FOR-PD's Reading Strategy of the Month

(Developed by Zygouris-Coe, V. & Glass, C., 2004)

Rationale:
Understanding the main idea or gist of a piece of text is a sophisticated reading task. Textbook chapters, articles, paragraphs, sentences, or passages all have topics, main ideas, and supporting details. The topic is the broad, general theme, message or what some call the subject. The main idea is the "key concept" being expressed. Details, major or minor, support the main idea by telling how, what, when, where, why, how much, or how many. Locating the topic, main idea, and supporting details helps readers understand the point(s) the writer is attempting to express. Comprehension is increased when a student can identify the relationship between topics, main ideas, and details.

In narrative text, characters' actions, motives, problems, and personalities all contribute to the overall theme(s) of the story. The main idea often depends on the reader; if the reader has had similar experiences to the character, the reader is more likely to enjoy a richer, more fulfilling reading experience. On the other hand, poems, which use figurative language, metaphor, and imagery, require the reader to dig deeper for meaning; it may not be what it appears to be on the surface.

Nonfiction presents its own problems; what is important may relate to a combination of interesting details and information essential to the basic understanding of the topic. Many textbooks are conceptually dense and therefore struggling readers have difficulty identifying what information is important and what information is extraneous (Lenski, Wham, & Johns, 1999). Content textbooks contain what Garner, Gillingham, & White (Lenski et al., 1999) call 'seductive details'. For example, a text may include information about Thomas Jefferson and his biracial children, these details are included to engage student interest yet they tend to pull student attention away from identifying the main idea of a passage. The ability to determine importance in text requires the use of related comprehension strategies such as drawing inferences and summarizing information, both of which require the student to think critically about the information being read. A good reader is able to sift and sort through text and pull out the essential or key ideas while the struggling reader tends to pay attention to everything in the text. Nonfiction reading is reading to learn so therefore determining main ideas is crucial when reading informational text. The reader must decide what is important and remember that information if anything is to be learned (Harvey& Goudvis, 2000).

Almost every paragraph in informational text has a key concept or main idea. The main idea is the most important piece of information the author wants the reader to know. Sometimes the author will state the main idea explicitly somewhere in the paragraph either at the beginning of the paragraph, in the middle, or at the end. The sentence in which the main idea is stated is the topic sentence of that paragraph. However, an author, often, will not state his/her main idea explicitly, leaving the reader to infer what the author intended. Cunningham and Moore (Hennings, 1991) termed this "*invention.*" Invention requires readers to create rather than locate, ideas. A reader relates what is in the text to what is already known about the topic; making connections between significant details and making inferences that go beyond the details explicitly stated in the text (Hennings, 1991).

How to Use the Strategy:
The **main idea of a paragraph** answers the question: "What is the main point or points the author is expressing about the topic?" The stated main idea is found in one or two sentences within the paragraph. The main idea answers two important questions:

1. Who or what have I just read about?
2. What was the main point or points the author made about this topic?

An **explicit main idea** may be anywhere in the paragraph, but is typically found in these locations: first sentence, last sentence, middle of paragraph, or a combination of two sentences.

An **implied main idea** is a sentence that the reader composes rather than a statement found in the selection. This reader-developed sentence answers the same basic questions: Who or what did I just read about? And what was the main point or points the author made? To determine the implied main idea, readers should follow these steps:

1. Read the paragraph and ask, "Who or what did I just read about?"
2. Ask, "What are the important details from the reading?"
3. Determine the main idea by asking, "What is the single most important point the author is making about the topic based on the details?"
4. Use the information from the paragraph that answers these questions to formulate a sentence that states the main idea.

Lets look at how this might be done with a piece of text:

"What happens to thoroughbred race horses when they are too old to race? Essentially, there are two groups of "over-the-hill" racehorses. The first group is the unlucky ones. They are sold to slaughterhouses, where they become pet food or are killed and their meat becomes delicacies in Europe or Japan. The second group is the lucky ones who find their way to an Equine Retirement Foundation ranch. These ranches are run by people who love horses and who want to provide a final resting place for the horses that give their all as they raced. The people running the ranches understand the stress and effort that each horse went through in training and in running races. They reward the horses by letting them roam pastures, feeding them well, and letting them enjoy the companionship of other horses. And the horses are cared for by people who love and understand these gentle yet competitive animals."

1. **Who or what did I just read about?** I just read about thoroughbred racehorses.
2. **What are the important details from the reading?** The paragraph tells you that there are two kinds of horses, the horses that are lucky and the horses that are unlucky. The lucky horses go to farms where they are able to run around and live the life of a horse. The unlucky horses are sent to slaughterhouses where they are killed.
3. **What is the single most important point the author is making about the topic based on the details?** The author starts the paragraph with a question so the important point the author wants to make is to answer the question, "What happens to thoroughbred race horses when they are too old race?"
4. **The implied main idea for this paragraph:** Thoroughbred racehorses that are too old to race are either sold for slaughter or enjoy life at an Equine Retirement Foundation ranch.

Visual organizers provide students a framework for making decisions about main ideas and important supporting details in material that they are reading. The **Herringbone Pattern** is used to help students identify the main idea and the related supporting ideas of a lesson, text, or concept. It contains six questions that help students organize the details of the text. The visual pattern of the herringbone creates a framework for students to take notes and sort information. When modeling, teachers should remind the student to look for and identify the answers to the six questions. After all six questions have been answered; the information can be used to create a main idea sentence. Stress that the main idea always includes specifically "Who …did what." Some of the other information may be included, but it is not necessary to create the main idea. The Herringbone can also be used in reverse as a pre-writing strategy.

