Active reading: main idea, pivot, and key word in...

Active reading means locating, in one pass, the sentences that carry a paragraph's...



Lesson `rw.infoideas.I5`

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The idea

Active reading means locating, in one pass, the sentences that carry a paragraph's meaning: the main idea (the claim every other sentence supports), the pivot (the sentence where the paragraph reverses direction, often short and signaled by but, however, or the opposite occurred), and any word used figuratively or fixed only by context. The setup and the supporting evidence are never the main idea – the sentence they point. . .

Read the whole paragraph first. Which sentence is the claim, which is setup, which is evidence, and where does it turn?

Main idea = the sentence every other one supports (not the setup, not a detail). Pivot = the sentence that reverses direction. Key word = the one used figuratively or fixed only by context.

Watch every step

When the first public libraries opened their doors without charge, many critics predicted disaster. Reading, they warned, would waste the hours of working people and fill their heads with dangerous ideas. The opposite occurred. Free access to books turned out to sharpen skills, spread practical knowledge, and give ordinary readers a foothold in public life. Within a generation, the library had become less a luxury than an engine of opportunity, quietly reshaping who could learn and lead.

'Words in Context' targets a word used figuratively. Which word is used non-literally here?

A. libraries ✗ *literal-for-figurative*

B. engine (in 'engine of opportunity')

C. books ✗ *literal-for-figurative*

D. readers ✗ *literal-for-figurative*

Why B — "engine (in 'engine of opportunity')." Select the sentence or word that fills the role the question asks for.

Now a harder one

Early mapmakers drew the ocean floor as a smooth, featureless basin, assuming the deep sea was as flat as it was dark. The voyages of the mid-twentieth century overturned that picture entirely. Using sonar, researchers found a colossal mountain range winding through every ocean, along with trenches deeper than any peak on land is tall. Far from static, the seafloor turned out to be spreading – made at the ridges and swallowed at the trenches in slow, ceaseless motion. What had seemed a lifeless void became, almost overnight, the most dynamic surface on the planet.

Which sentence is the pivot of the paragraph?

A. Early mapmakers drew the ocean floor as a smooth, featureless basin. ✗ *pivot-misidentified*

B. The voyages of the mid-twentieth century overturned that picture entirely.

C. The seafloor turned out to be spreading in slow, ceaseless motion. ✗ *pivot-misidentified*

D. What had seemed a lifeless void became the most dynamic surface on the planet. ✗ *pivot-misidentified*

Why B — "The voyages of the mid-twentieth century overturned that. . . ." Select the sentence or word that fills the role the question asks for.

The method, in one line

Active reading: main idea, pivot, and key word in a passage

Main idea = the sentence every other one supports (not the setup, not a detail). Pivot = the sentence that reverses direction. Key word = the one used figuratively or fixed only by context.

Is my main-idea choice the point the rest supports, or just a true detail? Is my pivot the reversal itself, or a result of it? Is my word figurative, or literal?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

setup-as-main-idea
Selects the opening assumption or the view the paragraph exists to overturn.

evidence-as-main-idea
Selects a true supporting detail instead of the overall claim.

Name the trap before you pick — most wrong answers are one of these two.

Try it, then watch the walk-through

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