**Work in Pairs or in Groups of 3:**

Day/Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Names and student IDs:

(1) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(2) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

(3) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**MAIN IDEAS AND SUPPORTING DETAILS**

One important strategy to help us do well on the TOEFL test is identifying and using main ideas and supporting details appropriately in all language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

**MAIN IDEA**

THE MAIN IDEA is what a text is mostly about—the most general and the most important thing the author wants readers to know. It is the ‘soul’ of the text. It is the KEY idea that the writer wants readers to remember.

So, a main idea is …

1. the most general idea in the text
2. the key idea that the author wants the reader to remember
3. the idea that holds together the other sentences in the text

For example:

*Today's postal service is more efficient and reliable than ever before. Mail that used to take months to move by horse and foot now moves around the country in days or hours by truck, train, and plane. First-class mail usually moves from New York City to Los Angeles in three days or less. If your letter or package is urgent, the U.S. Postal Service offers Priority Mail and Express Mail services. Priority Mail is guaranteed to go anywhere in the United States in two to three days or less. Express Mail will get your package there overnight.*

Which of the following sentences best summarizes the main idea of the passage?

1. Express Mail is a good way to send urgent mail.
2. Mail service today is more effective and dependable than it was in the past.
3. First-class mail usually takes three days or less.

Choices **(1)** and **(3)** are too narrow/specific—they tell us *only* about a certain part of the passage: Choice (1) only tells about the Express Mail—it cannot be the main idea; Choice (3) only tells about First-Class Main. The passage tells more than that. Therefore, Choices (1) and (3) cannot be the main idea.

Choice **(2)**—"Mail service today is more effective and dependable than it was in the past"—is general enough to cover the ideas in the whole passage.

And the rest of the sentences *support* the idea in this sentence: Each sentence offers "proof" that the postal service today is indeed more efficient and reliable. Thus, the writer aims to tell us about the efficiency and reliability of today's postal service.

**LEARNING TIP**: *If you are having trouble identifying the main ideas in a story, after reading the text, close it and try asking yourself these questions:*

1. What is it about? *Modern Postal Service*
2. What is the writer trying to tell us about it? *Modern postal service is more effective and dependable than that of the old days.*

Now, try this!

**Practice 1:**

Read the following texts, and write down the main idea of each text.

Text 1.

*Grass is one of Earth's most useful plants. Grass comes in different kinds. One type of grass is the one that grows in the yard to make the yard look green and fresh. Other types of grass are those that feed people and animals, for example wheat, rice, and other grains. So, grass is important for people and animals.*

|  |
| --- |
| The Main Idea of text 1: |

Text 2.

*Invention of helicopter has a long history. An Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci first sketched a flying machine in 1483. His sketch showed a screw-like wing made of stiff linen. He never got it off the ground. A real helicopter like it flew almost 500 years later!*

|  |
| --- |
| The Main Idea of text 2: |

**SUPPORTING DETAILS**

In a nutshell, we can say that supporting details:

1. Explain or describe the main idea
2. Give more detailed information about the main idea
3. Provide evidence to support the main idea.

Read again the text in the example (see below).

*Today's postal service is more efficient and reliable than ever before. Mail that used to take months to move by horse and foot now moves around the country in days or hours by truck, train, and plane. First-class mail usually moves from New York City to Los Angeles in three days or less. If your letter or package is urgent, the U.S. Postal Service offers Priority Mail and Express Mail services. Priority Mail is guaranteed to go anywhere in the United States in two to three days or less. Express Mail will get your package there overnight.*

The main idea of the text is stated in the first sentence: *Today’s postal service is more efficient and reliable.*

All other sentences in the text support the fact that today’s postal service is more efficient and reliable.

Now, try this!

**Practice 2.**

Read text 1 (page 2) and list down two supporting details of the main idea.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 |  |
| 2 |  |

Read text 2 (page 3) and list down three supporting details of the main idea

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 |  |
| 2 |  |
| 3 |  |

**MAIN IDEA AND SUPPORTING DETAILS**

Now, let’s try to identify the main idea and supporting details of the following text selections.

**Practice 3. Main Ideas and Supporting Details**

|  |
| --- |
| ONE LANGUAGE ISN’T ENOUGH  Everyone says that English is a global language –it is used all over the world. Certainly, much of the world’s international business and politics are conducted in English. However, as Americans, we should be embarrassed by our lack of knowledge of other languages. Students in elementary and secondary schools and in colleges and universities may take language classes, but they are not enough for a student to communicate well in the language—even as tourists. People in other countries will not respect us if we do not try to understand their languages and cultures. In the long run, we may have serious problems if the business world ever changes to another language such as Spanish or Chinese. American schools need to prepare students to face the world with more than just English. Even though the world seems to be learning English, we as native speakers of English have a responsibility to learn about the language and cultures of our global neighbors.  (Source: NorthStar Buidling Skills for the TOEFL iBT, Intermediate, John Beaumont, Pearson Longman, Unit 5, p. 85) |

Main idea:

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Supporting Details:

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Practice 4.**

Searching the Internet:

* Find two short paragraphs on the Internet (a minimum of 150 to 250 words).
* Write the paragraphs down and for each paragraph, identify the main idea and supporting details.

Text 1:

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Main idea of text 1:

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| --- |
|  |

Supporting Details:

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| --- |
|  |

Text 2

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Main idea of text 2:

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Supporting Details:

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| --- |
|  |

Thank you!

**Sources:**

Beaumont, John, NorthStar Building Skills for the TOEFL iBT, Pearson Longman, Unit 5.

Reading and finding main idea Study Guide, education.com (<http://www.education.com/study-help/article/finding-main-idea1/>)

Main idea and supporting details, Indiana.edu (<http://cia.indiana.edu/files/ITRI_5_MISD-complete.pdf>)