Elementary School Lesson Plan: Understanding Main Idea and Details

From the classroom of Angela Szakasits, 5th grade Reading and Social Studies teacher at North Topsail Elementary School in Hampstead, North Carolina.

Objective: The student will use main idea and supporting details to expand understanding of a variety of texts.

When determining weaknesses in comprehension, Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies (CARS) is an excellent resource. Each selection includes a comprehension question divided into skills. I assign students three lessons to read and then grade their papers. Using this information, I focus my instruction to meet their needs.

For students who require additional assistance with main idea and supporting details, I review the definitions of each.

Main idea- tells what the selection or paragraph is mostly about.
Supporting details- information that is included to support the main idea by filling in background information or expanding on the topic.

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Main idea is often stated or implied in the first or last sentence of a paragraph or selection as the topic is introduced or summarized. Because struggling readers can be overwhelmed by the number of words in a paragraph, eliminate those words that are not important in the selection. Begin by providing students with a copy of a paragraph. Using a pencil or black marker, cross out the words that are not as important in the paragraph, such as articles or prepositions.

Example:
When Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, he is unlikely to have foreseen how significant this invention would be in today’s times. The printing press increased the speed at which books could be copied because instead of having to copy printed material by hand, whole pages of text could be printed at one time. Today, layouts for pages are done on the computer and copiers are able to print hundreds of papers per minute. Without such easy access to printed material, our lives would be dramatically different.
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Once these words have been eliminated, begin a discussion on the remaining words. Note the words that are used most often. Determine what the paragraph is mostly about and write this as the main idea. The other facts that are important explanations or elaborations are supporting details.

Strategies to Achieve Reading Success (STARS) Strategy 1 (pages 4-11) focuses on main idea and supporting details and has sample selections that can be used for instruction. Focus on Understanding Main Idea and Details has selections with main idea and supporting details comprehension questions that follow.

Instruction can also be provided on how to check the main idea of a paragraph or selection using Microsoft Word’s AutoSummarize function using the following steps.

• On the Tools menu, click AutoSummarize.
• Select the type of summary you want.
• In the Percent of original box, type or select the level of detail to include in the summary. Select a higher percentage of the original document to include more detail.
• If you don't want AutoSummarize to replace your existing keywords and comments on the Summary tab in the Properties dialog box (File menu), clear the Update document statistics check box.

*Directions taken from Microsoft Word help

After teaching lessons on main idea and finding details I would then apply and extend lessons on Summarizing. The following lesson plan is on Summarizing with Struggling Readers.
Summarizing with Struggling Readers

Objectives:

My objectives would include: Use metacognitive strategies independently and flexibly to monitor comprehension and extend vocabulary (e.g., skim, scan, reread the text, and consult other sources, for teaching summarizing.

Read a variety of texts, such as:
- fiction (tall tales, myths).
- nonfiction (books of true experience, newspaper and magazine articles, schedules).
- poetry (narrative, lyric, and cinquains).
- drama (plays and skits).

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DAY 1
For students who require additional assistance with summarizing, I begin by reading a fictional paragraph or short selection as a class. We review the definition of summarizing:
Summarize- to tell a shortened version in your own words giving only the most important information
- should answer who, what, where, when, why, and how; should be shorter than the original

Then, we make a chart listing the 5 W’s and H based on what was read. The questions to answer are:
- WHO is the main character?
- WHAT is the problem?
- WHEN does the story take place?
- WHERE is the character?
- WHY does the character feel the way he/she does?
- HOW is the problem solved?

This information can be completed in chart form or by answering the questions orally, and the questions can be altered depending on the selection.
Use the answers to these questions to write a one or two sentence summary of the selection as a class. Students practice writing their own summaries of chapters of novels that are read as a class or their Accelerated Reader (AR) books. These summaries are written on sticky notes and placed at the end of the chapter so that the students can review them before answering comprehension questions or taking AR quizzes.

DAY 2 (or when students are ready to move on to nonfiction)
Read nonfiction selections and summarize as a class using the 5 W’s and H chart. The questions to answer are:
- WHO is the selection mostly about?
- WHAT is the main idea of the selection?
- WHEN did this person live or WHEN was this place created?
- WHERE did this person live or WHERE is this place?
- WHY is this person or place important?
- HOW is this person or place described?
This information can be completed in chart form or by answering the questions orally, and the questions can be altered depending on the selection.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO is the selection mostly about?</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use the answers to these questions to write a one or two sentence summary of the selection as a class. Students practice writing nonfiction summaries with additional nonfiction selections.

*Strategies to Achieve Reading Success (STARS) Strategy 12 (pages 104-111)* focuses on summarizing and has sample selections that can be used for instruction.