More than three hundred years ago, in La Rochelle, France, a boy named Andre dreamed of adventure and excitement in faraway lands. But his imagination could not match the reality of his future.

By the time he was eighteen, Andre had sailed across the Atlantic to an unknown place called Louisiana. The French king sent an expedition, led by Iberville, to establish a colony in his name. The young Andre served as the ship’s carpenter on that expedition. He later used his skill to repair the smaller vessels that explored the unknown waterways of this land claimed by the French.

We know about Andre’s adventures because he kept a journal. He described exotic scenes near the Gulf Coast and along the Mississippi River as far north as present-day Minnesota. Andre saw strange animals like the buffalo that traveled in great thundering herds and bears that they found hibernating in hollow trees in winter.

He told of thrilling experiences, including his trip with the French commander St. Denis to the Spanish colony of Mexico. His account becomes more personal
when he says the girls at the Spanish fort were sorry to see the young Frenchmen leave.

Andre’s writing includes descriptions of the cultures of the Indian nations he visited. He described great feasts with the Indians and the welcoming entertainment of music and dancing. One interesting detail was his report that Iberville left a young French cabin boy to live with the Indians to learn their language.

Some of these years in the colony brought more hardship and danger than adventure. Andre told of times when supplies ran low, such as the trip when some of the group ate leaves because they had no other food. He reported his firsthand experiences in the battles that resulted from the increasing conflicts with the Indians.

This young man, not much older than you are, went willingly to a place unknown not only to him, but to the rest of the world. By recording his observations, Andre helped write the story of French Louisiana.
Finding the Main Idea

Defining the Skill

When you read about a topic, do not try to remember every detail. Instead, look for the main idea of the paragraph. The main idea, a general or broad topic, is the most important idea in a reading. Finding the main idea will help you to understand the meaning of the paragraph.

The main idea is generally stated in the topic sentence, which is often the first sentence in a paragraph. The main idea is easier to identify when it is the first or the last sentence in the paragraph. It is more difficult to find when it is located in the middle of a reading. And, it is perhaps most difficult to identify when it is inferred and not actually stated. Regardless of where the main idea is stated, you can identify it by answering the question, “What is the most important idea in the reading?”

The main idea is followed by supporting details, which explain, describe, prove, or clarify. Supporting details may tell who, what, where, when, and why. Supporting details may also provide examples, facts, or statistics. If it is difficult to find the main idea, find the supporting details first and then determine to what they refer.

Try This!

Read the following paragraph and identify the main idea and the supporting details.

France needed to find a new way to fund the colony. King Louis XIV decided to allow a businessman to run the colony. He established a proprietorship and gave an individual a charter (contract) to operate the colony as a business. The proprietor was given almost total control and, in return, had to meet certain requirements. The proprietor had to send supplies and settlers to the colony regularly, and the colonial government had to follow French law.

You were correct if you said that the main idea was that France needed a new way to fund the colony of Louisiana. Supporting details include the fact that the king allowed a businessman to run the colony and that businessman (called a proprietor) operated the colony as a business.

It’s Your Turn!

Now read the following paragraph, found on page 185. First, identify the main idea and then any supporting details.

Slavery began in Louisiana in the early colonial days as a way to provide workers for the colony. A slave is a person who is bound to a life of service to others and who is considered property. Shiploads of slaves were first brought to the colony in 1716. The numbers continued to increase during the proprietorship of the Company. The slaves came from West Africa, where their cultures had long harvested rice and indigo. The Africans’ ability to grow rice added another staple food to the diet of the colony. Their knowledge and experience produced indigo and tobacco as Louisiana’s first cash crops.