

GRADE 7

Empire State

English Language Arts



Sample
Lesson

Continental Press

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Main Idea and Supporting Details

RLC 3; PI 1.R.5, 6; WLC 2; PI 1.W.5, 8, 11

The **main idea** is what a passage is about. Every book, chapter, and paragraph has a main idea. It can usually be stated in one sentence. The sentence that expresses the most important idea in a paragraph is called a **topic sentence**. This sentence is usually the first or last sentence of a paragraph, but it could be any sentence—or none at all. The other sentences in a paragraph are **details** that support or explain the main idea. Identifying the main idea is one of the most important reading skills; it helps you focus your reading.

After reading a passage, you may be asked to identify the main idea in different ways. You may be asked to choose a title for the passage or a heading for part of the passage, or to identify a detail that supports the main idea. You might be asked to choose the detail that is *least* important to the main idea. You also may be asked to identify the best summary of a main idea. A summary may state the main idea in a different way.

Guided Practice

Read this article. Then answer the questions.

The Popham Colony

by Maria Santos

1 The year is 1607. England’s King James I has chartered a company to plant two colonies in the “New World.” One group of colonists lands in Virginia. Their settlement will become known as Jamestown. A few months later, a second group sets sail under the leadership of George Popham. They settle near the mouth of the Kennebec River, in Maine. They name their colony after George’s uncle, Sir John Popham, who is providing money for the venture.

2 We all know what happened to Jamestown. After years of hardship, starvation, and bitter struggles with American Indians, the colony flourished. But what happened to Popham? How did Jamestown’s “twin colony,” the first English settlement in New England, lose its place in the history books?

3 Popham had a more promising beginning than did Jamestown. The colonists traded peacefully with the Indians for furs. They gathered wild roots to sell as medicine. They built snug houses, storehouses, a fort, and a ship to sail home in if the colony failed.

4 But the Maine coast turned out to be much colder than George Popham had been led to believe. The winter was harsh, and snow fell abundantly. The firewood the men had cut was too green to burn well. Relations with the American Indians deteriorated. Popham’s second-in-command, Raleigh Gilbert, a man of “small judgment and experience,” schemed to seize control of the colony. Fights broke out among the men.



5 Then in February 1608, George Popham died, and Gilbert assumed leadership of the colony. That fall, a ship arrived with the news that Gilbert's wealthy brother, John, had died, too, and he had named Raleigh his heir. At once, Raleigh ordered the colony abandoned. The colonists, all of whom apparently had survived except Popham himself, sailed home to England. The colony had lasted 14 months and was soon forgotten—but not quite.

6 It seemed that one of the settlers, John Hunt, had drawn a detailed map of the colony. It showed 18 buildings, including the fort. Somehow the map ended up in the hands of the Spanish ambassador to London. It was discovered in Spain nearly 300 years later. Details from the map were used to figure out the location of the colony. An archaeologist looked for the site in the 1960s. He turned up a few artifacts but no buildings. He concluded that either the map was wrong or the buildings had eroded away.

7 Then Jeffrey Brain became interested in the site. He was an archaeologist with 40 years' experience, affiliated with the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. By



Jeffrey Brain's Popham dig

comparing the map with the rise and fall of the land, he guessed that the map's "north" was actually 20 degrees west of where it was supposed to be. In 1997, Brain and his team of students dug up the colony's main storehouse—right where Hunt's map had it.

8 Over the next three years, Brain and his team of students found another building and more than a thousand artifacts at Popham. They found pottery, tools, buttons, musket balls, and pieces of armor. But their most exciting discovery is the detailed picture emerging of the earliest colonial life in America.

Which title **best** expresses the main idea of the article?

- A Why New England's First Colony Failed
- B Jamestown and Popham Compared and Contrasted
- C What Archaeologist Jeffrey Brain Discovered at Popham
- D How a "Lost" Colony Was Rediscovered Through Archaeology



A title often can be a concise way of stating the main idea of an article. Although the subjects in choices A, B, and C are touched on in the article, the main idea of the article is that the Popham colony was "lost" and then rediscovered centuries later. So, choice D is the answer you want.



What is the **main** action that is described in paragraphs 3–5 of the article?

- A The settlement thrives at first but ultimately fails.
- B George Popham’s untimely death dooms the colony.
- C The settlers are unprepared for the harsh Maine winter.
- D The Popham colony’s story is one of violence and greed.



Choices B, C, and D are mentioned in these paragraphs, but you’re looking for the main action that covers all three paragraphs. The paragraphs explain how the settlement succeeded at first but ultimately failed. Choice A is the correct answer.

Which of these is the topic sentence of paragraph 6?

- A It seemed that one of the settlers, John Hunt, had drawn a detailed map of the colony.
- B He concluded that either the map was wrong or the buildings had eroded away.
- C Somehow the map ended up in the hands of the Spanish ambassador to London.
- D An archaeologist looked for the site in the 1960s.



You know that the topic sentence is often the first sentence of a paragraph. The first sentence of this paragraph explains that one of the settlers had drawn a detailed map of the colony. The rest of the paragraph provides details to support this idea. Choice A is the correct answer.

