

## Meet the Nonfiction Main Idea Challenge

### What's the challenge?

Students often give the topic or a fact as the main idea when they have read nonfiction.

What students need to do to meet the **MAIN IDEA** requirement for nonfiction on NWEA:

- identify a statement or title best representing the main idea of the passage
- rephrases the main idea in the form of a short sentence or phrase
- deletes sentences that do not support the main idea
- identifies sentences that support the main idea
- Identifies the main idea

Students demonstrate their ability to determine the main idea in these ways at different levels of complexity—the strategy and skills are the same, it is the complexity of the text that varies.

### Strategy to develop this competence: Progressively

Begin to guide a student who has difficulty with a reading skill with a shorter and less complex text to master the strategy, then move to more complex texts after the student learns the strategy.

The guides and graphic organizers on the following pages can help students see how to figure out the main idea and can be used in guided reading or collaborative reading. A student who has developed the competence can apply it independently with text at an appropriate reading level.

## Readers use strategies to figure out the main idea of a nonfiction passage.

CCSSR. Determine **central ideas or themes** of a text and analyze their development; **summarize** the key supporting details and ideas.

What is a main idea of a nonfiction text?

It is a big idea that the writer wants me to understand about the topic of the text—an idea is a way of thinking about a topic.

How do you figure it out?

I answer it? What strategy and skills will I use?

1. First, I will make sure I know what the topic is.

But I will make sure I know that the topic is not the idea. The topic is what the writer is going to give me an idea to think about. For example, in an article about birds, the topic is birds, but the main idea would be a way of thinking about birds. The example at the bottom of this page shows what this means.

2. Then I will re-read the passage to figure out what the writer is explaining. I will look at each part and ask myself: What idea is the writer helping me to understand by telling me this information? So I will take time to think about the whole passage. I might make a list of important facts.

**Topic:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Important facts I find:**

---

---

---

Then I will look at the ideas inside the passage and draw a conclusion about what the BIG idea is, the idea that the writer has explained with the different ideas and facts.

*This is an example of figuring out the topic, important facts, and main idea of an article about birds.*

**Topic: Birds**

**Important facts I find in the text.**

- A bird's feet shows how the bird moves.
- Birds wings are different shapes that they use to fly in different ways.
- Birds have different kinds of beaks to help them get food.

**Main Idea: Each part of a bird helps it live.**

*You can see the text on the next page.*



## BIRDS

**INTRODUCTION:** When you look at a bird, you can read it! You can make inferences. You can use the parts you see to infer how the bird uses that part to live.

**FEET** When you look at a bird's feet, you can tell a lot about how it lives. For example, if it has webbed feet, you know that it swims. Webbed feet would help it paddle in the water. Ducks have webbed feet. So do swans. So do penguins! Yes, penguins are birds, even though they look so different. Other birds have feet that are claws, and they use those to sit in trees. They spend most of their time in trees, not in water. Some birds have toes that spread out and have thick coverings. Those are birds that walk a lot on land, like the ostrich. In fact, the ostrich never flies.

**WINGS** You can tell how a bird flies from the shape of its wing. If the bird has wide long wings that spread out so they look like a cape when they fly, those birds probably are soaring birds. Soaring means they float on the air. They do flap their wings to get into the air, but when they are in the air they can glide on those big wings. If a bird has long thin wings, those birds probably are fast flyers. They will flap their wings a lot to get into the air and keep flapping to keep flying. The ostrich does not fly, but it does have wings. But they are small wings. It does not use them to fly, but it has wings because it is a bird.

**BEAKS** When you look at a bird's beak, you can tell how it gets food. If the bird has a flat wide beak, it uses it to strain water. The bird will scoop up some plants and small fish or snails along with some water. Then it will close its beak and strain the water out so what is left is food it will eat. If you see a bird with a short beak shaped like a triangle then you probably are looking at a bird that eats seeds. It needs a strong beak to crack the seeds. Birds that have long thin beaks that look a little like straws with a pointed end are birds that get their food from plants. They put their beak into the plant to get nectar, which is a sweet part of some plants.

**CONCLUSION** There are many kinds of birds and there is much more you can learn about how they survive. Each kind is different because those differences help it get food, move, and stay alive. When you look at each bird you can tell a lot about how it lives by looking at its parts.

CCSSR2. Determine the main idea of a nonfiction text.

Which of these is a better main idea for this passage?

Birds have feet, wings, and beaks.

Each part of a bird helps it live.

Choose one and explain why you chose it.

## Tool to infer the main idea when you read nonfiction.

CCSSR2. Determine central ideas of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

*What I read:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Topic:* \_\_\_\_\_

*The topic is not the title. It is the subject of the passage.*

*It is not the main idea, either. You figure out the main idea by thinking about what the writer wants you to learn from the passage.*

*After you read, think about it: what is the main idea? What did the writer want me to understand because I read it? Put the main idea in the big box and information that supports it in the smaller boxes. You can write words and draw pictures to show what you think.*

Write the main idea here. It should be a BIG idea you learn from the passage you read.

*Put important facts from the passage in the boxes. The facts should support the main idea.*

Check your main idea.

It should be a good way to tell what the writer wants you to learn from the different facts in the passage.

It should be so important that it could be a new title for the passage.

