

**EVALUATING
ACADEMIC READINESS
FOR APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING**
Revised for
Access To Apprenticeship

**COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS
IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN IDEA**

**AN ACADEMIC SKILLS MANUAL
for
The Horticulture Trades**

This trade group includes the following trades:
Arborist and
Horticulturist

*Workplace Support Services Branch
Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities*

Revised 2011

In preparing these Academic Skills Manuals we have used passages, diagrams and questions similar to those an apprentice might find in a text, guide or trade manual.

The information in them is not intended to instruct you in your trade. Trade related material is used only to demonstrate how understanding an academic skill will help you find and use the information you need.

COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN IDEA

*An academic skill required for the study of the
Horticulture Trades*

INTRODUCTION

The main idea of anything is the central purpose or point of a series of ideas or thoughts. The main idea of any project, such as installing a garden wall, is to successfully finish the installation. Everyone who is part of the task contributes to that main idea. Your job may be to lift stones into place, to mix cement or to plant perennials in front of the wall. Every part of the project adds to the main idea of completing the job.

As you study your trade, you will find out how to do many tasks, often using technical books and manuals as references. Identifying the main idea as you examine written material and as you watch a technique being demonstrated will help you sort through the information. Then you can find what you want and focus on the exact part that has the ideas or facts that you need.

Just as saws, clippers, shovels, drainage tile, and workplace safety are each necessary parts of any project, the ability to understand main ideas is essential to your reading strategy toolbox

The practical applications of this reading skill range from understanding the functions of materials, tools, and hardware, to reading and correctly interpreting any written materials in your course of study. Note taking and study skills are enhanced by mastering this skill.

This manual will help you identify the main idea in technical material so that you can recognize what is important. We will look at how technical material is organized and suggest ways to find the main idea in that material. We will look at the following:

- ◆ Titles, headings and descriptions as guides to the main idea.
- ◆ Focussing on the main idea.
- ◆ Topic sentences and paragraphs.
- ◆ Supports to the main idea.
- ◆ An approach to reading.

PART I

TITLES, HEADINGS AND SHORT DESCRIPTIONS

Organization of Technical Material

Technical material usually gets you to the main idea quickly in the following ways:

- ◆ Titles, headings and short descriptions indicate the main ideas of each section.
- ◆ Information is grouped in a logical pattern by topic, chapter, section, and paragraph.

- ◆ The introduction to the topic usually comes near the beginning, so you get to the main idea and the purpose of the writing immediately.
- ◆ Individual chapters usually start with basic concepts and move to more detailed knowledge after the general introduction to the main idea.

Titles: Finding the Main Idea

When you need to read technical material, look at the document title or name. The title will give you a good general idea of what the material is about; Titles can also help you find necessary information quickly.

Drawers with labels

Finding the main idea is like looking for tools in a well-organized shop. When you open a drawer labeled *Tools*, you expect to find tools. If the label says *screwdrivers* then everything inside should be a screwdriver. A label doesn't give details. It doesn't describe the number or condition of what's inside but it provides an idea of what's there - and of what's not there.

Titles, headings and sub-headings

Think of a textbook, manual, chapter, section or paragraph as a drawer. While a drawer or shelf is used to store equipment and supplies, a textbook or manual is used to store information. This information is labeled with *titles*, *headings* and *sub-headings* so you know what's inside.

Examples: Headings you might find in your trade manual.

Hoes

Types of Hoes

Maintenance of Hoes

Each heading tells what a section contains. The first heading, **Hoes**, doesn't tell us any details about what the topic covers. It could be any or all of the following: what hoes are, how they are used or what kind of steel is used in their construction. But, we know for certain that it will be something about hoes.

The second heading, **Types of Hoes**, gives you more information. You know that in this section you will find information only about the different types of hoes - this is the main idea.

The third heading, **Maintenance of Hoes**, tells you that you will learn about a specific aspect of hoes, proper maintenance. It could be "how to" or safety procedures but something about maintenance is the main idea.

Usually titles or headings illustrate how the material in a text is organized. It starts with general topics and moves to more specific ones. The main idea of each section becomes more focused.

