Supporting Main Idea Identification and Text Summarization in Middle School Co-Taught Classes

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Abstract

Being able to identify the main ideas within a complex multi-paragraph content-area text is an essential reading comprehension skill. It is especially important for content-area and special education co-teachers to provide explicit instruction in this skill to meet the needs of their students with learning disabilities who frequently struggle with understanding text they read. To help students with main idea identification, co-teachers can provide students with explicit instruction on how to generate a main idea statement for individual paragraphs or sections of a text. Co-teachers can extend this instruction by incorporating peer-mediated practice to help students strengthen their main idea statements. Finally, co-teachers can instruct students to use their statements to summarize the text. This article provides guidance for supporting the main idea identification and text summarization skills of middle school students in a co-taught classroom.

The ultimate goal of integrating reading instruction into literacy-rich content-area classes (e.g., science, social studies, and English language arts), including those that are co-taught, is to help students develop the ability to derive meaning from texts they read so that they can acquire content knowledge. Strong reading comprehension skills are related to academic success (Cromley, 2009; Espin & Deno, 1993; Reed et al., 2017) and contribute positively to postsecondary outcomes, including high school graduation (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006) and successful employment (Ju et al., 2012). Because texts become more complex in the upper grades, secondary students, particularly those with learning disabilities (LD), may face significant challenges as they develop the ability to understand the texts they read.

Many secondary students could benefit from evidence-based literacy instruction delivered frequently across content-area classes to enhance their reading comprehension skills. According to the Institute of Education Sciences' adolescent literacy practice guide (Kamil et al., 2008), evidence-based literacy instruction for older students includes both explicit vocabulary instruction and explicit reading

comprehension strategy instruction. For example, research has revealed that explicit instruction on main idea identification and text summarization improves student reading comprehension (Edmonds et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 2019). In particular, students who learn to identify relevant information within smaller parts of a text can gain an overall understanding of the full text (Hagaman et al., 2016). Explicit main idea instruction is especially important for students with LD who may face cognitive overload and difficulties with working memory (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Thus, co-teachers can use this type of instruction in content-area classes given that many of the students in co-taught classes are students with LD who struggle with

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Civil Rights on a City Bus

On the first of December 1955, the African American seamstress Rosa Parks helped change the course of history on a city bus. Rosa boarded the bus after a day's work at a Montgomery, Alabama, department store. She settled towards the middle, past the first several rows, which at that time were reserved for white people. After making a few stops, the bus became full. Then a white man boarded, but there was nowhere for him to sit. The driver ordered Rosa and the rest of the black passengers in her row to stand at the back of the bus and let the white man sit. In an act of defiance that would help intensify the American Civil Rights Movement, Rosa refused to give up her spot.

For violating the laws of segregation, referred to as the "Jim Crow laws" (which were meant to keep white people and black people separate), Rosa was arrested and fined. Her refusal to move was a quiet and simple action, but she took an enormous risk that evening. She also became a hero and an inspiration to people all over the nation who were fighting for racial equality, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a young minister who would soon become a major civil rights leader. In response to Rosa's arrest, blacks in the city of Montgomery boycotted the public bus system for more than a year. Like her, they had had enough of being treated like second-class citizens. The Monday after Rosa's arrest, most black commuters walked to where they needed to go— some traveling more than 20 miles.

Finally, in November of 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Jim Crow laws that kept blacks and whites segregated were unconstitutional. Rosa Parks had challenged the law and shown people far beyond her own town how cruel and unjust segregation could be, and she had won. The boycott ended more than a month later, when the Montgomery buses were integrated, but the resistance to racial prejudice did not stop there. Rosa and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, as it has come to be known, sparked a series of nonviolent mass protests in support of civil rights. One woman's strength and commitment to change helped fuel a movement. Sometimes that is all it takes.

Figure 1. Sample text for get the gist and associate gist.
Source. Adapted from Readworks (2014), and used by permission.

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reading comprehension significantly more than their typical peers (Gilmour et al., 2019).

