Supporting details are the materials (examples, facts, ideas, illustrations, cases, anecdotes) used by the writer to explain, expand on, and develop the more general main idea.

Major and Minor Details

When you find the main idea in a passage, you have the most important idea the author intended. But in order for you to gain a complete understanding, the main idea may need to be defined, explained, proved or analyzed. In other words, the author uses details to fill in this important information. Some of these details directly support the main idea and are essential to understanding the idea. These are major details in the passages. Authors use minor details to indirectly support the main idea; it is not essential to remember them to comprehend the passage. If a major detail was omitted, the meaning might not be clear since basic information has not been included. If a minor detail was omitted, the material might not be as readable but would be just as understandable.

In the age of information, you are presented with more reading material than you can possibly assimilate, so it becomes increasingly important to be able to distinguish major details from minor details.

The main idea and major supporting details are often all you need for a clear and complete understanding of a reading passage. However, there are times when both the major and the minor details are very important. For example, if you learn that you have a certain illness, you are more likely to want to read detailed information about it, and you would be interested in every detail – from the major details giving the cause, symptoms, progression, and treatment, to the minor details such as the effects that aspirin would have on the illness. Also, in deciding whether minor details are needed, how can you overlook the fact that minor details make your reading more interesting?

When deciding whether a detail is major or minor, you should determine your purpose and need for the information as well as the main idea that the author wants you to understand.

EXAMPLE

The sun is the only important source of energy for the Earth and its atmosphere. Millions of other stars radiate energy, but they are too far away to affect the Earth. Energy is also released within the Earth, primarily from the decay of radioactive minerals. This heat flows upward to the crust; some also escapes to the atmosphere through volcanoes and geysers, but its quantity is insignificant. Tidal energy, resulting from the combination of terrestrial, lunar, and solar gravity, is also of minor importance in totality. Thus the sun supplies essentially all the energy that supports life on Earth, and it energizes most of the atmospheric processes.

The sun is a star of average size and average temperature, but its relative proximity to the Earth gives it a far greater influence on our planet than all other celestial bodies combined. The sun is a prodigal generator of energy. In a single second it produces more energy than has been used by humankind since civilization began. The sun functions as an enormous nuclear reactor, producing energy by fusion, which burns
only a very small portion of the sun’s mass but provides an immense and continuous flow of radiant energy that is dispersed in all directions.

EXPLANATION

The passage is about solar energy. The main idea is that the sun is the primary source of energy to support life on Earth. The underlined major details directly support this main idea.

PRACTICE

Read the following passage, and then answer the questions that follow. Note the major details have been underlined.

The Common Cold

Perhaps no ailment is as bothersome as the runny nose, itchy eyes, and generally uncomfortable feeling associated with the common cold. Cold-related symptoms are responsible for more days lost from work and more uncomfortable days spent at work than any other ailment.

Caused by any number of viruses (some experts claim there may be over 100 different viruses responsible for the common cold itself), colds are endemic (present to some degree) among people throughout the world. Current research indicates that otherwise healthy people carry cold viruses in their noses and throats a majority of the time. These viruses are held in check until a person’s resistance is lowered. Thus, in the true sense of the word, it is possible to “catch” a cold from the airborne droplets of another person’s sneeze or from skin to skin or mucous membrane contact. In fact, recent studies indicate that the hands themselves may be the greatest avenue of cold and other viral transmission. It should be obvious that covering your mouth with a tissue or handkerchief when sneezing is better than covering it with your bare hand, particularly if you next use your hand to touch food in a restaurant, shake a friend’s hand, or open a door.

Although numerous theories exist as to how to “cure” the cold, including taking mega doses of vitamin C, there is little hard evidence to support any of them. The best rule of thumb is to keep your resistance level high. Also, avoiding people with newly developed colds (colds appear to be most contagious during the first 24 hours of onset) appears to be advisable. Once you contract a cold, bed rest, plenty of fluids and aspirin for relief of pain and discomfort are the most “tried and true” remedies. Depending on the nature of the symptoms, several over-the-counter preparations have proven to be effective on a short-term basis.

1. The common cold is caused by _____________________________________________________________.

2. Three ways that colds spread are from _________________________________________________________.

3. The best way to prevent having a cold is ___________________________
Read the passage. Then answer the question.

Not too long ago, some music critics were saying that jazz had lost out to rock and would never be an important part of popular music again. However, with the advent of the compact disc, a new interest in jazz has arisen. The fine quality of sound on compact discs encourages close listening. This factor has increased sales of jazz and classical recordings on CDs. In addition, surveys have shown that unlike previous generations, more of the current generation of 20-somethings is expanding its musical interests, listening to and buying music they didn’t listen to as teenagers. They are now buying both the latest recordings and classics by jazz greats of the past.

1. According to this selection,
   a. Most people prefer classical music to jazz
   b. Jazz is lost forever
   c. The compact disc may have helped encourage interest in jazz

2. Why do people listen closely to music recorded on compact discs?
   a. CDs are more expensive than other recordings.
   b. The quality of sound on CDs is very good.
   c. Sales of these discs have increased.

3. What have surveys about musical preferences shown?
   a. Today young people are listening to many different types of music.
   b. Jazz has lost out to rock and roll.
   c. Jazz compact disks have fine quality of sound.

4. How is the current generation of 20-somethings different from other generations?
   a. They buy only the music they listened to as teenagers.
   b. They buy music of all different kinds.
   c. They buy only rock music.

5. Underline the sentence that contains the most important detail for someone who wants to know what kinds of recordings the new jazz audience is buying.
**ANSWERS**

**Exercise 1**
1. any number of viruses  
2. airborne droplets of another person’s sneeze, skin to skin contact, mucous membrane contact.  
3. by keeping your resistance high and avoiding people with newly developed colds.  
4. bed rest, plenty of fluids, and aspirin for relief of pain and discomfort.

**Exercise 2**
1. C  
2. B  
3. A  
4. B  
5. The last sentence should be underlined.

This handout was adapted from the following resources: Ophelia H. Hancock’s *Reading Skills for College Students*, fifth edition; *Contemporary’s Reading Basics: Advanced*, and CLAST Reading Skills.