



How to Teach Students to Get the Gist in English Language Arts:

A Guide for Middle School Teachers

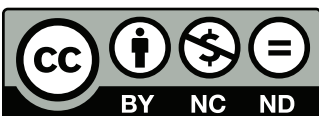
Note

This work is based on recommendations in CSR Colorado. (n.d.) *Get the gist: Strategy intro lesson*. Retrieved from http://toolkit.csrcolorado.org/CSR/media/Documents-Classroom_Resources/Strategy_Intro_Lessons/Strategy-Intro-Lesson-Get-the-Gist.pdf



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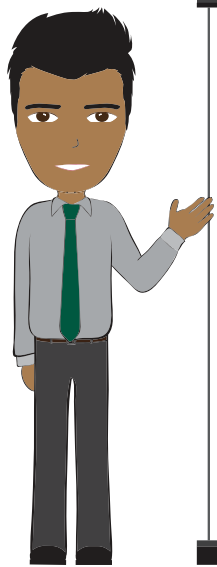
Overview of the Get the Gist Strategy

A COMMON CHALLENGE

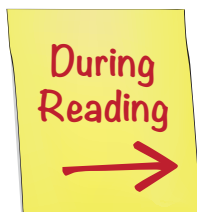
Do your students struggle with reading comprehension or determining the main idea of what they read?

A RESEARCH-BASED SOLUTION

Teach students the Get the Gist strategy. During reading, students stop to write a brief main idea statement, or **gist**, at predetermined stopping points (i.e., after paragraphs or sections of text). Get the Gist is typically used with expository text but can also be used with narrative texts, such as short stories.



How is it done?



Step 1: Who or what is this section about?

Step 2: What is the most important information about the "who" or "what"?

Step 3: Write a **gist statement** that combines the information from steps 1 and 2. (The gist should be in students' own words, rather than a sentence copied from the text.)

Why is this practice helpful? The Get the Gist strategy supports students' comprehension of text in several ways.

- It encourages students to monitor their comprehension while reading, as opposed to simply reading to "get to the end" of a passage.
- It helps students integrate the important information across sections of text.
- It helps students remember the most important information when they read.

Does research support the use of this strategy? YES! Reviews of research demonstrate that when students use a paraphrasing strategy, such as Get the Gist, their comprehension improves. Reading comprehension strategies help students realize when they do not understand a text and provide students with a method for repairing their misunderstanding. Selected research references are available at the end of this guide.

Teacher Instructions for Get the Gist

I. Prepare your introductory lesson.

Before students can independently write gist statements, they must be explicitly taught the Get the Gist strategy. When you first teach the strategy to students, it is best to model the steps while thinking aloud. We recommend these steps to prepare your model lesson.

a. Select a text for modeling.

The first time you model the strategy, use a short passage (about five paragraphs or sections) that is

- at students' independent reading level and
- on a familiar and interesting topic.

During the modeling phase, you want students to concentrate on learning how to use the strategy rather than struggling to understand the content of the passage. It may be a good idea to do a second round of modeling (on a different day) using a grade-level passage.



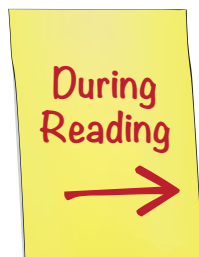
Need text? The CommonLit website provides a range of texts that teachers can access for free! www.commonlit.org

b. Chunk the text.

Divide the text into sections, if needed, so students know where to pause and generate a gist statement. As a general guideline, sections of text could be anywhere from one to three paragraphs, depending on the length of each paragraph.

c. Prepare gist statements.

Using the three-step strategy (shown again below), write your own gist statements for each of the text sections. Writing gist statements before you model the strategy also will help you chunk the text. It's OK to revise your chunks, or text sections, as you prepare the gist statements.



Step 1: Who or what is this section about?

Step 2: What is the most important information about the "who" or "what"?

Step 3: Write a **gist statement** that combines the information from steps 1 and 2. (The gist should be in students' own words, rather than a sentence copied from the text.)




EXAMPLE: We have prepared gist statements for a model lesson using the passage "Thank You, M'am" (see pages 6–10).

II. Teach students to use the Get the Gist strategy.

The Process

It is best to devote an entire 50-minute class period (or two 25-minute “doses” spread across two class periods) to explicitly teach students the strategy. Research supports the following process:

- Set a purpose for learning. 
- Introduce the strategy.
- Model how to use Get the Gist as many times as necessary.
- Facilitate whole-class guided practice with feedback.
- Facilitate guided practice in small groups or pairs with feedback.
- Facilitate independent practice with feedback.

★ TEACHING TIPS ★

Set the purpose for learning by pointing out some reasons to use the Get the Gist strategy.

- Gist statements help you think about what you’re reading while you read.
- Gist statements help you focus on the important information in the text.
- Gist statements help you remember what you read.

Helpful Resources

Get the Gist **student cue cards** and an **introduction PowerPoint presentation** are available at GreatMiddleSchools.org/gist



FAQ

Teaching students to use Get the Gist takes a lot of time. Why can't they just read?