Here is an example:

Hoses

Nylon and Vinyl Hoses

The first heading gives you a huge topic. Compare it to the second heading and notice how the second is more specific. It defines and limits the topic to specific types of hoses, giving you a more precise idea of what you'll find.

Titles and headings are placed at the top of the reading with **bold print** or CAPITAL LETTERS so they're easy to see. Charts and diagrams also have titles, and, often, short descriptions at the bottom or top. Titles give you visual cues that are easy to see and that direct you to the main idea.

A **heading** is a form of title designed to break information into smaller divisions. A **sub-heading** breaks into even smaller divisions; a sub, sub-heading is smaller again.

Often, a new heading will signal when there is a change in main idea. It will direct you to the next main idea. Always read the titles. They won't help if you skip them.

You'll find a list of titles and section headings in the **Table of Contents** at the beginning of each text or manual. Be sure to check the Table of Contents before you start searching for information. Here's an example of a Table of Contents you might see in a trade manual or text. Look at how information is broken into smaller and smaller topics or chunks.

SOIL MANAGEMENT	Textbook title
Irrigation and Drainage	Chapter title
Irrigation Systems	Unit heading
Surface Irrigation	Sub-heading
Sprinkler Irrigation	Sub-heading
Hand-moved Irrigation	Sub, sub-heading

Let's look more closely at how information is organized in this Table of Contents. The same ideas of organization will apply to all texts, manuals or diagrams. Consider these four points about titles and headings:

One

Observe how much information you get about **main ideas from the titles**.

- The textbook title tells you the kind of information you will find – up to date trade information about soil management.
- The chapter title **Irrigation and Drainage** lets you know what this chapter will cover.
- Under the chapter title, you see unit headings, sub-headings and sub, sub-headings.

Each tells you what aspect of soil management you will learn about.

Two

Each heading is a new main idea, but each one **stays on the main topic**

- *Soil Management*, the title of the book, is the main topic of the text.
- *Irrigation and Drainage* the title of a chapter, is a new main idea but it is closely related to the main topic, which is soil management

Remember, all the information you read will relate to the larger main idea, soil management, and all the information in a chapter will relate to the main idea in that chapter or section.

Three

As you read titles, from the textbook title down to the sub (and sub, sub) headings, you can see that topics *are more narrowly defined*. At each smaller heading, the topic covers a more limited or exact aspect of the main idea.

- The textbook title gives you a general, large main idea (soil management).
- The chapter title gives you a more specific topic (irrigation and drainage).
- Unit headings give a more detailed main idea (irrigation systems).
- Sub-headings divide the main idea of irrigation systems into two smaller groupings (surface irrigation and sprinkler irrigation).
- The sub, sub-heading divides sprinkler irrigation into an even smaller topic (hand-moved irrigation).

By reading the titles and headings, you know quite a bit about what to expect in this chapter. It should all tie together.

Four

When you read titles, you can see the *order of the information*. When learning a trade, you need to start at the beginning and learn information step by step.

- The first chapter, the first textbook, the first manual are the foundation for the second chapter, second textbook and so on.
- The chapter headings list the order in which you will learn individual topics.

This order shows you both where you are going and the steps you will take to get there.

In Brief

1. **Titles** indicate what you will read about.
 - Everything in this book will be about the main idea – metal fabrication
2. **Chapter headings** identify the parts that form the main idea and show the order in which those parts are presented.
 - Every chapter will be about some part of metal fabrication – precision metal fabrication, general safety and so on.
3. **Headings and sub headings** will identify information contained in the chapter.
 - All of the headings in the chapter on safety will tell about the specifics of working

PART II

FOCUSING ON MAIN IDEA

Assessing a job

When you have a job or task to do, you need to be clear about it. “What is the job? How big is it? How long will it take? What problems can I foresee?” These are main idea questions.

You need to do the same thing with reading assignments. Ask main idea questions: “What do I have to understand? What am I expected to do at the end? How long will this take?” Then look at the main titles and headings to find out where to start reading.

The Visual Check

The **visual check** is a preview of what you are going to read. Looking through a textbook before reading will help you find information quickly. You get an overall assessment of the material before you tackle it. If you are given a reading assignment in **Soil Management**, look over the book first. These guides will help you identify the main idea:

- The chapter, titles, and headings show how the information is organized.
 - Next, look for the chapter heading that refers to the reading you need to do.
- When you find the heading you want, flip through the book to that section.
 - Notice how long the passage is and if it is divided into smaller sections.
- Note the diagrams and read information around them.
 - If the information is new learning, and if it looks complicated, you might give yourself more time to spend on it.

