



DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE MAIN POINT AND THE DETAILS

To distinguish between the main point of a piece and the details, we need to distinguish between the **guiding/governing question** that the piece addresses and the **supporting/subordinate questions** that are addressed in the service of investigating the guiding question.

THE MAIN POINT IS A RESPONSE TO THE GUIDING/GOVERNING QUESTION

<p>Why? How? So what? What for?</p>	}	<p>These are complex questions which yield complex responses or answers.</p> <p>A piece of expository writing (book, chapter, essay) is a response to such a complex, guiding/governing question.</p> <p>The writer's answer to the guiding/governing question is the main point of the text.</p>
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THE DETAILS ARE RESPONSES TO THE SUPPORTING/SUBORDINATE QUESTIONS

<p>Who? What? When? Where?</p>	}	<p>These are factual questions which yield factual responses or answers.</p> <p>The responses to these supporting/subordinate questions (i.e., supporting of/subordinate to the guiding/governing question) provide points of detail which serve as examples, illustrations, pieces of factual evidence or history, clarifications, definitions, and elaborations.</p> <p>The writer's answer(s) to the supporting/subordinate questions are the details of the text.</p>
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HOW TO IDENTIFY THE GUIDING/GOVERNING QUESTION

A writer writes in response to a complex question that is not readily resolved; a *how*, *why*, or *so what* question that guides and governs the writer's investigative efforts and guides or governs how the writer structures the resulting text. This question arises from competing ideas or observations that are held in tension in the writer's mind. We can identify the guiding/governing question of a text by identifying the observations that initially puzzled the writer.

For example, in the *Napoleon** text used in the Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies, the competing ideas or observations are:

Napoleon was a wicked tyrant, driven by ruthless personal ambition to cruelly dominate his people.

Yet his followers had great faith in him.

The question that follows from these competing observations is (quoting from the text):

"As with other dictators, the question is this: how did he manage to fool so many people so much of the time?"

Identifying the guiding/governing question helps us determine the main point of the text, which is the writer's response to the guiding/governing question. This can be summarized as:

Napoleon, like other successful dictators, never set out to deceive his followers. He himself was convinced that he was a savior, acting for the good of the people, and it was the strength of his own convictions that attracted the loyalty of the people.

*William G. Perry and Charles P. Whitlock, *Napoleon*, Harvard Reading Film, 1949.

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE SUPPORTING/SUBORDINATE QUESTIONS

In the process of addressing a guiding/governing question, the writer typically explores a number of supporting/subordinate questions. These are the basic *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* questions that the writer must answer to produce the evidence, the background, or the illustrations necessary for making the main point.

For example, the following supporting/subordinate questions are addressed in the *Napoleon* text:

- Who was Napoleon?
- Where and when did he live and rule?
- What were the events and experiences that led up to his becoming such a powerful dictator?
- When, if at all, did the people he ruled begin to question his authority or his methods of dictatorship?

You might notice that these supporting/subordinate questions can themselves be broken down into even more specific sub-questions. The details of a text are the answers to questions like these.*

HOW TO FIND THE MAIN POINT BY RECALLING THE DETAILS

Many people find that they can pick up the details when they read, but tend to miss the main point. If you have noticed this tendency in yourself, try this: Right after you read something, jot down a list of any *who/where/what/when* information you recall from what you have just read. These discrete bits of information that come to your mind will tend to be details – facts, examples, disconnected observations.

But don't stop here. No matter how many details you remember from your reading, they will not add up to the main point. This is because the main point is not just an accumulation of details, but rather the sense that the author makes of these details. So you have one more step to go.

Look over your list and ask yourself these questions:

- Why is this information important?
- Why has the writer provided me with this information?
- What larger point is this information in service to?
- What is the writer trying to tell me or teach me?

Answering questions like these will help you identify the main point of the piece, by helping you place the details into the context of the writer's governing question.

* When the facts are in question – i.e., when they are unresolved – a *who*, *what*, *when*, or *where* question can become a complex, governing question.

"Who killed J.F.K.?" is an instance of a such a question. In a piece that addresses that question, supporting/subordinate questions would include "Why is it hard to establish that fact?" and "How might we determine that?" and "Why does this question persist over all this time?" Similarly, when a *who*, *what*, *when*, or *where* question has a disputable, non-factual response, it can become a complex, guiding/governing question. "When shall the United States enter into another nation's civil war?" is an instance of such a question.