You're right—teaching Get the Gist does take some time at the beginning. It will be more difficult for students at first, but their main idea statements will improve with practice and feedback. Consider it an investment. Once students are able to use the strategy, their reading comprehension will increase, and you will spend less time reteaching the information they read. Students will obtain a deeper understanding of what they read and will remember information longer.

Common Challenges and Suggested Solutions

Students have trouble finding the most important “who” or “what.”

- Point out that readers can often use headings and subtitles to help identify the most important “who” or “what.”
 - If the text does not have headings or subtitles, consider adding them to provide a scaffold.
-

My students’ gist statements are too long!

- Students often begin the gist process by writing longer gists and learn to write clear and concise main idea statements over time. Focus your feedback on the accuracy of students’ gist statements (i.e., Did the student identify the “who” or “what”? Did the student identify the most important information about the “who” or “what”? Is the gist written in the student’s own words?) rather than the length so students don’t get too bogged down counting words.
 - You can support the use of fewer words through modeling and explicitly teaching students to use overarching terms or phrases that encompass multiple details. For example, in section 3 of “Thank You, M’am,” the most important information is that Mrs. Jones drags Roger to her apartment, but rather than punishing him, she makes him wash his face, and insists that Roger stay and eat with her. This information could be shortened by using a more general phrase, such as “Mrs. Jones takes Roger home and does kind things for him instead of punishing him.”
 - Model how to begin gist statements with the “who” or “what” of each section, rather than broad statements that do not include the most important information (e.g., “This is about Roger,” “This is about Mrs. Jones”).
-

Students are just repeating a sentence or string of words from the passage when they write the gist.

- At first, many students may repeat words from the text, which may indicate difficulty identifying key information. It is helpful to (a) guide students through the three steps to writing a gist statement (see pages 2–3) and (b) model how to put information into your own words. If students continue to copy sentences from the text, return to the modeling phase and use a think-aloud to show students how to put steps 1 and 2 into your own words.

III. Prompt students to use the strategy on a regular basis.

When they write gist statements well, have students continue to write gists independently, in small groups, or with partners as a during-reading activity. This practice helps students identify and remember important ideas from the text and improves reading comprehension.

As a general recommendation, incorporate gist writing into your lessons at least twice a week.

Finally, monitor students' writing of gist statements and model and reteach the strategy as needed with the entire class, small groups, or individual students.



FAQ

What are some different ways I can integrate practice opportunities with Get the Gist into my instruction?

- Provide students with prompts or stopping points in their reading so they know when to stop and write a gist statement. In other words, break the text into "chunks" for students.
- Have students record gists in a learning log so they can refer back to the gists when completing other assignments or studying for a test.
- Have students develop gists after watching a short video or listening to a presentation.
- See the Gist Practice Opportunities Guide at [GreatMiddleSchools.org/gist](https://www.GreatMiddleSchools.org/gist) for more ideas!



Helpful Resources

The following are available at [GreatMiddleSchools.org/gist](https://www.GreatMiddleSchools.org/gist):

- Professional development resources
- Strategy guides and reading passages
- Get the Gist log
- Student cue cards and PowerPoint presentation
- Practice opportunity ideas

Questions?

E-mail us at msmi-info@meadowscenter.org

Example: How to Model Get the Gist in English Language Arts



Students, now that I've described the Get the Gist strategy, I will show you how to use it. Look at your passage, called "Thank You, M'am." I will read this aloud and stop where it says I should write a gist, or the main idea. I'll use the three steps in the Get the Gist strategy to help me. Follow along and watch as I show you how to do this.

Thank You, M'am

by Langston Hughes

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance so, instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk, and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 1

Teacher-Prepared Gist Statement

Section	Step 1: Who or what is this section about?	Step 2: What is the most important information about the "who" or "what"?	Step 3: Write gist statement.
I	A woman	Nearly had her purse stolen by a boy, but she fought back	A woman fought back when a boy tried to steal her purse.



This section describes a woman and what happened to her. The woman is the most important "who" or "what." Step 2 is to determine the most important information about the "who" or "what." I identified the main event here. Next, I combined the information from the first two steps. Do you agree that this is the main idea of the first section?

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"I'm very sorry, lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her. He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with me," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 2

Teacher-Prepared Gist Statement

Section	Step 1: Who or what is this section about?	Step 2: What is the most important information about the "who" or "what"?	Step 3: Write gist statement.
2	Mrs. Jones	Won't let the boy go so she can teach him right from wrong	Mrs. Jones won't release the boy so she can teach him right from wrong.



Psst! Hey, teachers! Keep modeling just like you did with the first section. If students learn the strategy quickly, begin calling on particular students or allowing them to work together to fill in the learning log. Other students may struggle, so keep modeling until they can engage in guided practice. The remaining example gist statements for “Thank You, M’am” follow.

Sweat popped out on the boy’s face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room. She said, “What is your name?”

“Roger,” answered the boy.

“Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face,” said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose—at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—and went to the sink.

“Let the water run until it gets warm,” she said. “Here’s a clean towel.”

“You gonna take me to jail?” asked the boy, bending over the sink.

“Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere,” said the woman. “Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain’t been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?”

“There’s nobody home at my house,” said the boy.

