence, that is a clue that the second sentence is the main idea.

4) LOOK FOR REPETITION OF IDEAS

If you read through a paragraph and you have no idea how to summarize it because there is so much information, start looking for repeated words, phrases, or related ideas. Read the following paragraph:

A new hearing device uses a magnet to hold the detachable sound-processing portion in place. Like other aids, it converts sound into vibrations, but it is unique in that it can transmit the vibrations directly to the magnet and then to the inner ear. This produces a clearer sound. The new device will not help all hearing-impaired people - only those with a hearing loss caused by infection or some other problem in the middle ear. It will probably help no more than 20 percent of all people with hearing problems. Those people who have persistent ear infections, however, should find relief and restored hearing with the new device.

What does this paragraph consistently talk about? A new hearing device. What is it trying to convey? A new hearing device is now available for some, but not all, hearing-impaired people. That's the main idea!

Avoid Main Idea Mistakes

Choosing a main idea from a set of answer choices is different than composing a main idea on your own. Writers of multiple choice tests are often tricky and will give you distractor questions that sound much like the real answer. By reading the passage through thoroughly, using your skills, and identifying the main idea on your own, though, you can avoid making these three common mistakes - 1) selecting an answer that is too narrow in scope; 2) selecting an answer that is too broad; 3) or selecting an answer that is complex but contrary to the main idea.

Summary

Finding the main idea can be challenging, but if you use the tools above and practice, you will be well on your way to the score you want on the verbal or reading sections of standardized texts.

Guidelines for Determining an Author's Main Idea

1. IDENTIFY THE TOPIC OF A PIECE

To find clues to topic:

- a) Look at the title.
- b) Look at the first and last paragraph—the topic is usually named.
- c) Ask yourself: What is discussed throughout the whole selection? What subject spreads across the whole text?
- d) Look at captions, pictures, words in bold, headings, and so forth for clues to topic. What do all of these have in common?
- e) Remind yourself: The topic must include all the major details and events from the selection. *Caution:* Not every detail has something to do with the topic. The topic is the common element or connection between major details.
- f) What do all major details share in common?

Check Yourself: It's Not the True Topic if...

- a) It's too general or too big. (Topic statement suggests or could include many ideas not stated in the text.)
- b) It's off the mark, totally missing the point.
- c) It only captures one detail, rather than all of the key details.
- d) It captures only some of the details, for example, maybe you didn't think about the ending.

Questions to Check Yourself:

- a) Does the topic I've identified give an accurate picture of what the whole selection is about?
- b) Was I as specific as possible?
- c) After naming the topic, can I now specifically picture in my mind what happened or was communicated in the text? or might I picture something different that also fits my topic statement? If so, how can I change my topic statement to correct the problem?

2. IDENTIFY ALL DETAILS/MAJOR EVENTS

Authors often plant important ideas in:

- a) Details that reflect or refer to the title.
- b) Details at the beginning of a text.
- c) Details at the end.
- d) Surprises, revelations, whenever your expectations are not met.
- e) Repetition.
- f) Lots of attention given to a detail, for instance, long explanation or description.
- g) Subheads and italicized text.
- h) Changes in character, tone, mood, setting, plot twists.
- i) A question near the beginning or the end.

Check Yourself: It's Not a Key Detail if...

- a) It's interesting, but it doesn't develop the topic/lead to the central focus.
- b) It reminds us of something and is even personally important, but if you were to remove it from the piece, the piece wouldn't lose any significant meaning or impact.

Questions to Check Yourself:

- a) Are all the details related to the topic?
- b) How do the key details relate to each other?
- c) What pattern do they make?
- d) What point do they repeat or add up to?

3. IDENTIFY THE CENTRAL FOCUS (the main idea or point the author makes about the topic):

- a) The statement of central focus you name must make a point about the topic and cover the whole selection.
- b) Ask yourself: Is the central focus directly stated? If not, it must be inferred.
- c) Which details help me decide on the central focus? Why are these details important?
- d) The central focus considers how the details relate to one another or lead to one another (what caused or led to what).
- e) The central focus must consider the ending and how the details or events led to this final conclusion.

Check Yourself: It's Not the Central Focus Statement if...

