

## Supporting Details

A very important reading skill one can acquire is finding the main idea in a passage or reading. A closely related reading skill is locating supporting details. **Supporting details are reasons, examples, facts, steps, or other kinds of evidence that back up and explain a main idea.**

Details make up most of the information in what a person reads, but some details are more important than others. There are two kinds of supporting details: **major** and **minor**. Just as the main idea is the most important idea and more general than its supporting details, **major** details are the most important and are more general than the **minor** details. The **minor** details are more specific and help fill out and explain the **major** details.

Major details are important to comprehension which is increased when one asks which of the details are most important and why. Primary purposes of major details are listed below with brief explanations:

- **To define** a topic, to show what the topic is; to give an expanded version of the kind of explanation a dictionary would give
- **To give examples**, usually as part of an explanation, or help a reader understand a broad topic
- **To describe**, so that a reader can picture the topic
- **To give reasons** that support an argument or opinion
- **To explain** a fact or idea in a passage that uses logical reasoning to make the fact or idea clear

### Identifying Major Supporting Details

#### Outlining

Preparing an outline of a passage often helps one understand and see clearly the relationship between a main idea and its supporting details. Outlines start with a **main idea** followed by the **major** supporting details and then the **minor** details. The template of an outline looks like the following:

- I. Main idea**
  - a. Major detail**
    - i. Minor detail
    - ii. Minor detail
  - b. Major detail**
    - i. Minor detail
    - ii. Minor detail

Below is an example of an outline from a passage dealing with factors interfering with memory.

- I. **Main idea:** Several factors can interfere with having a good memory.
  - a. **Major detail:** 1. Lack of motivation
    - i. **Minor detail:** Without the desire to learn or remember something, you probably won't
  - b. **Major detail:** 2. Lack of practice
    - i. **Minor detail:** To stay sharp, memory skills must be used on a regular basis.
  - c. **Major detail:** 3. Self-doubt
    - i. **Minor detail:** If you're convinced you won't remember anything you probably won't.
  - d. **Major detail:** 4. Distraction
    - i. **Minor detail:** Distracting noises or conversations can interfere with you remembering information.

The **major** details in the above outline serve as reasons why we may have difficulties with remembering information. The **minor** details are more specific and explain in detail the major supporting details.

### Signal Words

Another tip to identifying major supporting details is to look for words that signal major details. Here are some common signal words:

one	in addition	third(ly)
to begin with	furthermore	another
also	second(ly)	moreover
further	other	final(ly)
first (of all)	next	
for one thing	last (of all)	

In the selection below each of the signal words indicate or announce a major detail being explained. Signal words used in this paragraph include: first, next, a third, and last of all. The main idea, in this case, is the first sentence.

Although only human beings communicate through words, other animals also communicate in their own ways. **First**, animals can communicate by means of nonverbal sounds, such as chirps and birdsong, mews, barks, howls, and roars. **Next**, animals communicate through chemical signals: male dogs, for instance, use urine to mark their own turf. **A third** means of animal communication is touch, such as nuzzling and licking—as well as grooming among, for example, monkeys. **Last of all**, animals communicate by visual signals. Dogs, of course, wag their tails; also, they and some other furry animals raise their hackles (the hairs between the shoulders) when

threatened, in order to appear larger. Baring the teeth is another visual signal. And honeybees perform a famous "wobble dance" to inform each other about sources of food.