Script for “Get the Gist” (Main Idea) Strategy

The lesson begins with the teacher explaining the strategy and its value and then modeling its use.

*Over the next several lessons we are going to be learning to use a strategy called “Get the Gist”. Getting the gist of something means that you are getting the main idea of it. Using this strategy will help you in two ways. First, it will help you in making sure that you are getting the most important information from what you read. And second, it will help you to create main idea sentences that will improve your ability to understand and remember what you read.*

Teacher models, starting with a picture, something like the following:

*When I use “Get the Gist”, I start by asking myself: “Who or what is this mostly about?” So…looking at this picture I see a lot of different things. I see a man, his hand is on a window, there’s rain on the window, and it looks like some trains in the background. I would say that the picture is mostly about the man.*

*Then I ask myself: “What is the most important thing about this man?” And I look at the picture again and I see that the man is looking out the window and his hand looks like he’s waving at someone, and he looks sad. So now, what I’d want to do is create a sentence about the gist, or main idea, of this picture. And I would want the sentence to be brief, let’s say about 10 words or so. Let me give it a try…*
The teacher counts on his/her fingers and says the following:

*A man is saying goodbye to someone he cares about. That’s ten words. Pretty good! I got the most important information from the picture and created a main idea sentence with only 10 words. So, if this picture were at the beginning of a story, my sentence would help me to understand and remember how the story started. Make sense so far?*

*So now, let me try the “Get the Gist” strategy with a text instead of a picture.*

The teacher shows a text, something like the following, and reads it aloud:

The United States of America is one of the largest countries on the planet. Forty-eight of the fifty states are located in what is known as the “continental” section of the nation because they are all included within one land mass and share borders. The other two states, Alaska and Hawaii, are part of the U.S., but separated from the continental part. America’s states stretch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, and even beyond. That was not always the case, though. First, there were the Thirteen Colonies that England ruled. After the Revolutionary War, the U.S. won its independence from England and became its own small country. It occupied almost the entire eastern seaboard next to the Atlantic Ocean. France and Spain owned most of the western part of the land that would eventually become the rest of the continental U.S., though. That changed in 1803 when the President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, bought a large chunk of land from France’s ruler, Napoleon Bonaparte, in what was called the Louisiana Purchase.1

*There’s a lot of information in this paragraph! But, using my strategy, I’m going to ask myself: “Who or what is this mostly about?” I read the names of different states, of different countries, of different oceans, of different people...but I think that what this paragraph is mostly about is the size of the United States. And I think that because...*

The teacher highlights the words: “largest”, “stretch”, “even beyond”, “small”, “entire”, “most of”, “rest of”, “large”, and relates them all to the topic of size.

*So now I need to ask myself: “What is the most important thing the author is saying about the size of the United States?” And I would have to say that the most important thing the author is saying about the size of the United States is that it changed. It changed in 1803, with the Louisiana Purchase.*

The teacher should highlight the final sentence.

*Now I need to create a brief sentence about the gist, or main idea, of the paragraph. Let me give it a try...*

1 From ReadWorks, Mapping the West: The Journey of Lewis and Clark, by Michael Smith.
The teacher counts on his/her fingers and says the following:

The size of the United States changed in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase.
13 words! Pretty good. Let me see if I can say it another way:

In 1803 the Louisiana Purchase changed the size of America.
10 words! Often there is more than one way to state a main idea. So, it’s important to remember that there’s often not just one right answer.

Let’s look at another paragraph, and this time we’ll try the strategy together.

The teacher shows another text, something like the following, and reads it aloud:

When the famous naturalist Charles Darwin, who helped develop the theory of evolution, visited the Galapagos Islands in the 1830s, he made an interesting discovery about native birds. He noticed that 13 different species of finches were all very similar, but differed in the size and shape of their beak. Some of the birds had long, thin beaks, while others had short, thick ones; others still had shapes somewhere in between. Darwin hypothesized that these species all came from a common ancestor – a single species of bird that later evolved into the 13 distinct species he had observed. But how and why did this happen? Why did all the birds not have beaks of the same length?2

So...who or what was this paragraph mostly about?

The teachers asks for the opinions of several students, honing in on the response of Darwin’s discovery about birds’ beaks, and pointing to the many references to that topic in the paragraph. (If a student says “Darwin” or “birds”, the teacher should say: Is the paragraph mostly about Darwin? Is the paragraph mostly about birds?

Now let’s think about this: if the paragraph is mostly about Darwin’s discovery about birds’ beaks, what is the most important thing that the author says about Darwin’s discovery about birds’ beaks?

After giving everyone a few minutes to think, the teacher again asks for opinions, honing in on Darwin’s discovery of beak differences among similar species of birds.

So, if the most important thing the author tells us is that Darwin found out that beaks are different among similar species of birds, let’s create some main idea/gist sentences.

The teacher records what students generate and the class discusses which ones seem to work best.

2 From ReadWorks, A Bird with Many Beaks, no author.
The teacher and class should discuss similarities and differences among possibilities such as:

“Darwin discovered differences in birds’ beaks.” (Too general – topic, not gist)
“Darwin discovered differences in beaks of birds of similar species” (Better)
“Darwin wondered about differences in beaks among similar species” (Good)
“Differences in bird beaks among similar species made Darwin wonder.” (Good)
“Differences in bird beaks among similar species puzzled Darwin.” (Good)
“Darwin discovered bird beaks.” (Wrong)
“Birds have beaks” (true, but not what the passage is about)
“Darwin was a famous naturalist” (true, but not what the passage was about.

Teacher gives students practice by providing additional passages to pairs (guided) and individuals (independent) for them to create main idea statements, which he/she monitors.