Every essay and every paragraph has a main idea. Essays and paragraphs also have supporting details that reinforce, exemplify, or prove those main ideas. Essays and paragraphs also can have extraneous information that is included to add interest or detail to the main or supporting ideas.

Determining which are the main ideas, which are supporting ideas, and which are extraneous details is a critical skill when you are reading for information. You need to be able to determine the author’s main point and not be distracted by the less important statements.

Read the following paragraph. It is the introduction to an essay about Stephen Hawking, a famous physicist. Think about the author’s main point, and try to decide which are supporting details and which are details intended to catch the reader’s attention.

On January 8, 1642, Galileo Galilei, the great Italian astronomer and physicist, died at his villa near Florence, Italy. He had spent the last decade of his life under house arrest after being convicted of heresy for claiming that the Sun, not Earth, was the center of the solar system. Exactly 300 years later, on January 8, 1942, another great physicist was born. While he has never been imprisoned for his theories on the cosmos, Stephen Hawking is nonetheless a captive. He is imprisoned by a neuromuscular disease that has left him paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. Hawking’s brilliant mind is trapped in a body that barely functions. Despite his disability, he has become a college professor, an author, and one of the world’s leading authorities on mathematics, cosmology, and black holes.

The main idea of this paragraph is that Stephen Hawking has excelled in his field even though he is trapped by a disease that has put him in a wheelchair. The supporting details are that he has a neuromuscular disease and that his body barely functions. The initial discussion of Galileo is intended to catch the reader’s attention and set up a comparison between Hawking’s wheelchair and a prison.

This comparison with Galileo is a less important detail. It is not essential to an understanding of the rest of the paragraph. It does serve to clarify what the author is trying to say and make it more interesting to read.

Whenever you read, and especially when you read nonfiction, try to determine the author’s main idea and the supporting details. Identifying the less important details and understanding why the author chose to include them can aid in your understanding of what you are reading.
Read the following passages. Several phrases are listed after each one. Identify each phrase as either a main idea, supporting idea, or extra information.

1. In 1812, while the British controlled the island chain, signs of volcanic activity became evident on Sumbawa. For the next few years there were several small earthquakes and minor eruptions of steam from the volcano. The people of Sumbawa reported that a cloud often surrounded the mountain, a cloud that did not move. The native priests on nearby Java claimed that volcanic eruptions were signs that the gods would soon shake the Europeans off of the islands.
   a. The British controlled the island chain. __________
   b. Signs of volcanic activity became evident. __________
   c. There were several small earthquakes and minor eruptions of steam. ______
   d. People of Sumbawa reported that a cloud often surrounded the mountain. ________________
   e. Native priests on nearby Java claimed that volcanic eruptions were signs that the gods would soon shake the Europeans off of the islands. ___________

2. Hawking continued his research in cosmology. His study focused on the basic laws that govern the universe. Using Einstein’s theory of relativity, Hawking theorized that the universe began with the Big Bang and would end in black holes. The Big Bang theory states that the universe began with one singular explosive event that created everything including stars, planets, and black holes. Black holes are regions of space that have such a dense gravity that nothing can escape from them, not even light. Hawking believes that ultimately the entire universe will be sucked into a black hole in an event he calls the Big Crunch. Over the years his study of black holes has revolutionized the field of theoretical physics.
   a. Hawking continued his research in cosmology. _________________
   b. His study focused on the basic laws that govern the universe. ____________
   c. Hawking theorized that the universe began with the Big Bang and would end in black holes. ________________
   d. The Big Bang theory states that the universe began with one singular explosive event. _______________
   e. Hawking believes that ultimately the entire universe will be sucked into a black hole in an event he calls the Big Crunch. ________________