

# Research: The Main Idea Strategy

## Overview

The Main Idea Strategy is a strategy to improve the performance of students with learning disabilities and other students who perform poorly on reading comprehension tasks requiring them to comprehend inferential main ideas. The Main Idea Strategy consists of five steps that are aimed at deriving the main idea from the key details. Teachers teach the strategy to students following an instructional sequence divided into four parts.

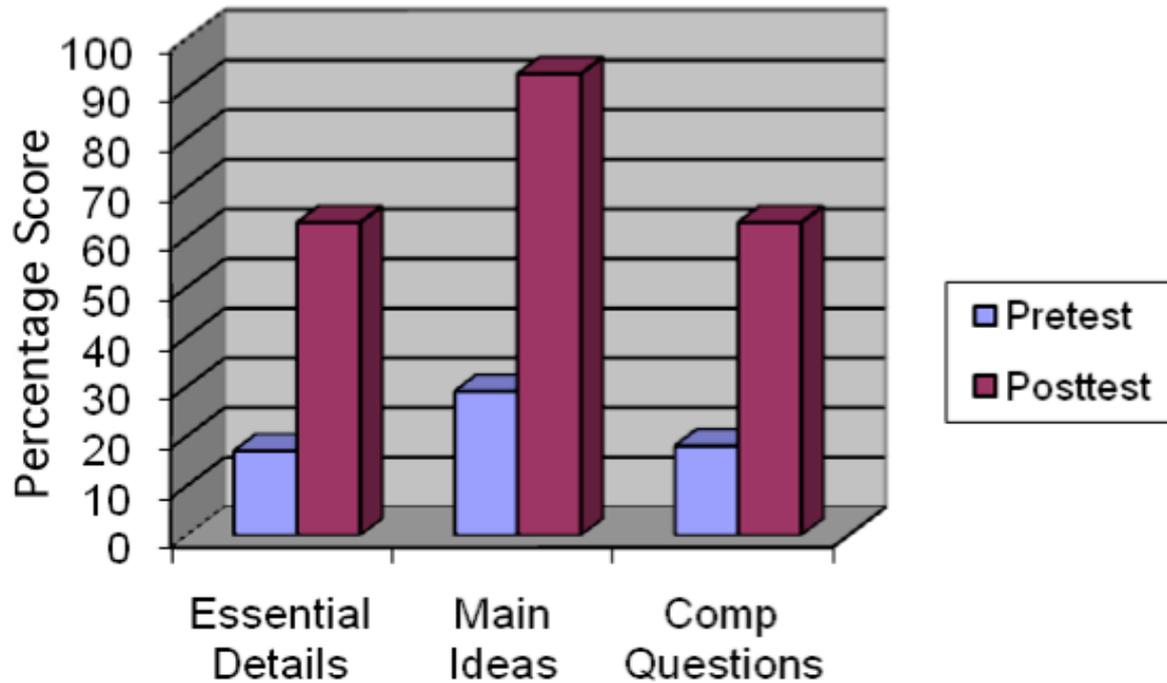
Highly qualified secondary teachers with an average of approximately 18 years of teaching experience provided the strategy instruction in the research study. Twenty-two students from the teachers' middle- and high-school classes participated, based on low performance in class and on state tests and IEP goals related to reading comprehension. Teachers taught the strategy in their classes over approximately five months within one school year. The researcher provided follow-up visits to the teachers to trouble-shoot and enhance implementation. Three measures were used: a highlighting measure, where students highlighted essential details in a passage; a main-idea paraphrasing measure, where students expressed the main idea of a paragraph in their own words in writing; and a comprehension measure where students wrote answers to comprehension questions about a passage.

## Results

Students showed pretest to posttest score gains, considerable improvement through on-going curriculum-based measurement, and changes in state test performance. Mean student percentage scores increased substantially from the pretest to the posttest, from approximately 15% to 60% on the highlighting essential details measure, from approximately 28% to 90% on the main-idea paraphrasing measure, and from approximately 16% to 60% on the comprehension questions measure. Using on-going curriculum-based assessment, students steadily enhanced their performance on all measures throughout the study, even as the readability of the passages increased from about the third-grade level at the beginning of the instruction to nearly the ninth-grade level toward the end of the study. In addition, based on teacher reports, 100% of the participating middle-school students passed the state reading test, whereas only approximately 63% had passed the test previous to the study.

Teachers and students provided social validation for the strategy instruction. Mean teacher responses to 7-point Likert-type scale questionnaire items ranged from 6.0 to 7.0, based on questions about how well the strategy instruction fit teaching responsibilities and beliefs about teaching, to the ease of implementation and student performance. Teachers also commented that they observed students transferring or generalizing the use of the strategy to other reading tasks without prompting. Students responded to 7-point Likert-type scale questions with mean ratings ranging from 5.17 to 5.53, addressing questions about ease of understanding the strategy to questions about how much they thought the strategy helped them become a better reader. One student commented "The strategy helped me improve my science grade a lot! Without even knowing that I was using it when I was taking notes and stuff then I was!"

## Main Idea Strategy Research Results



### Conclusions

Student understanding of inferential main ideas impacts many areas of academic performance, including measures of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) used by public school districts for accountability under No Child Left Behind regulations. Whether this strategy is introduced in a regular classroom, resource room, tutoring program, or home school setting, it has the potential to improve the performance of students who struggle to understand inferential main ideas in their reading.

### References

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Boudah, D. J., & Harris, N. (2006, April). *Collaborative research and evaluation of inferential main idea strategy*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.