- a) It is so literal and specific it doesn't allow the reader to apply the main idea to his/her own life.
- b) It is too general—more like a topic statement than a main idea.
- c) It is true but misses the point of the text. It wasn't what the author was talking about.
- d) It misses the point.
- e) It only fits one detail or event, not the whole text.
- f) It does not incorporate all details.
- g) It doesn't fit ending or final situation.

Questions to Check Yourself:

- a) What point do the key details repeat and add up to?
- b) Is the central focus a statement about the topic?
- c) Is it something useful that can help you to think or act in the world?
- d) Also consider: Do you agree with the statement as applied to life? Why or why not?

Retrieved from the World Wide Web at:

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/reading/bestpractices/comprehension/authorsmainidea.pdf>

Signal Words

1. Continuation Signals (Warning—there are more ideas to come.)

and	also	another
again	and finally	first of all
a final reason	furthermore	in addition
last of all	likewise	more
moreover	next one	reason
other	secondly	similarly
too	with	

2. Change-of-Direction Signals (Watch out—we're doubling back.)

although	but	conversely
despite	different from	even though
however	in contrast	instead of
in spite of	nevertheless	otherwise
the opposite	on the contrary	on the other hand
rather	still	yet
while	though	

3. Sequence Signals (There is an order to these ideas.)

first,	second,	third	A, B, C
in the first place	for one thing	then	next
before	now	after	while
into (far into the night)	until	last	o'clock
during	since	always	
on time	later	earlier	

4. Time Signals (When is it happening?)

when	immediately	now
lately	already	little by little
at the same time	final	after awhile
once	during	

5. Illustration Signals (Here's what that principle means in reality.)

for example	specifically
for instance	to illustrate
such as	much like
in the same way	as similar to

6. Emphasis Signals (This is important.)

a major development	it all boils down to
a significant factor	most of all
a primary concern	most noteworthy
a key feature	more than anything else

a major event	of course
a vital force	pay particular attention to
a central issue	remember that
a distinctive quality	should be noted
above all	the most substantial issue
by the way	the main value
especially important	the basic concept
especially relevant	the crux of the matter
especially valuable	the chief outcome
important to note	the principle item

7. Cause, Condition, or Result Signals (Condition or modification is coming up.)

because	if	of
for	from	so
while	then	but
that	until	since
as	whether	in order that
so that	therefore	unless
yet	thus	due to
resulting from	consequently	without

8. Spatial Signals (This answers the “where” question.)

between	below	about	left	alongside
here	outside	around	close to	far
right	over	away	side	near
near	in	into	beside	
middle	next to	beyond	north	
east	on	opposite	over	
south	there	inside	in front of	
under	these	out	behind	
across	this	adjacent	above	
toward	west	by	upon	

9. Comparison-Contrast Signals (We will now compare idea A with idea B.)

and	or	also
too	best	most
either	less	less than
more	than	same
better	while	though
even	then	half
much as	like	analogous to
but	different from	still
yet	however	although
opposite	rather	

10. Conclusion Signals (This ends the discussion and may have special importance.)
as a result consequently finally
from this we see in conclusion in summary
hence last of all therefore

11. Fuzz Signals (The idea is not exact, or the author is not positive and wishes to qualify a statement.)

almost	if	looks
maybe	could	some
except	should	alleged
nearly	might	reputed
seems like	was reported	purported
sort of	probably	like

12. Non-word Emphasis Signals

exclamation point (!)

underline

italics

bold type

subheads, like The Conclusion

indentation of paragraph

graphic illustrations

numbered points (1, 2, 3)

very short sentence: Stop war.

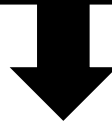
“quotation marks”

Retrieved from the World Wide Web at:

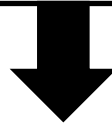
https://lincs.ed.gov/readingprofiles/PF_Signal_Words.htm. Original document by Fry, E. B., Kress, J. E., & Fountoukidis, D.L. (1993). The reading teacher’s book of lists, 3rd edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp.185-187.

Important Ideas: Summarizing

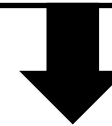
Important Idea



Important Idea



Important Idea



Summary Sentence (Use 15 words or less)

GIST It! (Generating Interactions between Schemata & Text)

Complete the following chart and then write a summary using the information.

