Finding Main Ideas

Students are often told to study by picking out main ideas from readings. For many students, however, textbooks can seem so fact-filled that every idea looks like a main idea. This is one reason that students may sometimes end up with more than half a page of a textbook highlighted when they only meant to make a note of important ideas. How can you distinguish facts or ideas that are essential to remember from those that aren't? The following sections on finding paragraph ideas, finding section ideas, unifying themes, using a notebook, and chapter questions offer you helpful strategies to understand the main purpose of a text. In the left column of the tables, you'll find a brief reading passage and in the right column, you'll find commentary to help you apply the strategy for finding the main idea in the passage.

Finding Paragraph Ideas

Not everything in a paragraph is important. Generally, the most important part of any paragraph is the topic sentence. This is usually the first (or sometimes the last) sentence of a paragraph, and it should give you an idea of what the entire paragraph is about. Sometimes the main idea is unstated and you infer what the paragraph is about by asking, "what do all these details talk about?" When you're reading the following examples and your own texts, note what material relates specifically back to the paragraph idea, and what is only used as example, illustration, or background.

Source Paragraph	Idea
"Another factor to consider in measuring variables is the effective range of the scale. If we are interested in weight changes in people, a normal bathroom scale will usually have sufficient range because it typically can weigh objects between 0 and 300 pounds. But weighing very large or very small objects (like elephants or mice) would require a different scale" (Graziano & Raulin, 1997, p.87).	The effective range of a scale is an important factor for accurately measuring variables. (mice vs. elephants) *Here, the examples using a bathroom scale to measure elephants and mice all illustrate the main point but are not important ideas in themselves. However, because of the visual story that the two words mice and elephants elicit (picture them on the scale) making note of them may be helpful.*
"The title slide should focus on what you are going to talk about. It should be clear and aesthetically pleasing. Beyond your own appearance, it may be the first impression you make on your audience. In addition to the title itself, this slide should contain your name and the name of the institution or agency you represent (if you do)" (Davis, 2005, p. 181).	What goes on a title slide. *Note how details of the features of the title slide support the idea that the slide is important, but no one sentence states the main idea.*

Finding Section Ideas

Textbooks typically divide chapters into smaller paragraph groups, and these groups are often given headings. The ideas in the section should relate back to that section heading. You can use these headings to get a better idea of what the textbook authors perceive as the major points of the section. Focus your attention on how each of the paragraphs relates to this section heading.

Source Heading	Idea
"Transitions in a Slide Presentation" (Davis, 2005, p. 183)	The key material in the section will relate to the use of transitions in a slide presentation. *Look for a definition of transitions, why they're important, and some different strategies for creating them.*
"Learning from Graphs, Tables, and Diagrams" (McWhorter, 2006, p. 291)	The key material that follows will relate to interpreting three methods of visual presentation (likely in the same order they appear in the heading). *Look for the similarities and the key differences between these three ways of representing information and when you'd choose one over the other.*

Unifying Themes

Textbook chapter titles give a hint as to what the section will be about. All the ideas in the chapter should relate back to this topic in some way. Use this theme to structure your notes. Write a quick note about how each idea in the chapter relates back to the central theme of the chapter.

Source Title	Idea
"Correlational and differential methods of research" (Graziano & Raulin, p.154)	The important concepts in the chapter will focus on two types of research methods. When the section on correlational research ends, the chapter will move on to differential research. To engage in the reading, ask yourself questions such as "are these the only kinds of research methods, or a subset of another category?"
"Structuring paragraphs" (Hult et al., 2005)	Important ideas will relate directly to organization of paragraphs. *Some helpful questions here include "are there categories of strategies for organizing paragraphs? How many? Can I draw a map of them?"*

Using a Notebook

For dense material such as a textbook, it can be beneficial to have your own notebook to complement the text. Use the
notebook to rewrite important definitions and facts in your own words. Impose a limit on your writing-- for example, one sentence (of reasonable length!) or bullet point in the notebook for every paragraph in the text, or less, in order to avoid reproducing the entire textbook. Doing this, you'll force yourself to rethink the ideas in the text and study them in your notebook in compacted form. This strategy will also help you avoid plagiarism!

Source Paragraph	Note
"A simple handout can enhance the poster presentation. A business card or other form with the author's name, addresses, and phone numbers along with an abstract or other condensed facsimile of the poster, a list of pertinent references, an important method, or a table or figure may prove valuable to the viewers after they leave the meeting. Some presenters supply a small but readable, printout of the entire poster" (Davis, 2005, p. 202).	Handouts should be given, whether they are small and simple or a condensed version of the main points. *Notice here how the examples of handouts—business card, abstract, reference list, etc.-- support the main idea, but are not main ideas in themselves.*
"Factual data include any information presented as representing objective reality. Factual data most often consist of measurable, or quantitative, evidence such as distances amounts, and ratios. But factual data can include historical events, long-standing assessments, and other widely attested observations about the world. Objectivity makes factual data difficult to refute. Therefore, in most academic disciplines, factual data are considered to be the most powerful form of evidence you can present" (Hult et al., 2005, p. 135).	Factual data (measured values or agreed-upon observations) are the best sort of data because they are objective. *The main point is that factual data are the most effective kind of evidence; examples of data types or sources are included to clarify what is meant by factual.*

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Chapter Questions

Many textbooks include a list of questions at the end of chapters or sub-chapters. Use these to help focus your reading and pick up on some of the important lines of thought in the reading. Rewrite the question and answer it in your notebook. For your own notes, think of questions using the definitions of concepts you read in the chapter and answer them in your own words.

Source Paragraph	Question
"You should not assume that your lecture notes are accurate and complete or that simply by taking notes you have learned the information the notes record. Two more steps are necessary: (1) you must edit your notes, making them thorough and accurate, and (2) you need to develop and use a system for study and review" (McWhorter, 2006, p. 261).	What are the two essential steps after taking notes and why? *Answer: After taking notes, it's important to edit your notes for accuracy and figure out how to organize them for review so that you actually learn the information.*

Source Paragraph	Question
"First, think about your audience. They are most important to the interpretation and understanding of your scientific message. However hard you try to send a clear message, the completed communication rests with them. You can't control an audience entirely, but since you are initiating the communication effort, you are responsible for presenting information in a way that is easily interpreted and understood" (Davis, 2005, p. 7).	Who is important to the interpretation of my writing, and why do I need to consider them? *Answer: It is important to know who your audience is in order to write a scientific message that is understandable and can be appropriately interpreted.*

References

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Hult, C. A., Huckin, T. N., Burgoyne, D. A., & Gooding, R. (2005). *The new century handbook.* Toronto: Pearson.

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