Controlling ideas and supporting ideas

In order to have unity, every well-written expository text should contain at least one **controlling idea** and a number of **supporting ideas**. You will find a controlling idea in a paragraph, in an article and in a book, in fact in all types of expository writing. If you read a long text, for example a book, you will usually find that each smaller unit (chapter, paragraph) contains its own related controlling idea. The supporting ideas for the larger unit (the book or the chapter) become the controlling ideas for the smaller units. The diagram below illustrates this:

Book – **controlling idea**: the causes of environmental pollution

**Supporting ideas**: the effect of the motor car, the effect of industrialisation, the effect of intensive farming, the effect of population increases

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Chapter 1 – **controlling idea**: the contribution of the motor car to environmental pollution

**Supporting ideas**: the effect of exhaust gases, the effect of car manufacturing processes, the lack of effective disposal processes

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Section 1 of chapter 1 – **controlling idea**: the effect of the exhaust gases from cars on the environment

**Supporting ideas**: the effect of carbon monoxide, the effect of lead, the effect of other exhaust gases

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Paragraph 1 of section 1 of chapter 1 – **controlling idea**: the effect of carbon monoxide on the environment

**Practice Activity:**
1. Have a look at one of the recommended textbooks on your course. The title of the book should give you an idea of the main controlling idea. What is it?
2. Look at the chapter headings on the contents page. How does each chapter support the book’s controlling idea?
3. Have a look at the headings for the sections in one chapter. How do the sections support the chapter’s controlling idea?
4. Read one paragraph of one section in the chapter. How does the paragraph support the controlling idea of the section?

Understanding how information is organised in this way will help you to read texts more easily and write more effectively.