Interpreting Nonfiction and Fiction Tips

Finding the Main Idea and Supporting Details

When you understand **the main idea** of a piece of writing, you understand the most important point a writer makes in **nonfiction**. The main idea can be **stated** at the beginning, middle, or end of a paragraph or passage. If the passage gives the main idea, it is the **topic sentence**. If it is given at the **beginning**, the rest of the paragraph(s) add details that support or explain the main idea. If the topic sentence is at the end, the **supporting ideas** are given first and then summed up in the topic sentence.

In some forms of nonfiction, the main idea is <u>NOT</u> stated at all. The reader must **infer**, or figure out the meaning by putting together the details the author provides. **Pay attention to headlines or titles; they usually contain the key ideas**.

Questions on tests refer to **main idea** in the following ways:
1. **The purpose of the passage is…**
2. **A good summary of the passage is…**
   - When you summarize what you read, try to answer these questions about the major points that are made:
     - Who?
     - What?
     - Where?
     - When?
     - Why?
     - How?
3. **The passage is MOSTLY about…**
4. **A good TITLE is…**
   - A good title restates the main idea in a short phrase.

Given the style of the excerpt (part of a longer piece of writing), sometimes you have to identify (infer) the **kind of literature** from which you would expect to find this excerpt:
Typical choices:
1. Newspaper Article
2. Scientific Journal
3. Interview
4. Editorial

Applying Ideas:

Sometimes a test requires you to **apply ideas**. This means taking information that you read and using it in a new situation you are given. **Be sure you select the choice that you can substantiate using passage details. It is a two-step process. First, make sure you understand the main idea and supporting details. Nexst, apply that information to the new situation**.

Restating Information:

You can show you understand something you read by **restating it in your own words**. This is an active reading strategy that reflects your understanding of written materials. For example,

when you explain directions to a friend assembling something from directions, you are restating. When you say to yourself what the question of a math problem is, you are restating. Make a habit of restating parts of a passage in your own words because it deepens your understanding as you read.

Drawing Conclusions:

When you **draw conclusions**, you consider the facts presented and then think of **reasonable** explanations for those facts. You can select the best choice on a multiple-choice test by **reading the choices and determining if that choice makes sense**, saying "no" to choices that cannot be substantiated by the evidence given, and select only the choice that makes sense because it can by substantiated. **You can save time on a test by going down the choices thinking no until you reach a choice you can prove. Don't bother reading all of the choices if the best answer comes before others that follow**. You can tell a test is asking you to select a question requiring **drawing a conclusion** when the questions begins:
1. Which of the following conclusions most accurately…
2. Which of the following might…
3. Which of the following most likely…

Comparing and Contrasting Ideas

When you **compare** ideas, you look for ways in which ideas, things, or characters are **alike**. When you **contrast** ideas, things, or characters you look for ways in which they are **different**. Look for similarities and differences as you read.

Clue words indicating similarities:
♦ And
♦ Also
♦ Likewise
♦ In addition to
♦ Similarly

Clue words indicating differences:

♦ Although
♦ However
♦ Yet
♦ But
♦ On the other hand
♦ On the contrary
♦ While
♦ Versus
♦ In contrast to
♦ Either/Or

Typical types of multiple choice questions that require you to determine similarities and differences:

1. Based on this excerpt, which of the following comparison is most accurate
2. How are X and Y alike?
3. How are X and Y different?