Just as a building rests upon a foundation, the main idea of a paragraph rests on supporting details. Just as a builder decorates and furnishes a building to make it comfortable and attractive, an author often includes extra details in a paragraph to make it clearer and more interesting. In both buildings and paragraphs there are parts that are essential and there are parts that are not as important.

Determining the relative importance of the information in a paragraph is an important skill. To fully appreciate and understand what you read, it is necessary to distinguish between the essential facts and the colorful background information and descriptions that simply make the facts more interesting. You must determine what information is most important and what is least important in making the main idea clear.

Read the following paragraph from an article about William Clarke Quantrill who became a Confederate officer during the Civil War. Distinguish between those details that are crucial in supporting the main idea and those that are interesting, but not entirely necessary.

Quantrill — wiry, blue-eyed, and nearly six-feet tall — was an opportunist, but his personal courage and determination at everything he set out to do was beyond question.

Although gambling gave him a taste of the fortune he was seeking, card playing seemed a slow way to make money.

He turned to crime with increasing frequency and, during the years preceding the Civil War, was accused of cattle stealing, horse rustling, mail robbery, and finally, murder.

The main idea of this paragraph is that Quantrill was determined and courageous regarding everything he set out to accomplish. Sentences within the paragraph include both supporting details and extra details. For example, in the first sentence, the idea that Quantrill was an opportunist is a supporting detail related to the main idea of the paragraph. But the fact that he was wiry, blue-eyed, and six-feet tall is extra detail. It is important to know that Quantrill was an opportunist, but it is not vital to know he was wiry, blue-eyed, and six-feet tall.

Similarly, in the third sentence there are both supporting details and extra details. It is very important to know that Quantrill turned to crime, but it is not as important to know what crimes of which he was accused.

The extra details have less relative importance and the supporting details have more relative importance. Being able to distinguish between them is an important skill. Whenever you read, try to determine the relative importance of all the information presented. By doing so, you will gain a better understanding of the author’s main point and purpose in a story.
In each of the following exercises, read the passage and the main idea statement beneath it. Then, on a separate piece of paper, list the details that support the main idea under the heading “Details Having the Most Relative Importance.” Also, list the details that are extra under the heading “Details Having Less Relative Importance.”

1. There are two basic approaches to prolonging life. One is to eliminate the specific diseases that predominantly afflict the older segment of the population. Cancer and heart disease are foremost among these. The other is to postpone the general deterioration of the body for as long as possible. This deterioration is known as the state, or disease, of aging.

Main Idea:  There are two basic approaches to prolonging life.

2. Cesar Chavez was 10 years old in 1937. That was the year his family began working as migrant laborers. Traveling up and down California, following the harvestable crops, Cesar Chavez's youth was spent in hot, dusty fields. His days passed in backbreaking toil as he stooped down to pick up sugar beets or lettuce, plant by plant, row by row. After long hours in the fields picking whichever crop needed harvesting, Cesar, his family and the many other migrant laborers went to their miserable shelters. These shelters were tiny shacks without electricity and without plumbing. Whole families slept crowded together in one hot, tiny room, waiting to begin another day of work.

Main Idea:  Cesar Chavez's youth was characterized by poverty and hardship.

3. In general, those who perished in Africa's killer drought of the late 1960s and early 1970s were the very young and the old. Weakened by hunger, they were killed by measles, pneumonia, and other diseases that are not usually fatal. In addition, meningitis was responsible for many deaths in Chad, while cholera did its dirty work in Senegal and threatened Burkina Faso (then called Upper Volta) as well.

Main Idea:  Africa's killer drought of the late 1960s and early 1970s killed many people.

4. The Devil Fox continued his career of rapine, making audacious raids and hair-breadth escapes and finally began, as do many old foxes, to kill from a lust for slaughter. Thus it was that Digby lost ten lambs in one night. Carroll lost seven the next night. Later a duck pond was wholly devastated and scarcely a night passed but someone in the region had to report the wanton destruction of poultry, lambs, or sheep, and finally even calves.

Main Idea:  The Devil Fox eventually began to kill from a lust for blood.