The CALI (Content Area Literacy Instruction) instructional framework (see the Wexler introduction to this special issue) includes two practices that middle school students in co-taught classes can use to identify main ideas and prepare to summarize texts: *get the gist* (Vaughn et al., 2011) and *associate gist* (Wexler et al., 2018). Independently, students use a previously developed evidence-based practice, get the gist, to identify the main idea of a section of text. Once students can use get the gist independently, co-teachers can facilitate a peer-mediated routine known as associate gist. Associate gist incorporates peer-mediated practice (i.e., academic work students complete in pairs or small groups) to help students improve their ability to identify main ideas by providing additional opportunities to respond and receive feedback. This article provides guidance for co-teachers on how to leverage the use of get the gist and how to extend this practice with associate gist. Co-teachers can facilitate students' use of these strategies to help them identify main ideas and demonstrate their understanding of texts through a final summarization activity.

Get the Gist

Get the gist is an instructional practice originally developed as part of collaborative strategic reading, a peer-mediated multicomponent intervention that has evidence of effectiveness for improving middle school students' reading comprehension skills (Vaughn et al., 2011). For each section of the text, a student gets the gist (i.e., generates a main idea statement) by following three steps:

1. Identifying who or what the section is mostly about.
2. Identifying the most important information about the who or what.
3. Using the information gathered in Steps 1 and 2 to develop a gist statement (i.e., main idea statement) in 8 to 13 words.

For additional guidance on how to teach get the gist, visit the collaborative strategic reading IRIS module (The IRIS Center, 2008) at www.iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/csr/.

Preparing for Get the Gist Instruction

Although a single teacher can provide instruction on get the gist, incorporating the strategy into co-taught classes allows both co-teachers to play important roles during literacy instruction. Co-teachers can collaborate in-person or virtually to prepare for a get the gist lesson. First, co-teachers create, modify, or select a multi-paragraph text aligned with instructional content they are teaching. The selected text should be written at students' average instructional level, so that students have multiple opportunities to practice identifying main ideas with instructional support. For a detailed description of how to select appropriate texts, see article one in this special issue (Wexler et al., 2021). Next, co-teachers

Gist Steps	Gist Rubric
1. Identify **who** or **what** the section is mostly about.	1. Does my gist statement identify who or what the section was about?
2. Identify the most important information about the who or what.	2. Does my gist statement identify *only* the most important information about the who or what?
3. Develop a gist Statement that is **between 8 and 13** words.	3. Is my gist statement paraphrased, between 8 and 13 words, and written in one complete sentence?

Purpose Question
How did Rosa Parks help spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and how did the boycott lead to change?

Section 1			
Who/What	**Most Important Information**		
Rosa Parks	• *Refused to give up bus seat*		
Gist Statement	**Score**		
Rosa Parks would not give her seat on the bus to a White person.	1 *1*	2 *1*	3 *1*

Figure 2. Section of sample gist log for get the gist.

divide the text into sections using natural breaks already in the text (e.g., sections divided by subheadings) or by manually marking sections (e.g., between paragraphs) if the text does not include natural section breaks. The sections should be a suitable length for students in that each section has one main idea for students to identify. Finally, co-teachers develop a purpose question that gives students a clear reason for reading the text. Students answer the purpose question after reading the entire text.

To develop the purpose question, co-teachers work collaboratively to (a) write a gist statement for each section of the text, (b) identify the essential gist statements, and (c) use the essential gist statements to create a single purpose question. The content-area teacher could write the gist statements for a particular text, and the special education teacher could use those statements to create the purpose question. Alternatively, the special education teacher could write the gist statements, and the content-area teacher could create the purpose question.

For example, in a sixth grade social studies class, the co-teachers decided to use the text *Civil Rights on a City Bus* (Readworks, 2014; see Figure 1). To prepare for the lesson, the special education teacher generated the following gist statements for each section:

> Gist Statement #1: Rosa Parks would not give her seat on the bus to a White person.
> Gist Statement #2: Rosa Parks was arrested, which sparked a bus boycott in Montgomery.
> Gist Statement #3: Rosa Parks and the *Montgomery bus boycott* helped end segregation across the United States.

After generating the gist statements, a co-teacher determines which gist statements are essential. Essential gist statements contain information that is critical to understanding the text and meeting the objective of the lesson. In the case of the sixth grade social studies class, the special education teacher determined that each gist statement was essential. Therefore, she used all of the gist statements to generate the following purpose question: How did Rosa Parks help spark the Montgomery bus boycott, and how did the boycott lead to change?