Seeing A Pattern

Every document follows a pattern of organization. Information is typically developed from general, large topics to more specific ones as details are added to the main idea. Watch for the pattern, so you understand where you are going and how you are getting there. When you recognize the pattern that a text or manual follows, you will have a pretty good idea of where to look for specific information in the document.

The organization of information will follow one of the following patterns:

- ◆ general to specific,
- ◆ most important to less important or vice versa,
- ◆ problem to solution, or,
- ◆ theory to application.

You will see other patterns too. You may learn why a procedure is important before you learn the steps, or you may learn the importance of each step as you go. Recognize the pattern and then focus on finding the information you need.

From main idea to details

Titles and headings give you a general idea of what you'll find. They don't give details. A drawer labeled *Tools* contains tools. This label doesn't tell you how many or what kind. Open the drawer; look at the contents. Take each tool out or dump them all out. Now, you are getting the details.

Keep focused on the main idea

To get the details of a section of reading material, first do a visual check. After the visual check, read the material, paying attention to what it is telling you. If the material is complicated or new, you may need to split it into smaller portions. It helps to read a difficult part several times.

While you have to pay attention to both the main ideas and all the details that explain it, don't get distracted from the main job by a detail.

Example: You are organizing your tools (main job) and find a drill you lost six months ago. You pick it up, show it to the worker beside you, and wonder how it got here. You have been distracted by a detail from the job you are suppose to be doing.

The same thing happens with reading – you can be sidetracked. Read Passage 1, below to find the main idea. Use the three steps below to guide you.

1. **Use the title** as a guide to the main idea and contents.
2. **Do a visual check** to look for headings, diagrams and length. Note anything that stands out such as large or bold print. This gives you some clues to the main idea.
3. **Read the passage.** Check the way that each sentence relates to the main idea.

❖ ***Because this is a working sheet, underline or make notes that will help you. Note that we are examining main idea, not shop ventilation.***

Passage 1 **Shop Ventilation**

Proper ventilation must be maintained at all times when operating an engine in the shop. A ventilation system must be running, and doors and windows must be open. In addition, personal respirators should be used to remove other contaminants from the air.

Gasoline engines produce exhaust gases that contain something called **carbon monoxide**. Carbon monoxide is a colourless and odourless gas. Inhaling small amounts can cause drowsiness and headaches. Large amounts can be lethal. A closed, one-car garage can accumulate a lethal amount of carbon monoxide within three minutes.

Toxic fumes can also be released into the air through solvents that are used to clean engine parts. Warnings on the labels of solvents must be checked and the instructions followed carefully. If using a solvent for an extended length of time, ensure there is plenty of fresh air.

Before answering the questions about main idea, we'll go through the three steps.

Step 1: Use titles and headings as keys to the main idea.

- The title gives you a guide to the main idea which is shop ventilation.
- You don't know exactly what the information is about.

Step 2: Do a visual check before you tackle the reading.

- The passage is three paragraphs long.
- Words that stand out are in italics: - *carbon monoxide and toxic fumes*.
- There are no pictures or diagrams.
- The passage seems to develop from general to more specific information.

Step 3: Read the passage carefully.

- You see that there are eleven sentences and that each sentence refers to or describes something about the main idea: shop ventilation.
- Each sentence contains details that relate to the main idea.

When you reach step 3, you are looking for details that relate to the main idea. You open the drawer and study the contents.

Answer the questions below. Answers are at the end of this skill manual.

Questions

- 1 In paragraph one, what is the main idea?
- 2 What is the main idea in paragraph two?
- 3 Give details from paragraph two that support the paragraph's main idea.
- 4 What is the main idea in paragraph 3?

Once you have found the main idea, the details will answer *what, how, why, when* types of questions. You also expect to find out how all of this relates to you and your trade.

What's it about?