Ideas for Assessment:
Being able to identify the main idea is central to understanding the text. The graphic organizers presented here can form the foundation for assessing student's ability to determine the main idea. By looking at the information students have pulled from the text, teachers can quickly assess whether students area able to identify the central point of the reading. Teachers can informally ascertain the student's ability to identify the main idea through discussions of the text or written responses. A checklist can be used.

- Is the main idea an expression of the author's most important general point about the topic?
- Does the main idea make sense by itself?
- Is the main idea complete?

There many other ways teachers can assess the student's ability to identify the main idea. Some include: drawing the main idea and details, writing a newspaper article, or writing a one-minute paper on the reading. .
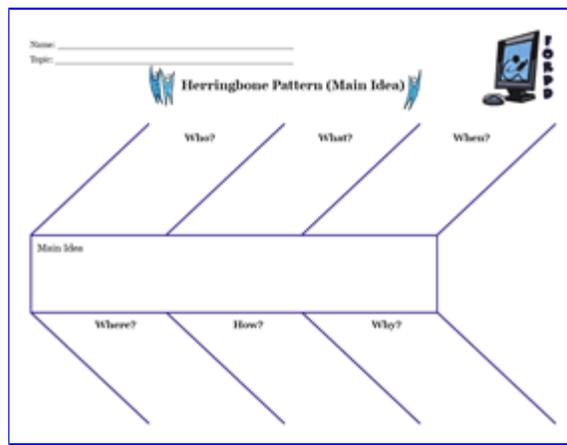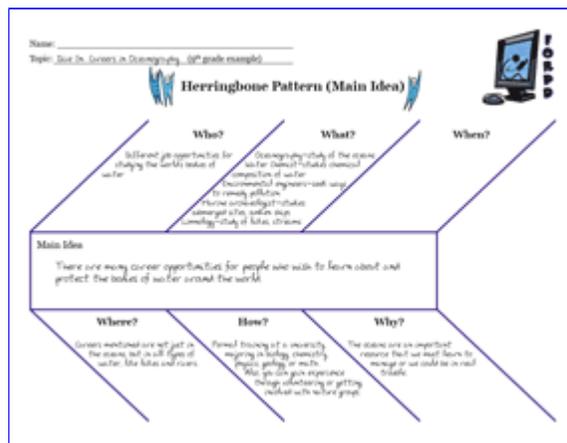
(Click on the graphic above to go to a pdf file of the Herringbone Pattern worksheet or go to the html file.)

Third grade example below used text from Reading & Math Sample FCAT Test Book
(http://firn.edu/doe/sas/fcat/pdf/fc3rib3a.pdf)
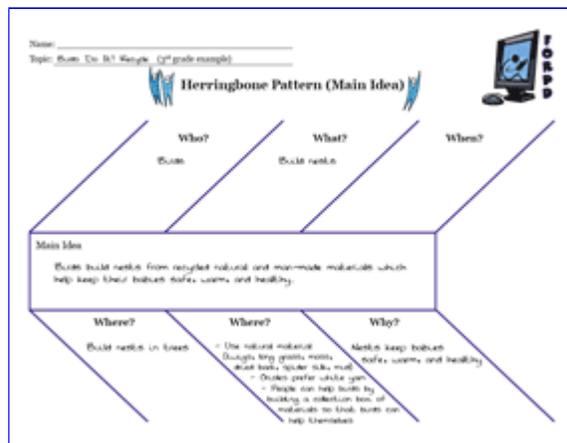
(Click on the graphic above to go to a pdf file of a sample elementary Herringbone Pattern worksheet.)

Ninth grade example below used text from Reading Sample FCAT Test Book
(http://firn.edu/doe/sas/fcat/pdf/fc9rib3a.pdf)

(Click on the graphic above to go to a pdf file of a sample secondary Herringbone Pattern worksheet.)

Resources
Additional Strategies
Sum it Up
http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/readquest/strat/summarize.html
You have students imagine they are placing a classified ad or sending a telegram, where every word used costs

them money. Tell them each word costs 10 cents, and then tell them they can spend "so much," like $2.00.

Column Notes
http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/readquest/strat/column.html
The column notes format lends itself to many variations. It may be that students would use it as a note-taking guide for their textbook reading; if so, then main ideas or headings would be listed in the left column, and details or explanations for each would be written in the right column.

Power Notes
http://wilearns.state.wi.us/apps/default.asp?cid=137
http://wilearns.state.wi.us/apps/default.asp?cid=138
http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/readquest/strat/pto.html
Power Thinking is an alternative system for outlining information that is hierarchical in nature. In other words, the information can be grouped according to main ideas, subtopics, and details. It considers information according to which level it belongs on, and we use numbers to signify those levels.

Teacher Resources
http://www.cerritos.edu/reading/Mainide3.htm - this site contains a tutorial that you can print out and use with middle and high school students.
http://atozteacherstuff.com/pages/358.shtml - this site contains a teacher lesson plan for teaching main idea to students in grades 1 and 2.
http://www.atozteacherstuff.com/pages/431.shtml - this site contains a teacher lesson plan for teaching main idea and note taking for grades 9-12.

Online Main Idea Practice for Students
http://www.daltonstate.edu/faculty/mnielsen/implied_main_idea1.htm
http://www.manatee.k12.fl.us/sites/elementary/palmasola/rcmi1.htm
http://www.harcourtschool.com/activity/book_buddy/rosie/skill_pre.html

References
Harvey, S. & Goudvis, A. (2000) *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension to enhance understanding.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Hennings, D. (1991) Essential reading: Targeting, tracking, and thinking about main ideas. *Journal of Reading*, (34) 5, p. 346-353.

Lenski, S., Wham, M.A., & Johns, J. (1999) *Reading and learning strategies for middle and high school students*. Dubuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt Publishing.

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