Teaching Get the Gist

At the beginning of get the gist instruction, co-teachers provide students with individual gist logs to use throughout the lesson (see Figure 2 for a sample gist log). The co-teachers then draw students' attention to the purpose question, which they insert at the top of the log prior to their lesson. For example, to provide the purpose question to their co-taught social studies class, the content-area teacher said

> Today, we are going to read a short text called *Civil Rights on a City Bus*. Our purpose question for this text is at the top of your gist log. It reads: How did Rosa Parks help spark the Montgomery bus boycott, and how did the boycott lead to change? As you read, pay attention to evidence that may help you answer this question.

Next, co-teachers read the first section of the text aloud and model the three steps of get the gist. While one co-teacher takes the lead on modeling, the other co-teacher can "jump in" (e.g., refer students to the gist rubric) to add clarification or reinforce the steps. During modeling, co-teachers:

1. Use think-alouds to share their thought process with students. For example, "The first part of get the gist is to identify the most important who or what. After reading the first section, I noticed that Rosa Parks was mentioned multiple times throughout the first paragraph. By circling all the places the text mentions or refers to Rosa Parks, we can see that Rosa Parks was discussed more than any other who or what. Therefore, I think she is the most important who or what in this section."

2. Write brief notes in their own words, which students copy onto their gist logs. For example, "I think it's important to note that Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a White person like the bus driver told her to. So, under 'Most Important Information,' I'm going to write 'refused to give up bus seat.'"

3. Generate a gist statement, which students also copy onto their logs. For example, "We know that Rosa Parks is the most important who or what, and the most important information about Rosa Parks is that she refused to give up her bus seat like she was supposed to. So, my gist statement is going to be: 'Rosa Parks would not give her seat on the bus to a White person.'"

4. Evaluate the gist statement using the gist rubric (see Figure 2). For example, "First, we each need to ask ourselves, 'Does my gist statement identify who or what the section was about?' My gist statement correctly identifies that the section was about Rosa Parks, so I'm going to give myself one point for the first question on the gist rubric. Next, we ask, 'Does my gist statement identify only the most important information about the who or what?' The most important information about Rosa Parks in this section is that she would not give up her bus seat. That is the only information I included in my gist statement, so I'm going to give myself another point for the second question on the gist rubric. We should also ask ourselves, 'Is my gist statement paraphrased, between 8 and 13 words, and written in one complete sentence?' My gist statement is in my own words, so it's paraphrased. Not including 'Rosa Parks,' my gist statement is 12 words, which is between 8 and 13 words. Finally, my gist statement is one sentence that starts with a capital letter and ends with a period, so I know it's one complete sentence. That is why I'm giving myself one point for the final question on the gist rubric. I earned all three points on the gist rubric."

Co-teachers structure a get the gist lesson in such a way that maximizes the amount of time students have to practice identifying main ideas and developing their own gist statements. Specifically, after the model, co-teachers instruct students to read the remaining sections of the text individually, apply get the gist to each section, and evaluate each gist statement. While students practice, co-teachers can monitor student work and provide frequent, immediate feedback. For example, a teacher could say to a student,

> If you're having trouble identifying the most important who or what in the section, try counting the number of times each who or what is mentioned in the section. Whoever or whatever is mentioned the most is likely the most important who or what of the section.

At the end of the lesson, co-teachers prompt students to score their gist statements using the gist rubric to identify if they need to make any improvements. As demonstrated in the teacher's model, the gist rubric indicates that a gist statement should: (a) identify who or what the section was about; (b) identify only the most important information about the who or what; and (c) be paraphrased, between 8 and 13 words, and written in one complete sentence.

Get the gist is an effective method for identifying the main ideas present throughout a text. With explicit instruction, modeling, and practice, many students can learn to use this strategy. However, some students may have difficulty using get the gist independently to generate accurate gist statements. Peer-mediated practice, in the form of associate gist, is one strategy to provide additional support to these students.