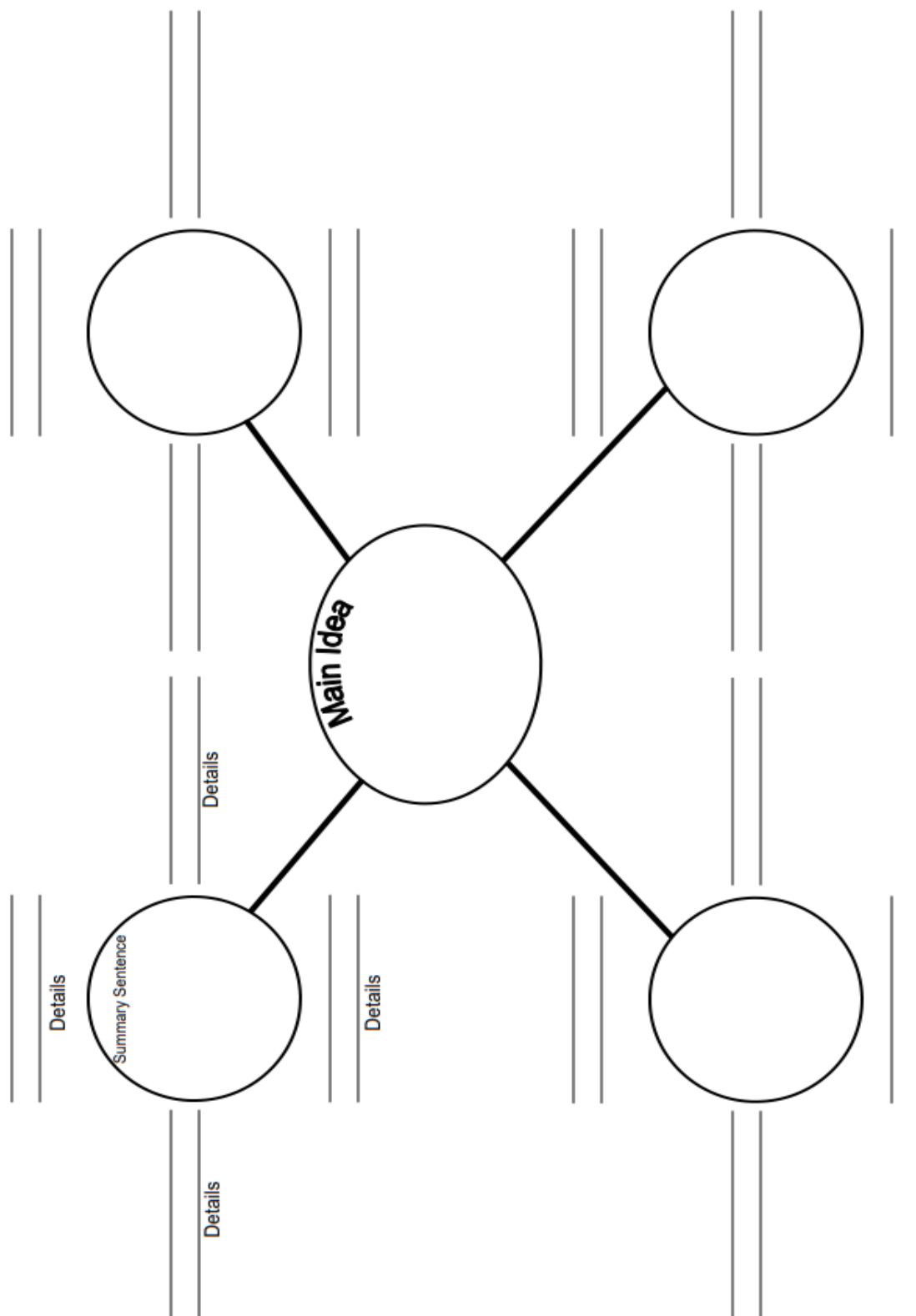
Name of Text _____

Complete the following chart:

Questions	Answer
Who?	
What?	
When?	
Where?	
Why?	
How?	

Write a GIST statement of 20 words or less that summarizes the text using the information from your chart.

Find the Main Idea



Question Stems for Teaching Main Ideas and Details

1. Which sentence best (describes, states, reflects) the main idea of the article (story)?
2. What is the main idea of this article (passage, story, poem)?
3. What does the article show about _____?
4. What should the reader hope to understand about _____ after reading this article?
5. Which sentence best summarizes what happens in the story?
6. What is (character's name) main goal in life?
7. Which sentence best characterizes (character's name) attitude toward _____?
8. According to the author, which word best describes _____?
9. What is another good title for this passage about _____?
10. Explain why the author titles the selection _____.

