

Understanding the Main Idea

Use this organizer with a news article, a nonfiction passage or a story. Read your text and record the key words or phrases that answer each question below. Then summarize the text in 25 words of your own.

Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

How?

Now summarize the text in 25 words (one word per box)

1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25

Teacher Notes: The Main Idea Organizer

What it teaches

Students sort a text into its key facts (who, what, when, where, why and how), then compress those facts into a 25-word summary. The word limit forces them to decide what matters most, which is the heart of finding the main idea. It suits students aged about 8 to 14 and works with any short text.

How to run it (one lesson)

1. Model first. Project a short news article and think aloud as you pull out key words for each question. Record words and phrases, not full sentences.
2. Students read their own text and complete the six boxes. Not every text answers every question. A blank box is fine and worth discussing.
3. Circle the most important key words, then build the summary one word per box. Exactly 25 words is the challenge.
4. Pairs swap summaries and check: does it say what the whole text is mostly about, or does it just list details?
5. Share two or three strong summaries and name what makes them work.

Main idea or detail? A quick check

The main idea is what the whole text is mostly about. Details are the facts that support it. If a sentence could be removed without changing what the text is about, it is a detail.

Adjust it

Support: allow a 40-word summary, or give the starter "This text is mostly about...". Extend: ask for a 12-word headline as well as the 25-word summary, then compare the two.

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For the full guide to teaching the main idea, including stated and implied main ideas, visit:

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