



# **How to Teach Students to Get the Gist in Social Studies:**

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## **A Guide for Middle School Teachers**

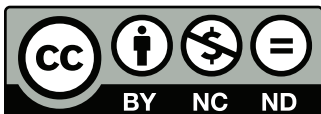
## Note

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](http://toolkit.csrcolorado.org/CSR/media/Documents-Classroom_Resources/Strategy_Intro_Lessons/Strategy-Intro-Lesson-Get-the-Gist.pdf)



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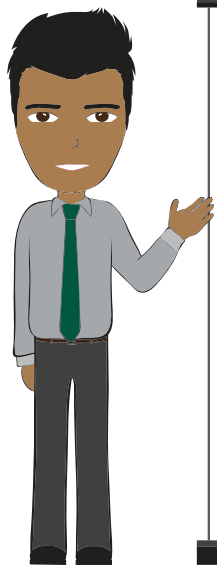
# Overview of the Get the Gist Strategy

## A COMMON CHALLENGE

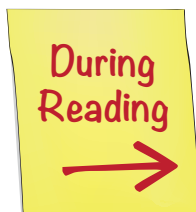
Do your students struggle with reading comprehension or determining the main idea of what they read?

## 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.



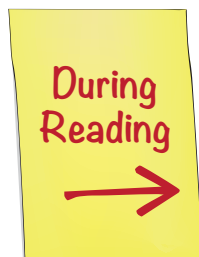
**Need text? The CommonLit website provides a range of texts that teachers can access for free! [www.commonlit.org](http://www.commonlit.org)**

### 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 "Lewis and Clark: American Explorers" (see pages 6–9).

## 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](http://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.
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### **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 “Lewis and Clark,” the most important information is that Lewis and Clark’s travel was slow because of snow and ice and having to row boats down the river. This information could be shortened by using a more general phrase, such as “Travel was slow because it was hard work paddling down the river, especially in winter.”
  - 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 Lewis and Clark”).
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### **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.



#### 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://GreatMiddleSchools.org/gist) for more ideas!



#### Helpful Resources

The following are available at [GreatMiddleSchools.org/gist](https://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](mailto:msmi-info@meadowscenter.org)

# Example: How to Model Get the Gist in Social Studies



Students, now that I've described the Get the Gist strategy, I will show you how to use it. Look at your passage, called "Lewis and Clark: American Explorers." 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.

## Lewis and Clark: American Explorers

By Barbara Radner  
2005

*The Lewis and Clark Expedition, also known as the Corps of Discovery Expedition, was the first effort by Americans to explore what is now the western United States. President Thomas Jefferson had just completed the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, in which the United States bought a great deal of land from the French. He wanted American travelers to map and characterize the newly acquired territory and establish an American presence there. As you read, identify the difficulties that Lewis and Clark faced on their journey, and how they overcame them.*

More than 200 years ago, in 1804, two explorers made an important journey. They were named Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.<sup>1</sup> Today, people know a lot about the places they visited, but 200 years ago there were no maps of that part of the United States. They would travel by boat most of the way and they would make the first maps of that part of our country. They were going to trace where a great river went. The river they were mapping is a very big one called the Missouri River.<sup>2</sup> They wanted to find out where it went. They hoped it would take them to the ocean.



*"3113 Lewis and Clark with Sacagawea" by Bill McChesney is licensed under CC BY 2.0.*

### STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 1

1. Lewis and Clark were friends and officers in the army. The two men were accompanied by a group of U.S. Army volunteers.
2. The Missouri River is the longest river in North America. It runs through Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri.

#### 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	Lewis and Clark	Made the first maps of the Missouri River	Lewis and Clark made the first maps of the Missouri River.



This section is about Lewis and Clark, so they are the most important "who." Step 2 is to determine the most important information about the "who" or "what." I identified the fact about creating the first maps of the Missouri River as most important. Next, I combined the information from the first two steps. Do you agree that this is the main idea of the first section?



