READING AND WRITING ASSESSMENT

Finding the main idea

Part 1 of the assessment asks you to find a passage's main idea, identify its supporting reasons, and understand words in context. This handout shows you how.

Topic, main idea, and details

Topic	What the passage is about, in a word or short phrase.
Main idea	The one point the author makes about the topic, stated as a full sentence.
Supporting details	The reasons, examples, and facts that back up the main idea.

Five steps to find the main idea

1. Read the whole passage once without stopping.
2. Name the topic in a few words.
3. Ask what the author says about the topic. Look closely at the first and last sentences and at words the author repeats.
4. Test your answer. Every part of the passage should support it. If a part does not fit, your main idea is probably too narrow.
5. Write the main idea as one sentence in your own words.

Finding supporting reasons

Ask: why does the author believe the main idea? The answer is a supporting reason. Authors often signal a reason with words such as *because*, *since*, *for this reason*, *as a result*, *therefore*, and *for example*.

Understanding words in context

When a word is unfamiliar, use the sentences around it.

Definition	The author explains the word nearby, often after a comma or a dash.
Example	The author gives examples that show what the word means.
Contrast	Words such as *but*, *however*, and *unlike* point to an opposite meaning.
Restatement	A nearby sentence says the same idea in simpler words.

Then put your guess in place of the word. If the sentence still makes sense, your guess is likely right.

Practice

> Many readers move quickly through a text, looking for the answer they expect to find. Careful study requires the opposite habit. A reader who returns to a passage a second and a third time begins to notice what a single reading misses: a qualifying phrase, a change in tone, a word chosen with precision. Such details often change the meaning of the whole. For this reason, the most reliable readers are not the fastest ones but the most patient.

1. What is the topic?
2. What is the main idea?
3. What reason does the author give?
4. What does *precision* mean in this passage?

ANSWERS

1. Careful reading.
2. Patient, repeated reading produces more reliable understanding than fast reading.
3. Rereading reveals details that one reading misses, and those details can alter what the whole passage means.
4. Exactness. The author means a word chosen with great care.

Before you answer

- [ ] I read the whole passage first.
- [ ] I can state the main idea in one sentence.
- [ ] I found at least one reason the author gives.
- [ ] I checked each unfamiliar word against the sentences around it.