Questions to Ask About Supporting Details

1. Are they relevant to the topic sentence?
2. Are they clearly stated?
3. Are there enough details for each paragraph?
4. Are the supporting details repetitious?
5. Are the supporting details expressed with sophisticated thought processes (cause/effect, compare/contrast)?
6. Are the supporting details varied?

Module: Reading

Lesson Title: Finding the Central Idea and Supporting Details

Objectives and Standards

Students will:

- Determine the central idea of a text
- Identify the key supporting details
- Understand how key details support the development of central ideas

Florida Adult Basic Education Reading Standards	Level Expectation
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development, summarize the key supporting details and ideas. (Apply this standard to texts of appropriate complexity as outlined by Standard 10.) (CCR.RE.ABE.2)	NRS Level 4 - Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

Materials

- Handout A: Finding the Central Idea
- Handout B: Non-Fiction Text Structures
- Handout C: Building the Central Idea (for beginning level students)
- Sample nonfiction text – a copy of each student to use (one recommended site is **Newsela** (<https://newsela.com/>) which provides articles at different readability levels)

Instructional Plan

Overview

When students are asked to find the central or main idea of a reading, they often recite the first or last sentence of a paragraph. Mastery of this standard involves two key skills: the ability to determine central ideas and to objectively summarize text. The purpose of this lesson is to provide students with a structure that they can use to identify the key details of a reading passage and how to determine the central idea.

Process

Prior to the lesson, access two nonfiction texts for students to use that are of interest to them. You may wish to use an article from one of your textbooks or use a website to access nonfiction articles.

Begin the lesson by writing the phrase **central idea** on the board. Have students brainstorm what a central idea is. Next, ask students how they determine a central idea in a text that they are reading. Share with students that the central idea of a text tells you what that text is mostly about. However, in a science text, the central ideas

are sometimes conclusions the author draws. When an author draws a conclusion, he or she makes a general statement based on evidence and observations.

You may wish to share examples of this with students, such as the following:

Example: if an author noticed that people who eat mostly green vegetables are healthier than people who eat mostly junk food, the author may draw the conclusion that eating green vegetables is better for your health than eating junk food. This would be the central idea of the reading. Key details would assist the reader in drawing this conclusion or central idea.

Provide students with a sample nonfiction article and **Handout A: Determining Central Ideas**. One example of a nonfiction to use with this lesson would be the article on the melting of glaciers from *Newsela* at: <https://newsela.com/articles/antarctic-ice/id/3994/> or another science article of interest to the class. The article “Antarctic glaciers melt is happening more rapidly than was first believed” is written at the 3.0, 5.0, 7.0, 8.0 and high school grade levels. If teaching a multi-level classroom, the same topic can be shared through the same article being written at different levels. This provides a venue where a reading strategy can be taught and then applied to different levels of readers.

To teach the strategy, the following is the step-by-step process:

- Have students read the text. After they have completed their reading, discuss that they will take a closer look at the text to determine the central idea and key details.
- First, have the students take a look at the text features of the article (headings, sub-headings, italic and bold-type words, pictures, diagrams, labels, captions, etc.). Have students copy them down on the graphic organizer. Ask students what hints they give about the central idea.
- Next, have students identify the author’s purpose in writing the text (entertain, persuade, inform, explain). Have students note the purpose and orally share their reasoning.
- Have students look at the organization or structure of the text. Discuss that in nonfiction articles, text structure refers to how an author organizes the information. Review the common text structures. You may wish to share with students a simple chart on text structures: Handout C: Non-Fiction Text Structures.
- After students have identified the text structure, have them read through the article again and circle or underline the key words or ideas in the text. After they have circled or underlined the ideas, have them determine what they feel are the three most important points being made in the text. Have students write these three ideas in the organizer. Students do not need to write their ideas as complete sentences.
- Share with students that they have all the information they need to determine the central idea of what they have read. Using the three main

points that they identified, have students craft one complete, succinct sentence.

- Have students share their final sentence with the class. Debrief by discussing the similarities and differences between the sentences. Make sure that students are using their own words and are providing objective central ideas, not their personal opinions.