Each sentence in Passage 1 relates to the title and topic of shop ventilation; you have confirmed that this is the main idea. You have kept your focus on the main idea. . By going through the process of identifying the main idea of each paragraph, you could now to tell another person what this passage is about. You can also separate the main idea from the details.

Apply this method to find the main idea in anything you read, whether it's for yourself or to explain a design, material or project to a client.

PART III

TOPIC SENTENCES AND TOPIC PARAGRAPHS

In technical material, the topic sentence (usually the first sentence) tells you what the main idea is. The other sentences add to this idea. All of the sentences should have something to do with the main idea. Once you are sure about the main idea expressed in the topic sentence, **read the passage carefully**. Then ask yourself what it's about. The *usual rule* can help you find the topic sentence, *and* the main idea.

The Usual Rule:

1. Paragraphs and passages are set up with a key sentence called a topic sentence.
2. This topic sentence is usually the first one in the paragraph.
3. Topic sentences provide you with the main idea.

In Passage 1, **Shop Ventilation**, the first sentences of each paragraph is a topic sentence.

- Paragraph one: Proper ventilation must be maintained at all times when operating an engine in the shop.
- Paragraph two: Gasoline engines produce exhaust gases that contain something called **carbon monoxide**.
- Paragraph three: **Toxic fumes** can also be released into the air through solvents that are used to clean engine parts.

These topic sentences prepare us for information to come. They say, “This is what we are going to talk about.” The remaining sentences explain or add details to the main ideas.

Below are two opening sentences that show how topic sentences work. These will be the topic sentences in passages 2 and 3, which we will see later. We can expect that anything that follows in the passages should relate to the ideas in these topic sentences.

Read the topic sentences carefully and answer the questions which follow, even though you haven’t seen the rest of the paragraphs yet.

from Passage 2

The most abundant inhabitants of soil are one-celled organisms called bacteria.

from Passage 3

Most soil bacteria are saprophytic (they derive their nutriment from decaying organic matter).

Questions:

1. What is the main idea of **Passage 2**?
 - a. bacteria
 - b. single-celled organisms
 - c. inhabitants of soil
2. What is the main idea of **Passage 3**?
 - a) types of soil bacteria
 - b) the importance of soil bacteria
 - c) bacteria and decaying matter
3. What would be appropriate titles for Passage 1 and 2?

Before you check the answers at the end of this skill manual, read Passage 2 and 3 below.
Do you need to change your answers? How close did you come?

Passage 2

The most abundant inhabitants of soil are one-celled organisms called bacteria. As many as 100 million may live in one teaspoon of soil. Bacteria common to soil are rod-shaped, but many take on other shapes as well. Although they are single-celled, many will cling together forming chains. Bacteria usually grow as small colonies on the surface of soil particles.

Passage 3

Most soil bacteria are saprophytic (they derive their nutriment from decaying organic matter). Because of this, they make up one of the groups most responsible for breaking down organic matter in the soil. A few species are parasites which cause plant diseases. Crown gall, for example, causes a tumour-like growth on the roots of many plants. A few important species of bacteria are actually primary producers (autotrophs): they obtain their energy from chemical reactions with certain soil substances.

Does the *Usual Rule* apply? **Yes**, these work as topic sentences:

- They give the main idea and the other sentences build information from that idea.
- They present a logical order in which to develop information on oxides in metal.
- The usual rule applies.

NOTE: *If you aren't sure about the main idea after reading the first sentence in a passage, go on to the second or third sentence. The main idea and direction of the passage should become clearer as you proceed. One idea or topic should emerge as the main idea.*

Topic Paragraphs

Longer passages begin with a **topic paragraph**. They act like topic sentences. They will tell you what the whole passage or section is going to be about. Watch for introductory paragraphs that prepare you for a large piece of information. They come first, are often short and give you the main idea and purpose of what you are going to read.

In Brief:

1. Titles and headings give you some information about the contents. They tell you what the textbook or passage is about, in other words, what the main idea is.
2. The next step is visual; you can “see” what to expect, and where the information fits in with the rest of the material.
3. When you read each paragraph, identify the topic sentence, which gives the main idea of that paragraph.
 - The other sentences should add information or details to the main idea.
4. Identify the topic paragraph when you read a chapter or a longer section.
 - The other paragraphs should add information to the main idea.

