



# Getting the Main Point

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Identifying or summarizing the main point of a text can be challenging, especially when the text includes a lot of detail, or when you encounter a lot of unfamiliar vocabulary, or when the writer never explicitly tells you, "My main point is such-and-such." Here is a framework to help you get the main point. Notice that it does *not* involve passively starting at the beginning and reading the entire text word-by-word. It involves actively hunting for the main point. Once you've got the main point, you can then read more purposefully, with better comprehension.

## 1. WHAT DO I LOOK FOR?

Think of the main point of a piece as the answer to a question about which the writer was curious. A writer's motivation to write something began with *competing observations* held in tension – some apparent contradiction, puzzle, mystery, oversight, discrepancy, or surprise that the writer noticed. This tension led the writer to say, in effect, "Huh. What's the story here?" So the writer wrote the piece in an effort to address a question that resulted from the competing observations. That unresolved *governing question* drives and governs the writer's inquiry. The writer's *answer* to the question is the main point of the piece. So to find the main point of a piece, you need to actively hunt for these three elements – a structure which might be explicit in the text but which is more typically implicit:



## 2. WHERE – AND HOW – DO I LOOK?

Texts are often organized to allow you to search for each of these three elements in particular places – particularly **rich sites**. Within these sites, you can **scan** for language that indicates each of the elements.

The beginning of a piece is likely to be a rich site to look for the competing observations and the unresolved governing question. The writer typically wants to let you know as you enter a piece what question the piece addresses and what led the writer to pose the question in the first place.

❖ **RICH SITES** for the **competing observations** and the **governing question**:

- Title
- Preface or first chapter
- Subheads or chapter titles
- First few paragraphs of the first chapter
- First sentence of two of each paragraph

**SCAN** for language, such as the following, indicating **competing observations**:

- “But . . .”
- “And yet . . .”
- “And at the same time . . .”
- “Before . . . /Now . . .”
- “Here . . . /There . . .”
- “seems sufficient until we consider . . .”

**SCAN** for language, such as the following, indicating the **governing question**:

- “The real question is . . .”
- “What has yet to be accounted for . . .”
- “We can’t help but wonder . . .”
- “What has not been considered is . . .”
- “What might explain that difference . . .”
- “?” (a question mark)

The end of a piece is often a rich site to look for the answer to the governing question, or the main point. The writer wants to make sure you know as you exit a piece what conclusion(s) he or she offers in response to the question posed.

❖ **RICH SITES** to scan for the **main point**:

- Last few paragraphs or last chapter
- Beginning of a piece (sometimes)
- Subheads or chapter titles (sometimes)

**SCAN** for language, such as the following, indicating the conclusion or **main point**:

- “We can conclude that . . .”
- “What is clear is that . . .”
- “The best explanation seems to be . . .”
- “This then accounts for . . .”
- “We can therefore understand how . . .”
- “The answer to the question . . .”