Sample Debriefing Questions

- How did identifying key details assist you in determining the central idea?
- In looking at your central idea, did you include the most important key details?
- Did you write the central idea in your own words?
- Would someone who has never read the complete text clearly understand the central idea and key details from reading your chart?

Modifications for Different Levels

At a lower complexity level, teach the strategy by discussing how determining the central idea is like building a table. The legs of the table are the key details that support the top of the table or the main or central part. Provide students with a copy of **Handout C: Building the Central Idea** and a text written at their readability level.

At this level, you may wish to verbally ask students questions and have them answer orally rather than in writing. Have students identify key words or details from the passage. Show students how to circle the key words and details. Have students identify their top three words/ideas and write these words or details in a graphic organizer. Model for students how to put these words/details into a sentence. After modeling the strategy for students, have them work together in small groups to complete the activity with a different text.

At a more complex level, provide more complex nonfiction text where the central idea is not specifically stated, but rather must be inferred.

Assessments/Extensions

As an extension of this lesson, have students independently complete the **Determining Central Ideas** graphic organizer when reading science or social studies text. Use this activity as a basis for students to summarize the main ideas of nonfiction texts that they have read.

Retrieved from Florida IPDAE

http://www.floridaipdae.org/dfiles/resources/lessons/ABE/Reading_Lesson_Plans/Reading_Finding_the_Central_Idea_and_Supporting_Details.pdf

Handout A: Determining Central Ideas

Directions: Complete the following chart to determine the central (main) idea of the text.

Copy down the title, headings, sub-headings, bold and italicized words in the document:

What is the **PURPOSE** of the text?

How is the text **STRUCTURED**?



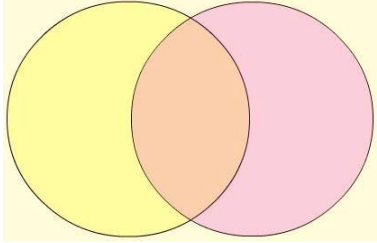
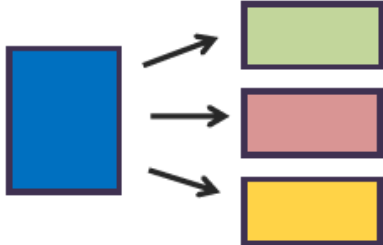
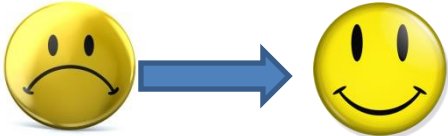
What are the three **MOST** important points being made in the text?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