PART IV

SUPPORTS TO THE MAIN IDEA

Supports to the main idea are the details that provide specific information. Supports may do any of the following:

- ◆ define or explain the main idea,
- ◆ describe how it works,
- ◆ illustrate how it operates,

- ◆ show the steps, or
- ◆ show the results.

Identifying Supports To The Main Idea

Read Passage 4. See if the main idea is placed first – and what it. Do the supports follow with details about the main idea?

Passage 4 Root Systems

The streamlined structure of roots functions in three important ways. They anchor the plant in the soil, absorb water and minerals, and store excess food for future needs.

There are two types of root systems. The roots in a *fibrous root system* occupy a large volume of shallow soil around the plant's base. Because these grow relatively close to the soil surface, they effectively control soil erosion (grasses are good for this purpose). Fibrous roots also capture water as it begins to percolate into the ground and must draw their mineral supplies from the surface soil before the nutrients are leached to lower levels. A *tap root system* sends one or two, rapidly-growing, sparsely branched roots straight down into the soil. This enables it to draw from deep water tables and mineral supplies. These roots are especially good anchors in shifting soils or windy locations.

We should find the topic sentence in the first paragraph. It should give the main idea and prepares us for supports to the main idea. The supports might define or expand the main idea. They will describe a method, illustrate with diagrams or photos, or provide examples. Let's look at paragraph one to see if it works this way.

Paragraph one

Sentence one states: *The streamlined structure of roots functions in three important ways.* The main idea here is roots and their functions.

Sentence two tells us **what** the three functions are and **how** they each benefit plants. The **main idea** gives us **what** and **how** of one aspect of the arborist and horticulturist trades.

Paragraph two

The first sentence tells us there are two types of root systems. This tells us that the main idea in paragraph one is followed by details about root systems. In order, we learn the following:

- one type of root system is *fibrous*;
- these systems take up a large amount of space in shallow soil;
- they provide soil erosion control, grass being a good example;
- they get their nutrients from surface soil;
- the other type of system is a *tap root*;
- this type gets nutrients from deep water tables and mineral supplies; and
- these work as good anchors in shifting soil and windy locations.

This passage about lubrication shows a common pattern used in technical writing.

1. The **title** communicates the topic in brief.
2. The **topic sentence or paragraph** communicates the main idea in expanded form.
3. The sentences that follow add details.

Diagrams

Many reading passages will direct you to look at diagrams, illustrations or photos. These figures show you what something looks like or how something works. If a passage tells you to *See Figure 1*, you can expect a diagram, chart or table that relates to the main idea.

We'll use a simple diagram, Figure 1 below, to show you how diagrams support the main idea. Look at the diagram to understand the main idea (root growth). Read the text below the diagram for both main idea and supports.

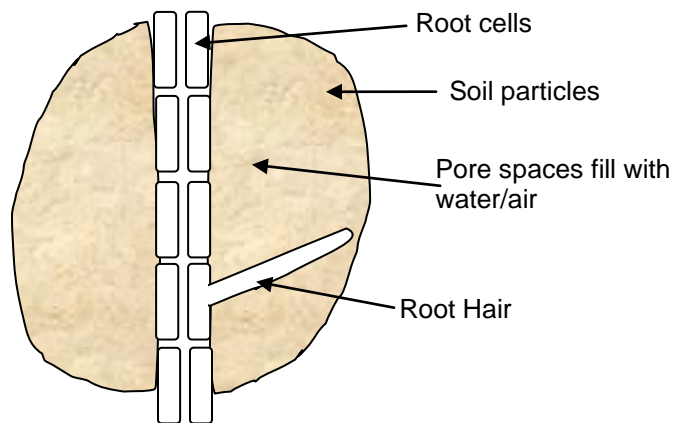


FIGURE 1: Roots and root hairs grow between soil particles. By contacting as much soil as possible, roots absorb water, air and nutrients. Conditions that obstruct root growth or that interfere with the right amount of oxygen and water in the pores threaten the health of the plant.

By reading the description below the diagram and looking at the picture, you can see and understand more about this aspect of root growth. The description below the diagram gives supports to the main idea and illustrates details you may not get from reading the text alone.

Steps to Supports

Narrowing in on the supports to the main idea is like starting a project.

