

Identifying the Main Idea

Identifying the **main idea** of a passage helps you understand and remember what you have read. Finding the main idea helps you paraphrase and summarize a passage. When you state the main idea, you state the general idea that is supported by the details in the passage. Make sure your statement is neither too broad nor too narrow.



Rich people find a variety of ways to exhibit their wealth. They may show off spacious mansions, expensive clothing and jewelry, and fancy vehicles. Chinese aristocrats had a unique way of showing their wealth. As a status symbol, they grew their fingernails, sometimes to as long as two inches. Long fingernails exhibited the fact that they never had to “demean themselves” by doing physical labor.

You might state the main idea of the paragraph above as, “Rich people often show off huge mansions to display their wealth.” However, this statement is too narrow. It states a detail, not the main idea, of the passage. Or you might say, “Rich people like to exhibit their wealth.” However, this statement is too general. A better statement of the passage’s main idea is “Throughout history, rich people have had various ways of exhibiting their wealth.”

Read the passage. Circle the answer that states the passage’s main idea.

The first dinosaur bones were uncovered in the early 1800s. Scientists figured that the earth had been populated by reptiles as large as 20 to 30 feet long. The experts were amazed! The word *dinosaur*, meaning “fearfully great lizard,” was coined for these creatures. But it turns out these scientists didn’t know the half of it. In the 20th century, scientists found many more dinosaur skeletons. They learned to judge what the animals looked like and how much they weighed. They realized that the largest dinosaur of all, *Brachiosaurus*, measured up to 87 feet in length and up to 80 tons in weight.

- A *Brachiosaurus* weighed an incredible 80 tons.
- B Not until the 20th century did scientists figure out just how large dinosaurs really were.
- C The word *dinosaur* means “fearfully great lizard.”
- D Dinosaurs were enormous animals.

Practice

Read each passage. Then circle the answer to each question.

Snowmobiling is a popular pastime in the United States. But some people worry that snowmobiles might damage the environment. People who enjoy the sport point out that snowmobiles use less gasoline than any other motor vehicle. So they create less air pollution. But environmentalists reply that other winter sports, such as skiing and ice skating, use no gasoline at all. In addition, snowmobiles travel at high speeds through the habitats of many wild animals, such as deer and rabbits. Many people worry that snowmobiles will threaten the wildlife by ruining their environment.

1. Which sentence best states the main idea of the passage?
 - A Snowmobiles create less air pollution than other vehicles.
 - B Some sports are healthier for the environment than others.
 - C People disagree about whether snowmobiles harm the environment.
 - D Snowmobiling is a popular pastime.

The American sport of football was developed from the English game of rugby. A medical student named Walter Camp played rugby when he was at Yale in the 1870s. However, he suggested some rule changes. For example, Camp reduced the number of players on a team from 15 to 11. He created the quarterback position. He devised the system of four downs. Camp is known as the Father of American Football.

2. Which of the following statements is too broad to be considered the main idea of the passage?
 - F Football is similar to rugby.
 - G Walter Camp was responsible for football's system of four downs.
 - H Walter Camp is credited with inventing the American game of football.
 - J While rugby had 15 players on a team, football had only 11.

The closest anyone has been able to get to the center of the earth is 36,198 feet below sea level. This depth was reached in Challenger Deep, which is part of the Mariana Trench, located southwest of Guam in the Pacific Ocean. It is the deepest known "ocean deep." An ocean deep is any part of the ocean that is deeper than 18,000 feet. A special diving machine called Trieste descended to the bottom of the Challenger Deep in 1960. It had to withstand water pressures that would have completed flattened an ordinary submarine.

3. Which of the following statements is too narrow to be considered the main idea of the passage?
 - A Exploring the ocean is interesting.
 - B Any spot deeper than 18,000 feet is called an ocean deep.
 - C People are curious about their world.
 - D The ocean is very deep in some places.

Apply

In your own words, state the main idea of each passage. Be sure it is not too broad or too narrow.

Kangaroos cannot run, yet even track stars wouldn't be able to keep up with them. A kangaroo's long, powerful hind legs are not mobile enough for running, but they are ideal for jumping. Kangaroos leap across the plains of Australia in jumps 15 to 20 feet long. They go about 20 miles an hour. Their speed allows kangaroos to escape predators.

1. _____

Francis Scott Key would have to been hard-pressed not to see the "star-spangled banner" that flew over Fort McHenry during a famous battle of the War of 1812. That flag is now referred to in the national anthem of the United States. The flag measured 30 by 42 feet. Before the battle, the fort's commander had ordered a "flag so large that the British will have no difficulty seeing it from a distance." Indeed they had no trouble seeing it, for they shot it full of holes. But the next morning, as Key wrote, "our flag was still there." The United States had successfully defended the fort.

2. _____

Baseball players spread a gooey substance called wood tar on their bats. This helps them get a better grip. The medical profession also recognizes the importance of wood tar. For centuries it has been used as an antiseptic. During the 1700s, the Bishop of Cloyne thought he had found a fantastic cure for all human illnesses. He had noticed that North American Indians often used tar in their medical practices. But he had overestimated the value of wood tar. Although it was a valuable antiseptic, it could not cure diseases.

3. _____

Ecology is a branch of science. It is concerned with the relationships among organisms and their environments. Ecology was brought to the attention of the public and the government of the United States in the early 1960s. That is when Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. In this book, Carson described how pesticides were destroying plant and animal life. By 1969 many pesticides were banned.

4. _____

Check Up

Read each passage. Then circle the answer that states the passage's main idea.

1. A hundred years ago, the job of the schoolteacher was different than it is today. Schoolteachers were expected to provide many services in addition to their teaching duties. They were also expected to behave so that they were a good example for their students. They cared for the oil lamps and tended the fire. They were expected to spend time each evening reading the Bible. Women teachers could not marry. Barber shops were off limits to men teachers because they were places where men gossiped and read sporting magazines.
 - A Barber shops were different a hundred years ago.
 - B The life of a teacher was hard a hundred years ago.
 - C Teachers have always been important influences.
 - D In the past, the tasks and expected behavior of teachers were different than they are today.
2. London had a serious pollution problem in the 1300s. The Thames River stank. The air was filled with a "disease odor" and soot clung to ladies' dresses. London was so polluted that the king had to forbid the use of coal. The government gave fines for a first offense and destroyed furnaces after the second. It seems that at least one lawbreaker was put to death for polluting the air.
 - F Justice was harsh in England in the 1300s.
 - G London officials took strong measures to fight pollution in the 1300s.
 - H Because coal was used for fuel in London, people's clothing got very dirty.
 - J Air pollution was unheard of until the 20th century.
3. The Cherokee Indians built their villages along the streams and rivers of present-day Georgia, Virginia, Kentucky, and North and South Carolina. They built the walls of their houses by planting large, sturdy posts three feet apart. They put smaller posts in between. The posts were held in place by twigs and long grasses woven to provide strength. To protect against wind and cold, the woven walls were plastered with a mixture of grass and clay. Many historians feel that the Cherokee were leaders in early architectural techniques.
 - A The Cherokee Indians were creative, effective builders.
 - B The Cherokee used twigs, grasses, and clay for their homes.
 - C Historians have studied Cherokee houses.
 - D The Cherokee lived in the southern United States.



Read On Read "Business Leader: Remedios Diaz-Oliver." Use what you have learned about character and main idea to answer the questions.