They took many people with them to help with the exploration. There were more than 40 people on the trip. They also carried many supplies, including a lot of food. They hoped they would find food along the way, but this was long ago and they did not know what the territory would be like. The explorers had three boats to carry them and their supplies. It was summer when they started on this long trip.

## 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	Lewis and Clark	Took many supplies because they were traveling to unknown territory	Lewis and Clark traveled to unknown territory, so they brought their own supplies.



**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 "Lewis and Clark: American Explorers" follow.**

They traveled slowly, each day traveling a short distance because they had to row their boats on the river. They would only travel a few miles every day. They traveled for months and were still far from their destination. In winter it was difficult to travel, so they camped along the river. There they would wait for spring when traveling would be easier. Snow and ice made it very hard to travel in winter.

## 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	Travel	Was slow because it was hard paddling along the river. Winter made it hard, too.	Travel was slow because it was hard work paddling down the river, especially in winter.

Native Americans helped them along the way. They helped them get food, and they showed them where places were. The explorers had never been to this area before, so they were not sure where to find food or even where the river went. The Native Americans had lived there for many years, so they knew the area and how to survive there, even in the hard winter.

A Native American woman named Sacajawea<sup>3</sup> helped them travel. She became their guide, and she traveled with them for months. It was hard work for everyone, including Sacajawea. The explorers needed her help to find their way to the West. They wanted to find out how to get to the ocean.

### STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 4

3. Sacajawea (1788-1812) was a Native American woman from the Lemhi Shoshone tribe who helped the Lewis and Clark expedition by guiding the men through unfamiliar territory, helping them communicate with other native populations, and explaining the environments they traveled through.

#### 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.
4	Native Americans	Helped Lewis and Clark find food and navigate their way to the West	Native Americans helped Lewis and Clark find food and navigate the land to find the West.

As they traveled, they made maps. Their maps showed the way the river went. It passed through grasslands, and then they were in mountains. When they got to the mountains, they had to leave their boats and walk.

It took more than a year for the explorers to get to the ocean. When they got there they had made maps that would help many people. But they had to bring the maps back. It had taken more than a year to make this first part of the trip. It also took a long time to get back. When the explorers came back, in 1806, they had been gone two years, and people said they were heroes. They would not make such a great journey again. They had done their job.

Their maps would help people settle in the new land. Long after their trip, people would build roads to the west. They would travel quickly by car. Today people can travel their route by plane. If you look out the window from the plane you will see those high mountains, you will see what a difficult journey it was.

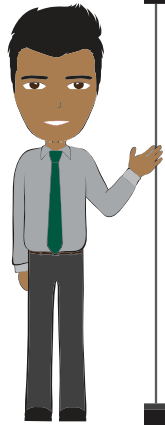
### STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 5

#### 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.
5	Lewis and Clark	Made maps of the river that later helped people settle the West	Lewis and Clark made maps of the river that later helped people settle the West.

## 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?

#### Brief Summary



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 “Lewis and Clark: American Explorers”

Main Idea (Gist) Statements	Brief Summary
<b>Section 1:</b> Lewis and Clark made the first maps of the Missouri River. <b>Section 2:</b> Lewis and Clark traveled to unknown territory, so they brought their own supplies. <b>Section 3:</b> Travel was slow because it was hard work paddling down the river, especially in winter. <b>Section 4:</b> Native Americans helped Lewis and Clark find food and navigate the land to find the West. <b>Section 5:</b> Lewis and Clark made maps of the river that later helped people settle the West.	Lewis and Clark were explorers who made the first maps of the Missouri River. They were traveling to an unknown territory, so they took supplies with them. Travel was slow because it was hard work paddling down the river, especially in winter. However, Native Americans helped Lewis and Clark get food, navigate the land, and find their way to the West. As they traveled, Lewis and Clark made maps of the river, which helped many people settle the West.

This brief summary was written by using the gist statements in the order they were already written. However, some light editing was applied so that the sentences “flowed” in a way that made 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).