Which detail provides the **best** evidence that John Hunt’s map was accurate?

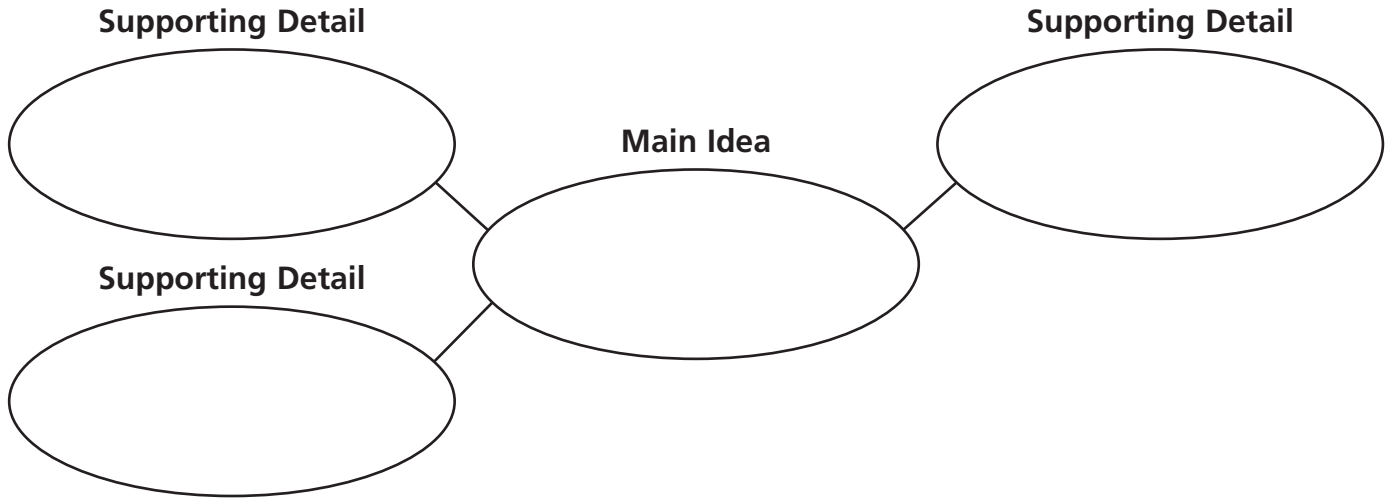
- A The map’s “north” was 20 degrees off.
- B The map showed 18 buildings, including the fort.
- C Jeffrey Brain used the map to find the storehouse.
- D The map was used to find the location of the colony.




This question asks you to provide a specific detail to support an idea. The best proof that the map was accurate is that Jeffrey Brain and his team used the map to find the storehouse. The map would have to be accurate to help a person find the location of a specific building. Choice C is the correct answer.



Write the main idea of the article in the center circle of the graphic organizer below. Write the most important supporting details in the outer circles.



 A main idea web can help you see clearly how the supporting details relate to the main idea.

Center space: *Popham was a colony in Maine that was “lost” and then rediscovered through archaeology.*

- Outer spaces:**
1. *Popham was the second colony in the New World.*
 2. *One of the settlers had drawn a detailed map of the colony.*
 3. *In 1997, Jeffrey Brain and a team of students found buildings and artifacts at Popham.*

Read this article. Then answer the questions.

“The Most American Thing About America”

by Kelly Ostertag

1 In 1874, two ministers started a modest summer adult education program on a 50-acre camping area in southwestern New York State. The Methodist Church owned the site, near Lake Chautauqua, and used it for religious gatherings. The goal of the Chautauqua Assembly was to train Sunday school teachers in a peaceful, resort-like setting. But within two years, the program began to include science and language classes, lectures on politics and

history, music, and theater. The grounds expanded to hundreds of acres, and the program went on all summer long. The Chautauqua Assembly was on its way to becoming the Chautauqua Institution.

2 To understand the impact of the Chautauqua Institution, you have to imagine America before the age of mass media. Many people went to work at age 14 or 15. Many did



not go to college, if they even graduated from high school. There were no movies. There was no radio or television. There was no Internet. In larger towns and cities there were popular theater and band concerts, perhaps even an opera house. Most Americans had to create their own entertainment and do their best to get an education.

3 That was why Chautauqua, and the Chautauqua movement, became such an amazing success. A vacation at Chautauqua and the train fare to get there were basically affordable, and many middle-class people could go there to learn about current events and the latest discoveries in science. They could see a play, hear a concert, or take dance lessons. They could enjoy tennis, rowing, and swimming. They could learn to speak French or to play the clarinet. They could hear speeches by leading political figures. Those who came for religious inspiration could hear sermons by famous preachers and sing hymns composed at Chautauqua for Chautauqua services.

4 By 1882, Chautauqua correspondence classes were available to anyone within reach of the U.S. mail. By 1900, at least 50 “daughter Chautauquas” had been founded in scenic areas around the country. More than 10,000 local Chautauqua reading circles had sprung up and, in 1904, lecturers and entertainers



One of the main buildings at the present-day Chautauqua Institution.

traveled the Chautauqua circuit, appearing in tents in towns throughout the United States.