“Then we’ll eat,” said the woman. “I believe you’re hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook.”

“I wanted a pair of blue suede shoes,” said the boy.

“Well, you didn’t have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes,” said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. “You could of asked me.”

STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 3

Teacher-Prepared Gist Statement

Section	Step 1: Who or what is this section about?	Step 2: What is the most important information about the “who” or “what”?	Step 3: Write gist statement.
3	Mrs. Jones	Takes Roger home and does kind things for him instead of punishing him	Mrs. Jones takes Roger home but then does kind things for him instead of punishing him.

“M’am?”

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run, run!

The woman was sitting on the day-bed. After a while she said, “I were young once and I wanted things I could not get.” There was another long pause. The boy’s mouth opened. Then he frowned, but not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, “Um-hum! You thought I was going to say but, didn’t you? You thought I was going to say, but I didn’t snatch people’s pocketbooks. Well, I wasn’t going to say that.”

Pause. Silence.

“I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if he didn’t already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable.”

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse, which she left behind her on the day-bed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye, if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman not to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

“Do you need somebody to go to the store,” asked the boy, “maybe to get some milk or something?”

“Don’t believe I do,” said the woman, “unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here.”

“That will be fine,” said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty-shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, red-heads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

“Eat some more, son,” she said.

When they were finished eating she got up and said, “Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto my pocketbook nor nobody else’s—because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in.”

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it.

“Good-night! Behave yourself, boy!” she said, looking out into the street. The boy wanted to say something else other than “Thank you, m’am” to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but he couldn’t do so as he turned at the barren stoop and looked back at the large woman in the door. He barely managed to say “Thank you” before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.

STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 4

Section	Step 1: Who or what is this section about?	Step 2: What is the most important information about the "who" or "what"?	Step 3: Write gist statement.
4	Mrs. Jones	Gives Roger money and tells him to behave	Mrs. Jones gives Roger money and tells him to behave.



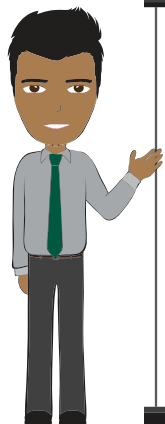
A Note About Using the Get the Gist Strategy With Narrative Texts

The Get the Gist strategy helps students understand main plot points in a story, but it is not necessarily helpful for making inferences or identifying themes. Our suggestion is to use the strategy for a first, close read of the text. You can then help students gain a deeper meaning of the text through discussion, questioning, or any other literacy activity.

For example, the Get the Gist strategy would help students understand that rather than sending him to jail for stealing her purse, Mrs. Jones showed Roger kindness. You may then want to question students on why Mrs. Jones showed Roger kindness. What was the significance of telling Roger that she, too, had done bad things when she was young? This type of questioning and discussion will help students understand the underlying meaning of the story—compassion, trust, and second chances.

Moving From Gist to Summary

After reading an entire passage and writing gist statements for each section, students combine their gist statements to write a brief summary (about three to four sentences). Summarizing text helps students integrate ideas across sections to develop a "global" understanding of the entire text.



How is it done?



After reading and generating gist statements for each section, combine them into one paragraph that is about three to four sentences long and contains the most important information about the entire passage.

When are students ready to write a brief summary? Students are ready when they can independently write main idea (gist) statements. Some students may be able to do this right away. Other students, especially those with learning difficulties, may need more practice with Get the Gist before they are ready to write summaries.

Example for the Passage “Thank You, M’am”

Main Idea (Gist) Statements	Brief Summary
Section 1: A woman fought back when a boy tried to steal her purse.	A woman, Mrs. Jones, fought back when a boy named Roger tried to steal her purse. Mrs. Jones wouldn't let Roger go because she wanted to teach him right from wrong. She took him to her home and did kind things for him instead of punishing him. Finally, Mrs. Jones gave Roger money and told him to behave.
Section 2: Mrs. Jones won't release the boy so she can teach him right from wrong.	
Section 3: Mrs. Jones takes Roger home and does kind things for him instead of punishing him.	
Section 4: Mrs. Jones gives Roger money and tells him to behave.	

This brief summary used the main idea statements in the same order because they were main plot points already presented in a logical order. Some light editing was applied to make the tense consistent (in this case, past tense) and to make the sentences “flow” in a way that makes sense.



FAQ

How can I scaffold summary writing for my struggling students?

One way to scaffold summary writing is to provide students with explicit steps to organize their main idea statements and rewrite them in a way that makes sense. Here are a few steps that may be helpful (adapted from Archer, Gleason, & Vachon, 2005):

Step 1: **REREAD** the main ideas for each paragraph in the passage.

Step 2: **UNDERLINE** the most important main ideas.

Step 3: **COMBINE** main idea statements that could go together.

Step 4: **NUMBER** the ideas in a logical order.

Step 5: **WRITE** your brief summary in one paragraph (about three to four sentences).

Step 6: **EDIT** your summary to correct punctuation and grammar.



Selected References

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- This practice is also included in *The Middle School Matters Field Guide: Reading Throughout the Content Areas* (see Principle 4, Practice 2).