1. First, you need to ask main idea questions:
 - a. What is the task (the job or the reading)?
 - b. How long will it take?
 - c. Where is it located?
2. Next you need to look more closely at the details and ask specific questions:
 - a. **What** manuals do I use?
 - b. **What** procedures and materials do I use?
 - c. **What** order will I use for the project and **why**?

3. Proceed carefully.
 - a. Stay focused on the purpose of the task.
 - b. Make sure that each part helps to accomplish the main purpose.

Getting the information you want

Getting what you want, whether you are reading for information or doing a job, involves seeing the big picture and then narrowing in on details. In this way you become knowledgeable, and you can make informed decisions. If you use this approach when you read for your trade, you will get the information you need to understand an aspect of your trade.

In Brief: The Three Steps

Step 1: See the big picture: Look at the title

Step 2: Get a better focus: Use the visual check to preview the reading

Step 3: Look more closely: Read for details.

Passage 5 below might be found in a section of your textbook on *Trade Science*. Use it to apply the three steps.

Passage 5

Physical States of Matter

Matter exists in one of three physical forms or states: solid, liquid or gas. Substances change states without changing their chemical structure. In appropriate conditions, solids melt into liquids or vaporize, liquids freeze to solids or vaporize into gases, and gases condense into liquids.

When water changes its physical states the make-up of the molecules remains the same. Molecules of frozen water (ice) still contain two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom, chemically combined. Steam also contains these types of molecules. It is mostly a change in temperature that causes changes in the different physical states. Because of this, water can be made to return to a previous state by changing surrounding physical conditions.

Step 1: See the big picture. In a passage with the title, **Physical States of Matter**, you expect:

- Definitions and descriptions of the physical states

Step 2: Get a better focus **by previewing** the passage.

- You see it has two paragraphs.
- One word, *ice*, is enclosed in parentheses (). Pay attention to signals such as parentheses that indicate explanation, definition or useful details.
- Find the topic sentence in paragraph one. It is the first sentence: *Matter exists in one of three physical forms or states: solid, liquid, or gas.*
- In paragraph two, the topic sentence refers to a specific aspect of physical changes of state: *When water changes its physical state, the make-up of the molecules remains the same.*
- Sometimes a diagram or table will be part of a passage. Make sure you look at any charts, tables, and diagrams. Any details found in the diagrams will help you to follow the details in the reading. Also note if any information is highlighted.

Step 3: Read carefully for details.

- Check the supports (details) to see if they are guided by the title and the topic sentences.
- Look to understand the details which answer **what, how, how much** and **why** questions.

Make information accessible

When you need to understand a piece of technical writing, write down all the main ideas and a list of the supporting details. We suggest making a list of supporting details for two reasons:

1. You need to identify and find the details before you can work with the information.
2. You need to break down information, especially if it is long, complex, and filled with details.

Types of Supports

When you recognize the type of support, it may help you find what you want efficiently. Supports to the main idea include but are not limited to the following:

- 1. Examples:** Examples take you from what you know to new knowledge. They give you a clearer picture of what something is or what it includes or how it works. The passage usually signals an example:

For example, a four-stroke cycle engine includes:

1. Intake Stroke,
2. Compression Stroke,
3. Power Stroke, and
4. Exhaust Stroke.

For example, sodic soil is alkaline because its pH is greater than 7.0.

Examples will almost always clarify and add to your knowledge. Watch for examples that do not have the word *example* as a signal. The above sentence could be re-written as follows:

Alkaline soil, such as sodic soil, is soil that has a pH greater than 7.0.

- 2. Order of Ideas:** Order of ideas (sequence) describes the relationship between parts or steps in a process. It is a common type of organization in technical materials. Usually technical information is presented first in a general introduction and is followed by more specific details. The opening or introduction may outline the content, the application and the importance of the information.

The example below explains something about the relationship between the health of a transplanted tree and proper preparation of the hole that it is planted in. The opening sentence introduces the topic with a general statement. It is followed by more specific instructions.

Example: The future growth of a transplanted tree depends on proper preparation. The hole should be twice as wide as the root ball and as deep. The soil in the bottom of the hole should be loosened with a shovel and organic material worked in. After the tree is placed in the hole, the soil is replaced to the same level as the soil in the root ball of tree.