Associate Gist

Peer-mediated practice provides students with opportunities to engage with class content while receiving regular feedback from classmates. Reading comprehension interventions that include peer-mediated practice have had positive effects for students with reading difficulties at the secondary level (Wexler et al., 2015). Because of these benefits, we adapted and integrated a peer-mediated strategy, associate gist (Wexler et al., 2018), into the CALI instructional framework to help students improve the accuracy of their gist statements. Associate gist is a natural fit for the co-taught setting because both teachers can work together to model the peer-mediated strategy. In addition, co-teachers can provide feedback to a greater number of students during practice opportunities.

Preparing for Associate Gist Instruction

Co-teachers prepare for associate gist in the same way they prepare for get the gist. One co-teacher creates gist statements, and the other uses those gist statements to develop a purpose question. An additional step is creating associate pairs. One key to creating effective associate pairs is limiting the reading skill discrepancy between partners, while still allowing one reader within each pair to have a higher reading level. Co-teachers can take the following steps to determine pairs: First, rank students in order of highest to lowest reading fluency. Next, divide the list of students in half so that there are two lists. Then, pair each student on the first list

Text Summary Rubric
1. Does my text summary include important information from more than one gist statement?
2. Does my text summary answer the purpose question?
3. Is my text summary paraphrased, 40 words or fewer, and written in 2-3 complete sentences?

Text Summary	Score		
Rosa Parks helped spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus. The boycott led to change because it caused the United States to end segregation.	1 *1*	2 *1*	3 *1*

Figure 3. Text summary rubric and sample text summary.

(e.g., Student 1 on List 1) with the corresponding student on the second list (e.g., Student 1 on List 2). This allows a more fluent reader (from List 1) to provide support to a less fluent reader (from List 2). Finally, make any necessary adjustments to partner assignments. For example, after the content-area teacher pairs students together using reading assessment data, the special education teacher can make slight adjustments to the pairings to ensure that partners can support and collaborate with each other while minimizing conflict and off-task behavior. For more information on other considerations when pairing students, see Wexler (2016).

Teaching Associate Gist

Like in get the gist, an associate gist lesson begins with co-teachers' introduction of the purpose question. Then, co-teachers assign partners and student roles. For each section of text, one partner serves as the Reading Associate (i.e., the reader), while the other serves as the Leading Associate (i.e., the listener). The more fluent reader in each pair can be the first Reading Associate to act as a model of fluent reading for their partner, who will read the next section. Next, co-teachers introduce or review the following steps of associate gist:

1. The Reading Associate reads the section of text. Meanwhile, the Leading Associate listens, reads along silently, and, when possible, provides the Reading Associate with any necessary help (e.g., corrective feedback).
2. The Leading Associate asks the Reading Associate who or what the section is mostly about and what the most important information about the who or what is.
3. After the Reading Associate responds to the Leading Associate's questions, each student writes their individual gist statement on their copy of the joint gist log.
4. The Leading Associate prompts them to read their gist statements aloud to each other.
5. Partners work together to write a joint gist statement that represents the essential information from both

of their gist statements. The pair refers to the gist rubric for guidance (see Figure 2). The Leading Associate could say, "Let's work together to write a joint gist statement for this paragraph. We both included Rosa Parks as the most important who or what in our individual gist statements, but we included different information about her. You said that Rosa Parks was arrested because she didn't give up her seat, and I said that Black commuters in Montgomery stopped taking the bus because she was arrested. First, we need to decide if both of our ideas are important enough to try to combine into our joint gist statement or if one of them includes more important information. Let's discuss that and then come up with a joint gist statement."

6. Partners alternate roles for the next section of text and repeat the process.

During the lesson, co-teachers take advantage of the fact that there are two teachers by modeling the strategy together. Therefore, during planning, co-teachers can also discuss how they will model associate gist. Questions to consider include: Who will act as the Reading Associate? Who will be the Leading Associate? How will co-teachers model providing peer feedback appropriately? For example, co-teachers can model sharing their gist statements and using respectful language, particularly when gist statements conflict (e.g., "I think we should point out that Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat."). After modeling, co-teachers monitor students' practice and provide them with any necessary support. Providing students with explicit instruction, modeling, and practice during associate gist can help increase the accuracy of their gist statements, indicating that students' ability to identify main ideas has improved.