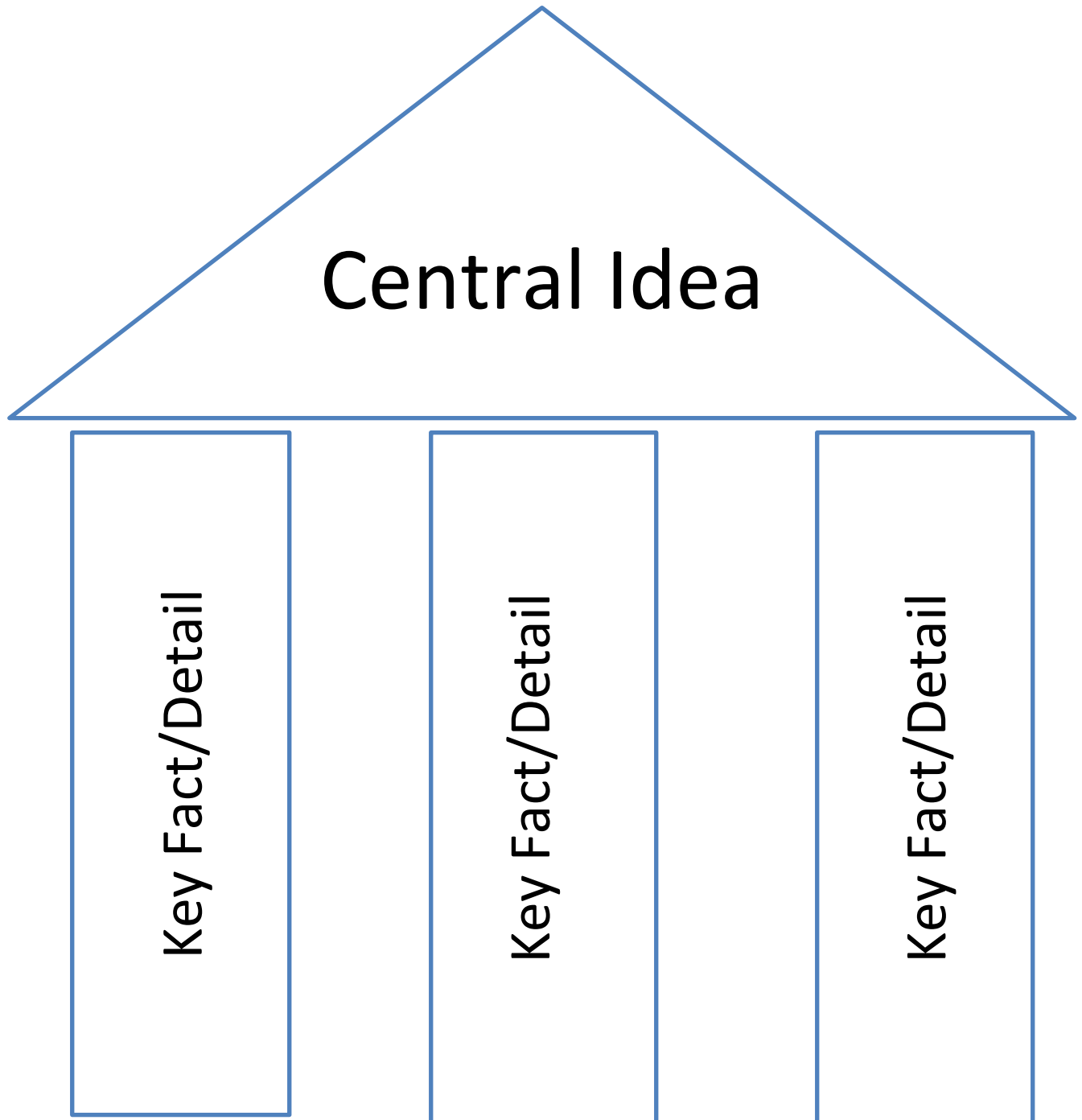
So ...

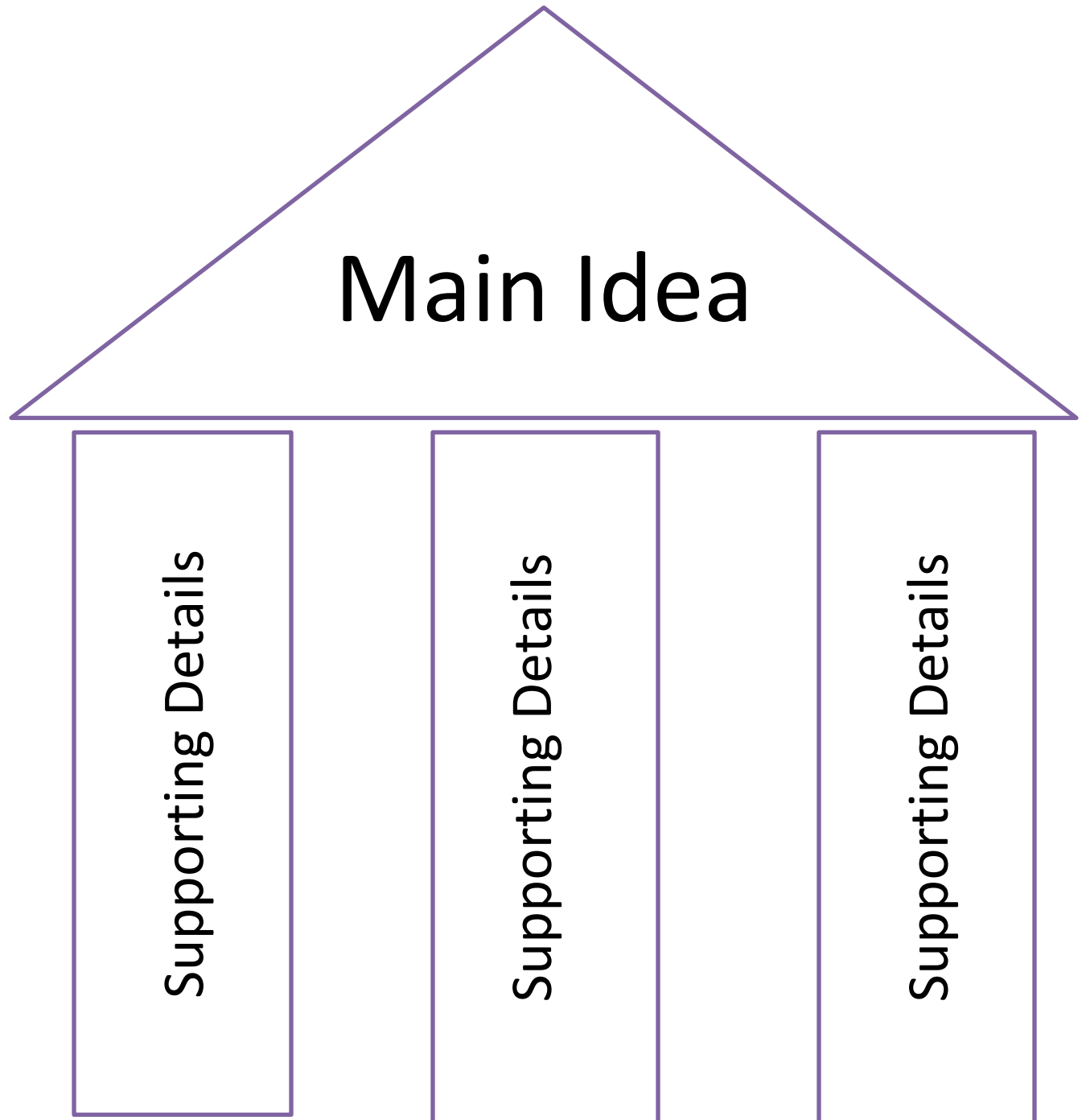
What is the **CENTRAL** idea of the text? (Write your three main points into one complete, concise sentence.)