Sometimes step by step instructions have no introduction.

Example: Place the wrench on the bolt head (or nut), so the movable jaw faces the direction the fastener is to be rotated. Adjust the thumbscrew so the jaws fit the bolt head snugly. Then, pull the wrench to rotate the bolt.

Directions and instructions will start with the first step. Look for numbers or letters; also, look for lists, or steps. Look for words such as *to begin with, first. . . second, then / next, before . . . after, in the same way, finally*. Remember, there is a reason for the order even if you don't know what it is.

3. **Definitions:** If the topic introduces a new concept or a technical word, you need an explanation of what it is before you know what it does. Technical terms are defined so you can understand the new word.

Definitions tell you what technical terms mean:

Example: When soil particles are “glued” together by substances such as lime or iron oxide, they are said to be **cemented**.

The definition may state what something is or what it does:

Example: *Photosynthesis* is the extraction of energy from the sun by chloroplasts located by plant cells.

The definition or the word being defined may be in italics (*italics look like this,*) written in **bold**, or surrounded by quotations (“...”).

Example: “*Contour tillage*” is the process of tillage following the contours of a slope, rather than up and down a slope.

Parentheses () may give you the correct, technical term, clarify a term or direct you to a diagram.

Example: Planting perennials (plants that regrow every year) is an economical way to start a garden.

Look for definitions and make notes. These are the words of your trade and you need to make them part of your new vocabulary.

4. **Comparison and Contrast:** Comparisons show similarities and differences, while contrasts show differences only. Look for words such as *in contrast, some ... others, whereas, yet, on the other hand*. This is done to help explain, define and expand your knowledge of relationships

Examples: Base your working loads on “Safe Load Ratio” **not** on the “Break Lbs.”. The Strength ratings are based on tests at room temperature; rope strength decreases with an increase of temperature.

The pH scale indicates how acidic or basic a solution is. The smaller the number on the pH scale, the stronger the acidity of a substance. Conversely, the larger the number on the pH scale, the more alkaline a substance will be.

- 5. Cause and Effect:** Cause and effect explains relationships. Why did this shrub die during the winter after it was planted? Can I take steps to prevent it from happening next time? Look for supports which explain relationships and the reasons they exist.

Example: A newly planted shrub needs to be watered regularly during its first summer in order to establish a good root system. If the root system is weak, a plant might not make it through its first winter.

PART V ***AN APPROACH TO READING***

Know What You Want

What you want from a reading affects how you approach it. If you know exactly what you need, you might go over the contents quickly until you come to the information you want. Then you should carefully examine the details concerning that topic.

You may need instructions on using a fork lift, an explanation of how air affects certain chemicals, or the details about a certain irrigation system. If you are reading for a specific reason, you look for information related to your aim and pay less attention to details that don't seem related. This is a logical and economical approach to reading for a purpose. Below are some suggestions for getting what you need from a reading, once you have located the relevant information:

- ◆ Make notes while you read, detailing the main points.
- ◆ Use your own words to repeat what you have read.
- ◆ Try stating the main idea.
- ◆ Give the passage a title.
- ◆ Can you tell someone else what the passage is about in a few words? If you can, you've identified the main idea.

To understand a passage, you need to know its main idea and its details. You should be able to say, “This tells me the difference between types of fertilizer.” or, “This explains why the rhododendron died.” If you can't, you need to reread the passage to find the main idea. Then look again at what supports do: They relate to the main idea but they also add details to our understanding.

Troubleshooting the System

(Getting lost - and found again)

You think you have a clear sense of the main idea. You know what it's about. But, as you get further into this technical material, you start feeling lost.

Check:

- *Maybe you weren't on the main trail at all.* If the sentences don't seem on topic, rethink the main idea.
- *Maybe the paragraph doesn't have a clear topic sentence.* You can still find the main idea by looking at what all the sentences are about. Try to identify one word or phrase that seems to be the theme of the paragraph and develop the main idea from this.
- *Maybe, you're on the main trail but have strayed a little bit off it.* Again, this will send you back to the beginning. As you reread, you may find a confusing part and realize, "Here's the spot that baffles me." You can identify the main idea, but a sentence or part of a chart contains details you don't understand. You may find new vocabulary or words used in unfamiliar ways, technical terminology, or a math formula.