## A Way to Analyze Paragraphs to Figure Out the Main Idea of a Nonfiction Text

CCSSR2. Determine central ideas of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

After you read each paragraph, list the main idea you learned from each paragraph.  
*We put 7 rows. If you need more rows for more paragraphs, you can add another page.*


***What do you think is the main idea of the passage? Use your list to figure it out. Write it as a sentence.***

---

---

## Nonfiction Main Idea Exerciser

CCSSR2. Determine central ideas of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

You can take these steps after you read nonfiction so you learn more about the topic and learn more about how to read nonfiction.

### EXPLAIN WHAT YOU LEARNED

1. Underline the most important information in each paragraph.
2. Write a short summary that tells what the passage explains. Include only the most important information.
3. Figure out what the main idea is—the idea that the writer wants you to think about animals because you read the passage.

*Start your summary this way:*

The main idea of the passage is \_\_\_\_\_.

Here is information that helps you understand that idea.

Then finish the summary. Include the information that helps explain the main idea.

## Learning about Animals

CCSSR2. Determine central ideas of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Animals are wonderful. If you look closely at how they live you will find surprises. Watching animals is a job that scientists called making observations. They have learned a lot about animals.

Scientists learned about tiny animals. They have studied insects. They found that insects have tools. They use those tools to live. They learned about the sawfly. This is just one animal they have studied.

Imagine what the sawfly is like. It is a fly but not like many others. They call it the sawfly because it has a kind of saw. It's not a real saw. But it looks like one. And it works like one. It is part of the sawfly. The sawfly uses the saw to make places where the eggs will be safe. It saws at plants. So it makes a place where the eggs can go.

Some insects have tools that work just like scissors. The poppy-bee is one of them. It is a bee that makes its home in wood. This bee has a drilling tool, too. It uses the tool to dig into old wood.

Scientists observe birds, too. They have seen birds use their bills to get what they need. Some birds use their bills to cut into wood. They have sharp bills. They can cut a hole in a tree. They drill the hole to get inside the tree where insects live. Then they eat them.

Every animal is amazing. Even dogs and cats can surprise you. The more you look at animals the more you will learn. Nature is full of surprises. Every part of every animal has a purpose. Scientists learn more about them ever day.

### EXPLAIN WHAT YOU LEARNED

1. Underline the most important information in each paragraph.
2. Write a short summary that tells what the passage explains. Include only the most important information.
3. Figure out what the main idea is—the idea that the writer wants you to think about animals because you read the passage.

*Start your summary this way:*

The main idea of the passage is \_\_\_\_\_.

Here is information that helps you understand that idea.

*Then finish the summary. Include the information that supports the main idea.*

## **I can infer the main idea of a history.**

CCSS Anchor Standard 1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS Anchor Standard 2. Determine central ideas of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. Use standard specific to your grade level.

**What is the history about?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What was a challenge that people faced?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What did people do to meet that challenge?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What happened because the people did that?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What is the main idea? What is the big idea the writer wants me to understand from reading the history.**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What information is important to understanding this idea?**





## Reversing the Chicago River

CCSSR2. Determine **central ideas** of a text and analyze their development; **summarize** the key supporting details and ideas.

In 1900, Chicago's government did something very bold. They changed the direction of the Chicago River. Until 1900, the river flowed into the lake. Then Chicago leaders changed it.

Chicago started as a small town. But it grew to a great city. In 1890, there were 1 million people living here. By 1900, just ten years later, there were 600,000 more people here. The river was polluted. Factories dumped trash into it. Sewers drained into it. Because the river flowed into the lake, people were getting sick. The lake was getting polluted. People got their drinking water from it.

Chicago has a great history of people who figured out ways to solve problems so the city could grow. Chicago leaders made a plan. They would turn the river back. It would flow the other way. Then they would send the pollution away from the lake. It was a big job. They had to dig a canal to move the water the other way. They had to put a wall across the river where it met the lake. Then they would be able to lower the water in the river and pull the lake water out.

They did it. They build the wall, called a lock. They were ready to move the river the other way. Rivers flow naturally in one direction. This would change nature. But the people of St. Louis heard about the plan. They were worried. They knew that the pollution would come their way. The river would reach the Mississippi River, which flows by St. Louis. It would bring pollution to them.

Chicago has a history of bold leaders. The mayor decided to go ahead with the project. The mayor of St. Louis was fighting the plan. He was angry. So were citizens of St. Louis. Early one morning on January 2nd, 1900, Chicago leaders took shovels to the place where the river would join the new canal. They dug at the place between the river and the canal. They found it was too big to do with shovels, so they used dynamite. Still it would not work. They were very worried. It might not work. Then they used a big machine called a dredge. It pulled out the last big pieces of earth. Then the water rushed backwards. They had reversed the river.

Once it was done people of Chicago marveled. The citizens cheered the mayor. And the people of St. Louis complained. Only later would people figure out how to stop pollution before it got into water. Today, Chicago filters its waste. But the river will always go the other direction. Once reversed, it would be very difficult to put back. Brave Chicago leaders changed nature to help the city grow.

Which is the best main idea of this passage? Underline the parts of the text that support your choice.

- Chicago changed the river.
- People have solved important problems to improve the city.
- Chicago grew a lot from its beginning.