

Basics

The most effective way to read a text and understand and interpret the main points is not to simply take the text and start reading it. You need to develop a reading strategy to help you manage the text. Part of a reading strategy is being able to read to find the main idea and supporting arguments.

The academic context

Academic texts can be long and complicated, and reading them can be stressful. In most cases, you do not need to understand every word in the text. If you can learn to identify the main idea and the supporting arguments, then the academic reading process becomes simpler and you will have the supporting arguments ready when you need them. When you are looking for the main idea, think of it as a summary of the paragraph. This can make it easier to find. The supporting arguments will be around it.

Key features

There are a number of ways that you can find the main idea. Look out for these in each paragraph you read.

1 Headings and bullet points are the easiest text features for you to find. For example:

Improving your reading needs a strategy:

- Read the whole text first.
- Identify the main idea and supporting arguments.
- Make notes.

2 The main idea is often in the first sentence. For example:

To improve your reading you need to develop a strategy. There are a number of things you can do. Let's explore them!

It can also be in the last sentence. For example:

Read the whole text first, identify the main idea and supporting arguments, and make notes. To improve your reading you need to use these ideas as you develop a reading strategy.

3 Signpost language can help you 'navigate' the text. For example:

The main idea is ... The most important thing is ... The key concept is ...

Challenges / difficulties

Sometimes it can be very hard to find the main idea, especially in long paragraphs. One useful tip is to look for repeated words or ideas. These are often the main idea.

How can I develop this skill?

Use your writing, as well as your reading. When you are writing, try different ways of structuring your paragraphs. There are many possible ways of ordering arguments and a main point, but you often need to experiment to find out what works best. Although the main point is often in the first or last sentence of a paragraph, academic writers sometimes 'bury' the main point in the middle, with arguments on both sides. Try it! How can you make sure the main point is still clear? Practising by using your writing in this way will make you a more analytical reader.

Learning outcome

Students will be able to demonstrate that they can find the main idea and supporting arguments in a text as part of their reading strategy.

Theory to practice

Look at these texts. They all have the same main idea and supporting arguments. Underline the main point in each and decide which one is the easiest to find.

1

Medical emergency procedures

Whether it's a car accident, a fall or a heart attack, this may happen to you while you are at university, and it's very important that you're prepared to help.

The first thing to do is to get professional help from the emergency services but, before they come, use this procedure and remember the letters *Dr ABC*.

D is for danger: Make sure that you are safe.

R is for response: See if the victim can hear you or feel you if you touch their shoulder.

A is for airway: Lift their chin forwards if they don't respond to you.

B is for breathing: If they are not breathing, start pressing down hard and fast on their chest about twice a second.

C is for circulation: Once the casualty is breathing, if they are also bleeding, put pressure on the injury to try to stop the blood.

Dealing with an emergency is something that happens to most of us, and we need to be ready to follow the best procedure even if we are very stressed and beginning to panic.

2

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3

Medical emergency procedures

Dealing with an emergency is something that happens to most of us and the key point is that we need to be ready to follow the best procedure even if we are very stressed and beginning to panic. Whether it's a car accident, a fall or a heart attack, this may happen to you while you are at university, and it's very important that you're prepared to help.

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Ways to get more practice

Each time you see a text with several paragraphs, try to find the main idea using some of the ideas on this Factsheet. You can try doing it with another student and see if you agree.