Begin to solve the problem:

1. Can you look up the new words?
2. Can you find a technical definition?
3. Should you get extra help with the math?

Sometimes a writer assumes you know a concept or theory and has left it out. This makes your job tough. You may need help from an instructor, a different textbook or another student. Remember, if you can find the problem, you can fix it.

Read aloud

If you are stumped by a passage, try reading it out loud. Sometimes you discover that you have been reading one word wrong the whole time. Reading aloud may help you solve the puzzle. Sometimes, you can "hear" a problem better than you can "see" where a problem exists.

Complex passages

The main idea may jump out at you in short, familiar readings. In complex paragraphs with a lot of detail, math formulas and technical information, you may find the main idea buried. Read the section in pieces, ask questions as you go, underline and make notes. You might need to read parts of the passage several times to understand how the details relate to the main idea.

Application

Your test of understanding is the ability to explain something to someone else. Imagine you have to explain an estimate to a client. Where do you start? Start with the main idea.

1. **The main idea:**
 - The estimate may be based on more expensive structural work that needs to be done instead of less expensive cosmetic work.
 - You can give an overview and any problems you might expect.
2. **The supports** may include a variety of information. The details in the explanation depend how much your client wants to know:
 - Do they need all the details?
 - Will plans or sketches help them understand what is to be done?
 - Do they need to know the different materials available, along with price?

Just as a writer chooses details to support the main idea and purpose, so do you. You can explain this – or anything else – by starting with main idea and working through the details. You will use definitions, examples, comparison, and cause and effect details that relate to the situation. You will be practicing your skills and demonstrating your expertise.

CONCLUSION

Ask you read, ask yourself, "What is this about?" If you can answer the question, you understand the main idea. If you can't answer it, go back and follow the steps to identify the main idea.

Build your skills from the base up. As you move to more difficult concepts, either in reading or in the complexity of a job, the skill of separating the main idea from the details still holds. The goal will remain the same: understanding the main task and all the details necessary to get you to a successful completion.

Work to understand how the details relate to the main idea. This may take longer, but if you get the effects you want, the time will be well spent. When you understand the purpose of a passage, you find what you need, and, most importantly, find what you are supposed to learn.

Summary

1. **Focus on the main idea before you start.** Identify the main idea through the title, the topic sentence, and find the supporting details that expand the main idea.
2. **Use the supporting details** to help you sort out the main idea. The supporting details answer questions such as how, what, why, where, when, and in what order.
3. **Notice how your trade / technical material is organized.** Do a visual check of the passage for length, for highlighted information and diagrams. Look for the patterns.
4. **Understand the types of details** found in technical writing. The supporting details give examples, order (sequence) of steps or ideas, definitions, comparisons and contrasts, and causes and effects.

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5. **Use an organized approach** to reading. Understand why you are reading so that you focus on the details you need. Make sure you also find what you are required to learn.
4.
 6. **Translate what you have read into your own words** as though you were explaining it to someone else. Work from the main idea through to the details.
 7. **If you get lost, stop.** Find out where you got lost and try to identify the problem: Is it main idea, technical vocabulary, a math formula?
5.
 8. **Accept that picking out supports to the main idea and listing information takes longer than just reading.** The results – identifying, finding and understanding the information you read – are essential to your trade success.

ANSWER PAGE

PART II Passage 1, Shop Ventilation

1. The main idea of paragraph one is the importance of maintaining ventilation in a shop when operating an engine.
2. The main idea of paragraph two is why good ventilation is necessary in the shop – because carbon monoxide, a dangerous gas, is produced by the engine.
3. Details from paragraph two include the facts that carbon monoxide is colorless and odorless and that inhaling large amounts can be lethal.
4. The main idea of paragraph three is that cleaning solvents can also cause toxic fumes.

PART III Passage 2 and Passage 3, Topic Sentences

1. What is the main idea of **Passage 2**?
 - a) bacteria
2. What is the main idea of **Passage 3**?
 - a) characteristics of soil bacteria.
3. Look again at the answers to the questions on main idea. Each of these has the makings of a good title.