5 There were, however, many people who considered Chautauqua events bland and boring. Some preferred to attend horse races or spend a day at an amusement park. Radio, movies, and the Great Depression all helped to end the interest in and ability to attend the Chautauqua circuit, but the Chautauqua Institution is still very popular. People still travel to the original site, now more than 740 acres. These enthusiasts would probably have agreed with President Theodore Roosevelt, who called Chautauqua, “the most American thing about America.”

Which of these was **not** featured in the Chautauqua program?

- A** lectures on science
- B** political speeches
- C** water sports
- D** horse races



Some test questions ask you to choose a detail that is *not* contained in the article. A careful reading will help you find the one wrong piece of information. This article tells you that lectures on science, political speeches, and water sports were all part of the Chautauqua program, but that some people preferred to go to horse races. Choice D is the correct answer.



Which sentence expresses the main idea of paragraph 1?

- A The Chautauqua Assembly was on its way to becoming the Chautauqua Institution.
- B The goal of the Chautauqua Assembly was to train Sunday school teachers in a peaceful, resort-like setting.
- C The grounds expanded to hundreds of acres, and the program went on all summer long.
- D The Methodist Church owned the site, near Lake Chautauqua, and used it for religious gatherings.



In paragraph 1, the topic sentence is not the first sentence. The first paragraph describes Chautauqua's founding and its original intent: to train Sunday school teachers. Choice B is the correct answer.

What is the main idea of paragraph 2?

- A Not everyone had access to entertainment and education.
- B Life was boring without the Chautauqua circuit.
- C Only the middle class could afford to travel.
- D Chautauqua offered a lot to see.



The first sentence of this paragraph is the topic sentence. The other sentences offer information to support it. The kind of life many people led in the late 1800s and early 1900s was very different from the kind of lifestyle most Americans have today. Choice A is the correct answer.

This article is **mostly** about

- A education by mail
- B the Chautauqua lectures
- C the history of Chautauqua
- D popular culture in the 1800s



In test questions about the main idea, wrong answer choices may include supporting details (choice B), irrelevant details (choice A), or generalizations of which the main idea is an example (choice D). One way to decide is to think about which answer choice would make the best title. This article is about Chautauqua's history, so choice C is the answer you want.



Independent Practice

Read this article about a historical settlement in New York state. Then answer questions 1 through 5.

1 Mount Sinai is an archaeological site on the shore of the Long Island Sound. The area has a rich history of the area's earliest settlers.

Nonowatuck, or “stream that dries up,” was the original name given to the area. This American Indian name was used by the members of the Seatocots family of Indians who lived here. Several archaeological sites document that humans had lived near Mt. Sinai harbor for thousands of years.

2 An archaeological site at Hopkin's Landing provided clues to the area's original residents. Shallow oval basins were lined with fire-cracked rock. The basins contained shell, bone fragments, and debris from stone toolmaking. Archaeologists could tell that American Indians lived there from about 2000 B.C. until the late 1600s.

3 Colonial settlers began negotiations with the local American Indians to buy land east of Setauket on the north shore of Long Island. At that time the area was called “Old Mans.” In 1664, settlers obtained a deed to the land from the Indians. After the purchase, parcels of the territory were divided and given to individuals. Other lands were held for later subdivision. Once lots were distributed, trading began. This allowed individuals to purchase larger pieces of property in the area. The colonial families who settled on these lands established farms and businesses.



4 The origin of the name Old Mans is not known. Several legends exist as to the source of the name. The most prominent concerns John Scott. Scott was known for his sneaky business deals. Major John Gotherson, an elderly Englishman, came to the New World looking to buy land. John Scott assured Major Gotherson he could obtain property for him but never closed the deal. Gotherson had already given him the money to do so. “Old” Major Gotherson sent representatives to claim the land he thought he owned. American Indians refused to turn over the land because there was no deal in place. Locals started referring to the land as “the Old Mans.”

- 1 This article is **mostly** about
- A Seatocot Indians living in Mount Sinai
 - B English businessmen in Mount Sinai
 - C the early inhabitants of Mount Sinai
 - D colonial landowners of Mount Sinai



- 2 Which of these **best** states the main idea of paragraph 2?
- A American Indians were the first residents in the area.
 - B American Indians ate a bounty of fish from the harbor.
 - C Oval basins found at the site were lined with fire-cracked rock.
 - D Hopkins Landing provided clues about the area’s first residents.
- 3 Which of these phrases **best** describes the main idea of paragraph 4?
- A why long distance deals are dangerous
 - B where the name “Old Mans” came from
 - C why American Indians retained the land
 - D how John Scott swindled John Gotherson
- 4 Which of the following would be the **best** title for the article?
- A How “Old Mans” Came to Be
 - B English Settlers Who Visited Mount Sinai
 - C The Early Settlers of the Mount Sinai Region
 - D The Original Seatocot Indians of Mount Sinai
- 5 Explain why the Mount Sinai area attracted early settlers. Use details from the article to support your answer.
