

Target Reading Skill: Identify the Main Idea

Your science book is organized in topic clusters and in paragraphs. The most important idea the author tells you about a topic is called the **main idea**. Identifying the main idea of a paragraph or a topic is a key step in understanding the information you read. Here's how you can identify the main idea:

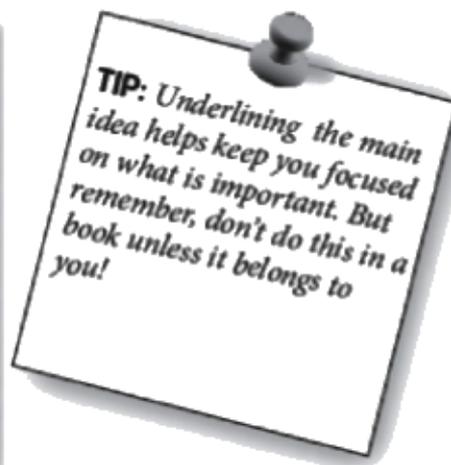
- **Identify the topic** Preview the paragraphs or paragraphs. The section title and headings usually provide the clues.
- **Identify the main idea** Ask yourself, "What is the main point the author is making?" That is the main idea.

A Stated Main Idea

The main idea can either be stated or unstated. A stated main idea is one that is expressed in a sentence. Often it is in the first sentence. In your science book it is often in bold face type.

Wave Frequency

Wave frequency is the number of complete waves that pass a given point in a certain amount of time. For example, if you make waves on a rope so that one wave passes by every second, the frequency is 1 wave per second. How can you increase the frequency? Simply move your hand up and down more quickly. To decrease the frequency, move your hand up and down more slowly.



TRY THIS

1. Underline the main idea in this passage.

Volcanic Islands

A new island can form when a volcano beneath the ocean erupts. Lava from the volcano pushes its way above the water's surface and forms a new patch of land called a volcanic island. It is extremely hot when it first forms, but it soon cools down.

In the beginning, there is nothing on the island but rock. Nothing there is alive. Soon birds fly in. Seeds travel in on the wind or are carried on the bodies of birds. Seeds develop into the island's first plants. Strong winds may help flying insects reach the island. Small land-dwelling animals can drift in on floating objects. Like the first human travelers to a new region, the island's newcomers are often called pioneers.

Target Reading Skill: Identify the Main Idea, Cont.

Identify the Main Idea *(continued)*

An Unstated Main Idea

Sometimes the main idea is unstated. That means the idea is not specifically expressed. Look at the second paragraph on the previous page. Its main idea is not specifically stated, so you must use the topic of the paragraph and details to help you find it.

Topic: How living things arrive on an island

Main idea: Living things reach an island by air or by water.

TRY THIS

Read the paragraph below. Identify the topic and the main idea.

2.

Thunder

The process of creating thunder starts when warm, moist air rises rapidly, and then cools at higher levels, forming clouds called thunderheads. Areas of positive and negative electrical charges build up in the clouds. Electrical charges jump from one part of the cloud to another, or from a cloud to the ground. That's when you see lightning. In the blink of an eye, lightning heats up the air near it to more than 25,000°C! Then, bam! The heated air expands, making a sound like an explosion.

Topic:

Main Idea:

3.

Hands-on Task: Building an Optical Instrument

You see reflections all the time — in shiny surfaces, windows, and mirrors. A camera can capture reflections on film. A telescope can capture reflected light with a curved mirror. Cameras and telescopes are optical instruments, devices that control light with mirrors or lenses. In this investigation you will design and build your own optical instrument.

Topic:

Main Idea:
