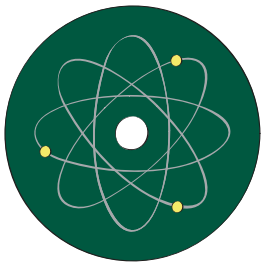

How to Teach Students to Get the Gist in Science:

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

The Meadows Center
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK

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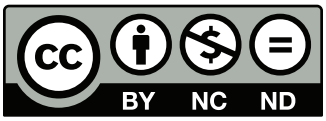


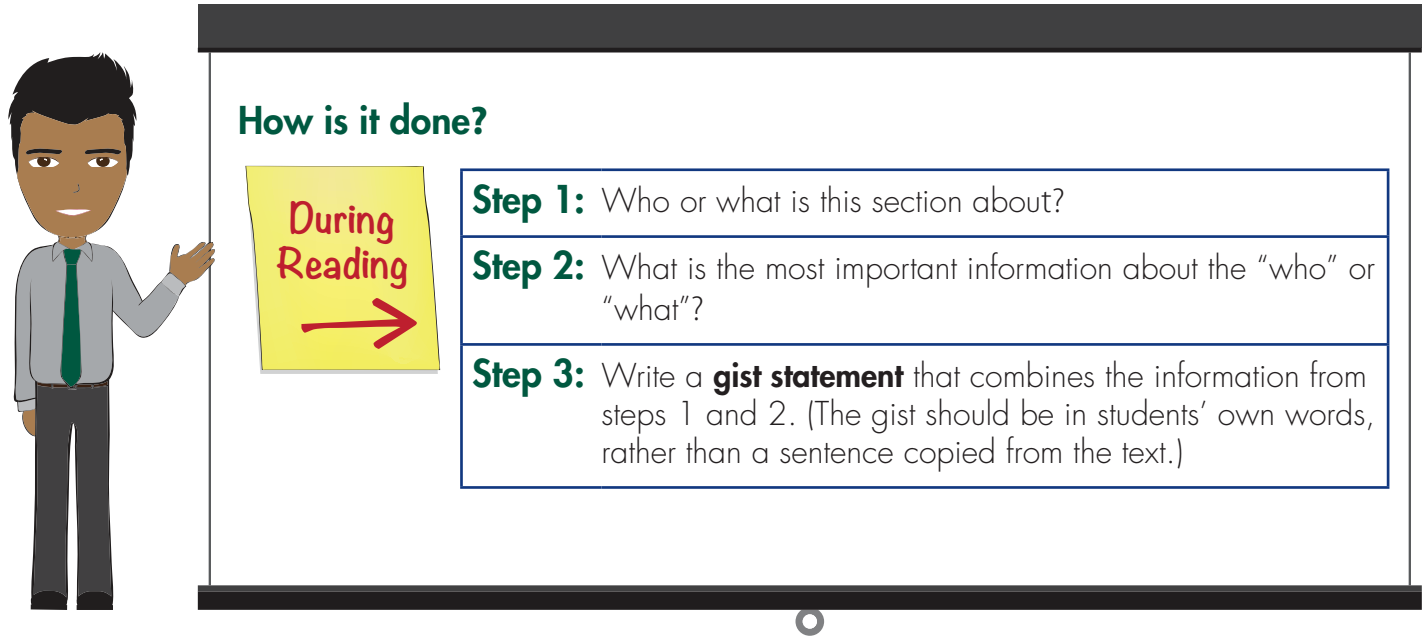
Overview of the Get the Gist Strategy

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.



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.

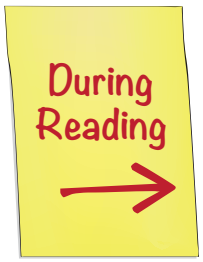
Need text? The CommonLit website provides a range of texts that teachers can access for free! www.commonlit.org

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 "What Are Clouds" (see pages 6–8).

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 the section "What Are Some Types of Clouds?", the shapes and locations of cirrus clouds, cumulus clouds, and stratus clouds are described. This information could by shortened by saying it in a more general way. Students could write, "Clouds are named based on their location in the sky and their shape."
- 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 weather," "This is about clouds").

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 form 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** for more ideas!

Helpful Resources

The following are available at 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 Science

Students, now that I've described the Get the Gist strategy, I will show you how to use it. Look at your passage, called "What Are Clouds?" 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.

What Are Clouds?

By NASA
2014

Spotting a cloud floating overhead is a common sight on our planet, but what are clouds made of? Why do they look like they do? This informational text explains the formation of different clouds and how they contribute to different types of weather on Earth. As you read, take notes on how clouds can affect weather on Earth.

[1] A cloud is made of water drops or ice crystals floating in the sky. There are many kinds of clouds. Clouds are an important part of Earth's weather.

"Untitled" by Pero Kalimero is licensed under CC0.

How Do Clouds Form?

The sky can be full of water. But most of the time you can't see the water. The drops of water are too small to see. They have turned into a gas called water vapor. As the water vapor goes higher in the sky, the air gets cooler. The cooler air causes the water droplets to start to stick to things like bits of dust, ice, or sea salt.

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.
1	Clouds	Form when water vapor rises, cools, and sticks to particles in the air	Clouds form when water vapor rises, cools, and sticks to particles in the air.

This section is all about clouds, so that is the most important "who" or "what." Step 2 is to determine the most important information about the "who" or "what." I identified three main points here by rereading the text that describes how the clouds form. Next, I combined the information from the first two steps. Do you agree that this is the main idea of the first section?

What Are Some Types of Clouds?

Clouds get their names in two ways. One way is by where they are found in the sky. Some clouds are high up in the sky. Low clouds form closer to Earth's surface. In fact, low clouds can even touch the ground. These clouds are called fog. Middle clouds are found between low and high clouds.

Another way clouds are named is by their shape. Cirrus clouds are high clouds. They look like feathers. Cumulus clouds are middle clouds. These clouds look like giant cotton balls in the sky. Stratus clouds are low clouds. They cover the sky like bed sheets.

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	Clouds	Are named based on their location in the sky and their shape	Clouds are named based on their location in the sky and their shape.

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 "What Are Clouds?" follow.

What Causes Rain?

[5] Most of the water in clouds is in very small droplets. The droplets are so light they float in the air. Sometimes those droplets join with other droplets. Then they turn into larger drops. When that happens, gravity causes them to fall to Earth. We call the falling water drops "rain." When the air is colder, the water may form snowflakes instead. Freezing rain, sleet, or even hail can fall from clouds.

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	Rain	Occurs when small droplets join together to form larger drops and fall to Earth	Rain occurs when small droplets join together to form larger drops and fall to Earth.

Why Does NASA Study Clouds?

Clouds are important for many reasons. Rain and snow are two of those reasons. At night, clouds reflect heat and keep the ground warmer. During the day, clouds make shade that can keep us cooler. Studying clouds helps NASA better understand Earth's weather. NASA uses satellites[1] in space to study clouds.

NASA also studies clouds on other planets. Mars has clouds that are like the clouds on Earth. But other planets have clouds that aren't made of water. For example, Jupiter has clouds made of a gas called ammonia.

STOP AND GET THE GIST OF SECTION 4

"What Are Clouds?" from NASA Knows (2014) is in the public domain.

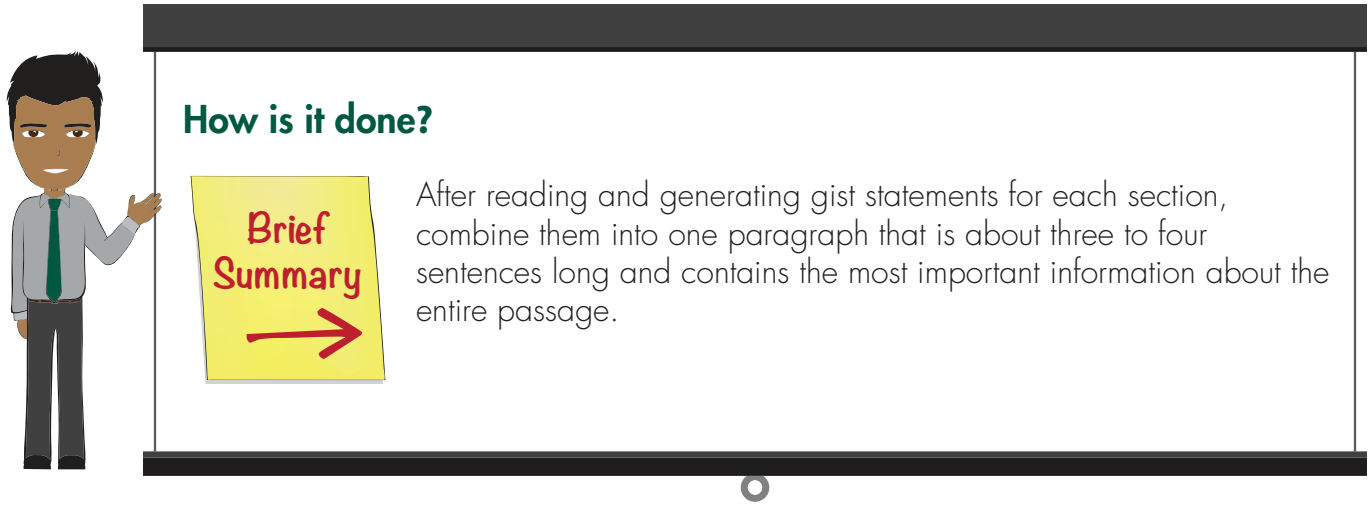
1. A satellite is a man-made or natural object that orbits around another object. In this context, it refers to a man-made object that sends information from space back to Earth.

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	NASA	Studies clouds to help understand Earth's weather	NASA studies clouds to help understand Earth's weather.

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.



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 "What Are Clouds?"

Main Idea (Gist) Statements	Brief Summary
Section 1: Clouds form when water vapor rises, cools, and sticks to particles in the air. **Section 2:** Clouds are named based on their location in the sky and their shape. **Section 3:** Rain occurs when small droplets join together to form larger drops and fall to Earth. **Section 4:** NASA studies clouds to help understand Earth's weather.	Clouds are important because they help us understand Earth's weather. They are named based on their location in the sky and their shape. Clouds form when water vapor rises, cools, and sticks to particles in the air. When the water droplets join together, they get heavy and fall to Earth as rain.

This brief summary was written by reordering some of the main idea statements. The last main idea was moved to the beginning because that sentence makes a great introduction. (It could also go at the end of the summary as a concluding statement.) The main ideas from Sections 1 and 3 both describe how clouds form and then produce rain, so it makes sense to put them together in the summary. Finally, some light editing was applied so that the sentences "flowed" in a way that made sense (e.g., changing the word *clouds* to *they*).

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.

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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).