Handout B: Non-Fiction Text Structures

Text Structure	Signal Words	Visual
Description	for example, for instance, characteristics include, specifically, in addition	
Sequence and Order	before, in the beginning, to start, first, next, during, after, then, finally, last, in the middle, in the end	
Compare and Contrast	similar, alike, same, just like, both, different, unlike, in contrast, on the other hand	
Cause and Effect	since, because, if due, to cause, as a result of, so, then, leads to, consequently	
Problem and Solution	problem, issue, cause, since, consequently, therefore, as a result, because of, leads to, due to, solve, so, then	

Handout C: Building the Central Idea





Websites

Aspen Institute. Materials for teaching close reading skills that are tied to standards. This site also provides leadership materials. <http://www.aspendri.org/portal/Home>

e-Reading. Main Ideas and Details. <https://www.ereadingworksheets.com/free-reading-worksheets/reading-comprehension-worksheets/main-idea-worksheets/>

Newsela. A site with nonfiction articles available in 4-5 different Lexile Levels with many of them providing a quiz that is aligned to a specific anchor standard. It is necessary to sign up for the free account to see the different level of articles. <https://newsela.com/>

NSW Centre for Effective Reading. Comprehension: Main Idea https://cer.schools.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/doe/sws/schools/c/cer/localcontent/main_idea.pdf

ReadWorks. Main Idea/Details Worksheets. The following url provides a sample of the type of materials available from this site by inserting keywords. https://www.readworks.org/rw/articles-teach-main-idea#ls0:1,33/q:/g:/t:/s:/k:33/cid:/pt:A/features:/staff_picks:/sel:/

Reading Skills for Today's Adults. This site provides original texts written by instructors for Marshall Adult Education. Articles are written at a 0.7 to 8.9 GE. http://resources.marshalladulthoodeducation.org/reading_skills_home.htm

Super Science. Articles for Science Main Idea <https://superscience.scholastic.com/pages/text-sets/skill-sets/main-idea.html>

Thought Co. Find the Main Idea Worksheets. Kelly Roell. Worksheets and answer keys for use in the classroom. <https://www.thoughtco.com/find-the-main-idea-worksheets-3211754>

A Few Videos

How to Find the Main Idea and Details <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42SJTk2XSi4>

The Main Idea. Learning Upgrade. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W24RyhtX1qA&feature=youtu.be>

Florida IPDAE. <http://www.floridaipdae.org/>

