

What's the "Main Idea"?

How a little bit of imagination goes a long way

by L.P. Chase

How many nights have you listened to the typical homework moan coming from the dining room table echoing like this, "Mom, I don't understand this writing assignment?" Like most parents, after a big huffy exhale, you probably rush right in and complete the assignment just to get it over with, and not have to suffer through the pains of another homework drama. Unfortunately, in doing this, the ones who do suffer are the children who simply did not understand.

I watched my ten-year-old son struggle with what I thought was a seemingly simple homework assignment to write the "main idea" of the story. I took for granted that the concept of a "main idea" was obvious to everyone, but obviously not to this ten-year old.

As I peered over his shoulder, I couldn't help but notice the way he extracted the first line of every story and wrote it down as the main idea. "What are you doing?" I asked him. He didn't really know. Trying not to get frustrated, I asked him to explain to me what he thought the main idea of a story was. He couldn't really give me an answer. As I thought about it, something occurred to me. When writing an essay or short story, he always began with the standard first line, "In this essay, I am going to tell you about..." No wonder he would think the first line had all the information he needed! I sat for a while racking my brain to find a way to explain this to him in a manner that would *encourage*, not discourage him from writing.

Knowing that most children respond very well to visual explanations of abstract ideas, I tried to come up with a visual to help him understand the abstract concept of a main idea. Something he could grab hold of and make the connection. That's when I decided to make the story a meal.

I suggested he think of the story as dinner. First, start off with an appetizer, whose job it is to entice the reader to keep going. Then there's a salad and side dishes such as broccoli, applesauce or mashed potatoes, which adds a variety of flavors and textures to the story – the additional information to make it fuller. Of course, we have the main dish, or main theme such as roast beef, which is the focus of the meal. Add on the beverages, and condiments such as gravy, ketchup and dressing, which add the small details that make the meal or the story become more delicious, more complete. Dessert is the final portion of the meal where the story winds down resulting in a neatly wrapped up conclusion.

What we are looking for in a main idea of a story is simply the main course of the dinner, the “meat.” If we get too stuffed with the appetizer and side dishes, the taste of the main course gets lost and the dinner becomes a big blur of food. This goes for the story as well. Too much information becomes overwhelming and the main idea gets lost in the mix. I suggested if he reads through carefully, he would be able to distinguish between the appetizer, the side dishes and the main course and stay on track. This is helpful, not only when reading a story and answering questions, but also when organizing and writing an essay or short story.

As he thought about what I said, he finally realized taking the first line of the story wasn't the main idea at all. It was just the grabber. He went back and read his story again. In applying the “make the story a meal” concept, he was able to make the connection and complete the assignment more easily. Homework was finished and painless for both of us. Over time, he was able to easily apply this concept on his own.

Whether your child is trying to find the main idea of a story or write his or her own story, this “make the story a meal” concept will help keep them organized and on the right track. The next time you hear the homework moan, don't rush in to save the day. Make the, “I don't understand” go away. Try to come up with an innovative way to help your child make a connection that he or she can relate to. *Encourage*, don't discourage. A little bit of imagination goes a long way.