
GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING AN AUTHOR'S MAIN IDEA

I developed the following set of guidelines with a group of seventh graders over several weeks. The process of creating such a list of problem-solving strategies is incredibly effective, so while you should use this example to guide your thinking, you should also invite students to collaborate on one of their own.

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 remind 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 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. 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?
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