Text Summarization

Text summarization is a higher-level skill that requires students to synthesize multiple pieces of information from a

text. Being able to identify the main ideas in different sections of a text can support a student's ability to provide an overarching summary of the text (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). Through summarization, students can demonstrate their understanding of the full text, which is the ultimate goal of reading comprehension.

In the CALI instructional framework, get the gist and associate gist both culminate in writing text summaries. Students' text summaries should:

1. Synthesize gist statements;
2. Answer the purpose question introduced at the beginning of the lesson; and
3. Be written in 2 to 3 sentences of about 40 total words or fewer.

After completing get the gist or associate gist, students will have all of the information they need (i.e., the purpose question and gist statements) to write text summaries. Thus, co-teachers do not need to prepare additional material for this portion of the lesson. Instead, co-teachers are ready to provide students explicit instruction on how to use their gist statements, while considering the purpose question, to summarize the text.

Teaching Text Summary

Although gist statements will help students write text summaries, writing a text summary does not mean simply restating gist statements. Co-teachers will likely need to model synthesizing gist statements. Co-teachers provide students explicit instruction and modeling on the following steps:

1. Identifying the gist statements that help answer the purpose question. For example, "Now that you have a gist statement for each section of the text, let's review the purpose question. The purpose question is: 'How did Rosa Parks help spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and how did the boycott lead to change?' Go through each of your gist statements and draw a star next to each gist statement that helps you answer the purpose question."
2. Paraphrasing the gist statements identified in Step 1 to answer the purpose question, thus creating a text summary. For example, "Now, we are ready to write our text summaries. The first part of the purpose question asks, 'How did Rosa Parks help spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott?' Hmm . . . Which of my gist statements help me answer this question? One of my gist statements reads: 'Rosa Parks was arrested, which sparked a bus boycott in Montgomery.' I can use this information to answer the question, but I also need to explain why she was arrested. I'm going to write 'Rosa Parks helped spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott when she was arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus to a

White person.' The next part of the purpose question asks, 'How did the boycott lead to change?' Again, I need to use my gist statements to answer the question. My last gist statement reads: 'Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott helped end segregation across the United States.' That's how the boycott led to change. So, at the end of my text summary, I'm going to add 'The boycott led to change because it helped end segregation in the United States'."
3. Evaluating the summary using the text summary rubric (see Figure 3). For example, "Take a look at your text summary and the text summary rubric. The first question in the text summary rubric is: 'Does my text summary include important information from more than one gist statement?' If your answer is not yet 'yes,' revise your text summary to include important information from more than one gist statement. If your answer is 'yes,' you're ready to move on to the next text summary rubric question: 'Does my text summary answer the purpose question?' Once you've explained how Rosa Parks helped spark the Montgomery Bus Boycott and how the boycott led to change, you can move on to the final question: 'Is my text summary paraphrased, 40 words or fewer, and written in two to three complete sentences?' If you can answer yes to this question, in addition to the first two questions, then you have successfully met the text summary criteria!"

Co-teachers conclude the lesson with a short discussion during which students share their text summaries (i.e., their responses to the purpose question). Co-teachers use this time to reinforce students' understanding of the text and address any points of confusion. After the lesson, co-teachers review students' individual gist statements, joint gist statements (after associate gist), and text summaries to determine students' areas of need and provide intensified instruction during the next lesson. For example, students may benefit from using a sentence-level get the gist strategy during a differentiated lesson to identify main ideas throughout a text (see Lyon et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Identifying main ideas is essential for students to comprehend the texts they read across content areas. However, middle school students with LD often have difficulty identifying main ideas. Co-teachers can provide students with explicit instruction and modeling on how to use the get the gist strategy to generate accurate gist statements, thus identifying the main ideas within sections of text. To reinforce this instruction and provide students with frequent opportunities to receive feedback on their gist statements, co-teachers facilitate students'

use of associate gist as students work with their partners to create improved gist statements. In addition, get the gist and associate gist allow co-teachers to share equal responsibility in planning lessons, modeling the strategies, and monitoring student progress. By using get the gist and associate gist, not only are students able to identify main ideas, but they are also prepared to synthesize those main ideas to summarize entire texts. Therefore, co-teachers can use the practices that comprise the CALI instructional framework to provide evidence-based literacy instruction that improves reading comprehension among middle school students in content-area classes.

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