

How do you determine what's important?

them. Or it may turn out that you and the authors hit a fork in the road and move in different directions.

To find what's important, ask questions and then seek to answer them. You can be driven by the engine of the author's questions or by questions of your own.

Where do you find the author's questions?

Answering the Author's Questions

A book can be thought of as the answers to a series of invisible questions. Granted, you can't usually see these questions, but they're there. If this sounds like some sort of fairy tale, think again. Questions are actually built in to the unit that organizes almost everything we read. What unit is that? The paragraph. According to its definition, a paragraph "typically deals with a single thought or topic."³ Everything in a paragraph points to that thought or topic. All the other sentences in that paragraph are there to support it. If you read a paragraph and ask, "What's important here?" your answer will be the controlling idea and that should lead you to the invisible question.

The Empire State Building is an impressive symbol of early twentieth century industrial achievement. At 1,454 feet, this massive two-acre office building is the tallest in New York City and the ninth tallest in the world. Started in 1930, it took a total of 7,000,000 work-hours and a little more than a year of almost nonstop work to complete. It weighs 365,000 tons, has 6,500 windows, and boasts a total of 1,860 steps leading from the street level to the 102nd floor.

How are the controlling ideas arranged?

Most information is organized hierarchically. A chapter or an article has a single controlling idea or "thesis" and then all other ideas grow out of that idea. On a smaller scale, each individual paragraph has its own controlling idea, with the rest of the paragraph acting to support it. The maps that open each of the chapters in this book (including this one) provide a good example of how this arrangement works. Each idea is supported by the ideas beneath it.

How do you find the most important information in an article or chapter?

To find the most important information in an article or chapter, look for the controlling ideas in each paragraph. These ideas in turn are likely to cluster around a controlling idea for a particular section. And those ideas should all support the chapter or article's controlling idea. Often, the first paragraph of each section provides the controlling idea for that section and the introductory paragraph for the chapter provides the controlling idea for the entire chapter. Some articles or chapters are better organized than others, but in many cases

³*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 1274.

you should be able to create a framework of controlling ideas that resembles the maps that begin each chapter in this book.

Answering Your Own Questions

What if what I think is important differs from what the author thinks is important?

How do I find what's important to me?

How can I be sure what I've found is the most important?

What happens to information that is interesting but not important?

Of course, your view of what's important may differ from the author's view. Just as the Empire State Building was built around a steel framework, an article or chapter is constructed by the author around a framework of controlling ideas. But these important ideas don't necessarily have to be your important ideas.

The way to find the information that is important to you is by asking a focused question and then zeroing in on the area that provides the answer. Depending on the scope of your question, that area might be a sentence, a paragraph, a section, a chapter or article, or even an entire book. The next most important information will be the information that directly supports your original answer.

Unlike relevance, which has to do with whether a connection exists or doesn't, importance is a relative thing. It has to do with the scope of your topic or question. If relevance can be seen as where the camera lens is pointed, importance is influenced by how far you zoom in or zoom out. The larger something is relative to the other facts around it, the more important it's likely to be. So, if your question asks, "How tall is the Empire State Building?" then its height is likely to be the most important piece of information in your answer. If, on the other hand, your question asks, "How big is the Empire State Building?" then its height would presumably compete with its other dimensions for importance.

Keep in mind that what is important is not the same as what is interesting. A lot of information (such as the number of steps in the Empire State Building) falls under the general heading of trivia. Trivia fascinates some students and bores others. Regardless, it's rarely important. At best it provides support for a controlling idea. If you think trivia is interesting you may find this motivates you to remember it. It's still better to focus your attention on the important ideas though. When you do, the details that interest you will often remain in the picture. If, on the other hand, you focus on trivia instead, the controlling ideas may be pushed out of frame.

Determining Whether Information Is Reliable

How can you tell whether information is reliable?

Questions activate your learning and help you to determine which information is relevant and which information is important. But they play one more especially vital role. They help you put the reliability of information to the test. Compared to finding information that's relevant or deciding which information is important, determining whether information is reliable can be a real challenge.

