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Main Idea and Summaries

Your friend wants to tell you about a book he's just read. Your first question is probably "What's it about?" If your friend really understood the book, he can tell you what it was about in one sentence.

Every bit of text you read is about something. Every text has a main idea. Stating the **main idea** means you will answer the question "What's it about?" Being able to answer this question is an important reading skill. When you know what you are reading about, details make sense. The main ideas of sections of text are the details that support the main idea of the whole section.

VOCABULARY

exploration
fascinating
parched
privy
wayfarers

Guided Practice

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

Seaman Saves the Day

by Damien West

1 When Lewis and Clark set off to explore the American West, a furry, four-legged friend joined them. This furry friend named Seaman was Lewis's Newfoundland dog. Seaman was a well-known member of the team of explorers. Lewis bought Seaman for \$20 in 1803. He wrote about Seaman in his journal. Because Lewis's handwriting was hard to read, people thought the dog's name was "Scannon."

2 Lewis's dog saved their American Indian guide, Sacagawea, and the men from being killed many times. One night, a bear came near their camp. Seaman saw the bear and barked at it. The men heard the barking and came out and shot the bear before it could hurt any of them. Another time, Seaman saw a large buffalo bull that had come near their tent. He made the buffalo move away just by being there. Lewis wrote, "When he came near the tent, my dog saved us by causing him to change his course." Seaman protected the camp from many dangerous animals.

3 As a hunter, Seaman helped catch food for the explorers. Seaman once found a deer that was drinking water at a river. Seaman charged it and the deer became food for the very hungry team. He often caught squirrels, which the explorers ate.

Research Newfoundland dogs. Write about what would make them good traveling companions.

4 Seaman became an important member of the exploration team. We imagine him riding in their boat and running alongside them as they traveled. He was always watching for animals that could hurt them. His bark would tell them that something was wrong.

5 Without Seaman, the team would have experienced many more dangers on their trip west! Perhaps we would not know the West as we know it now without Seaman.

exploration
the act of traveling to
discover more about a
new place

What is this passage mainly about?

- A the American West
- B Lewis and Clark's travels
- C Sacagawea
- D Seaman

The passage is "about" all these things in some way, but they are not what the passage is mainly about. The passage has one central focus.

Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 1?

- A When Lewis and Clark set off to explore the American West, a furry, four-legged friend joined them.
- B This furry friend named Seaman was Lewis's Newfoundland dog.
- C Lewis bought Seaman for \$20 in 1803.
- D Because Lewis's handwriting was hard to read, people thought the dog's name was "Scannon."

In most paragraphs, there is one sentence that tells the main idea of the paragraph. It's called the **topic sentence**. It can be anywhere in the paragraph, but often the topic sentence is the first sentence. The sentences that follow give more details about the topic.

Identify the topic sentence of paragraph 2.

Details in this paragraph include examples that support the topic sentence. The topic sentence is more general. Here is a restatement of the topic sentence:

Seaman protected the camp from many dangerous animals.

Identify the topic sentence of paragraph 3.

Most of the sentences in the paragraph support the main idea by telling more information about how Seaman caught a deer and squirrels. The topic sentence is a general statement supported by these details.

Determine which of these ideas should be left out of a summary of the passage.

- A As a hunter, Seaman helped catch food for the explorers.
- B Seaman was a well-known member of the team of explorers.
- C Because Lewis's handwriting was hard to read, people thought the dog's name was "Scannon."
- D Seaman protected the camp from many dangerous animals.

A **summary** is a retelling of the main ideas and important details in a passage. Which sentences are important details? Which sentence does not add to your understanding of the main idea?

Write a summary of the passage.

You can summarize a passage by thinking of the main idea of each section or paragraph.

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

The Talkative Tortoise

a fable from India

- 1 Tortoise lived near a pond in the enormous forest. One beautiful day, he spotted two geese that had come to the pond for a drink.
- 2 “Why haven’t we seen you here before?” the geese asked Tortoise.
- 3 “Well, I usually stay indoors,” Tortoise said. “I prefer to be alone because I don’t have many friends.”
- 4 “We hope to see you again,” the geese said as they departed.
- 5 Tortoise began to leave his home more, and he often met the geese at the pond. They all had fun together.
- 6 Soon, the pond started to dry up. The animals had a difficult time finding food. Before the geese left to find a new place to live, they visited Tortoise.
- 7 “We have decided it is time to move before we die in this desertlike forest. The pond has nearly dried up,” the geese told Tortoise. “We hope you have a prosperous life, and we will surely miss you.”
- 8 “Don’t leave me behind to become parched and die!” Tortoise yelled. “Please take me with you; I beg you!”
- 9 “How can birds that fly take a tortoise that travels on the ground? You can’t fly!” they said to Tortoise.

parched
dry, or thirsty

10 “I know, but I have a plan. I will explain how you can take me with you if you promise you won’t leave me,” Tortoise said.

11 “If we can take you, we will. What is your suggestion?” they asked Tortoise.

12 Tortoise told the geese that he would find a sturdy stick. The two geese would each hold one end of the stick in their feet as they flew. Tortoise would use his mouth to hold onto the middle of the stick while they flew. The geese would be able to carry him to their new dwelling place.

13 “We think that will work,” one of the geese said. “Let’s go search for a stick!”

14 Before they began to soar, the geese reminded Tortoise that while they were flying and he was holding on to the stick, he would not be able to move his mouth. He wouldn’t be able to utter a sound.

15 “You must not talk while we are flying. If you do, your mouth will open and you will plummet toward the earth and surely die,” they said. “Please stay absolutely quiet until we find a new pond.”

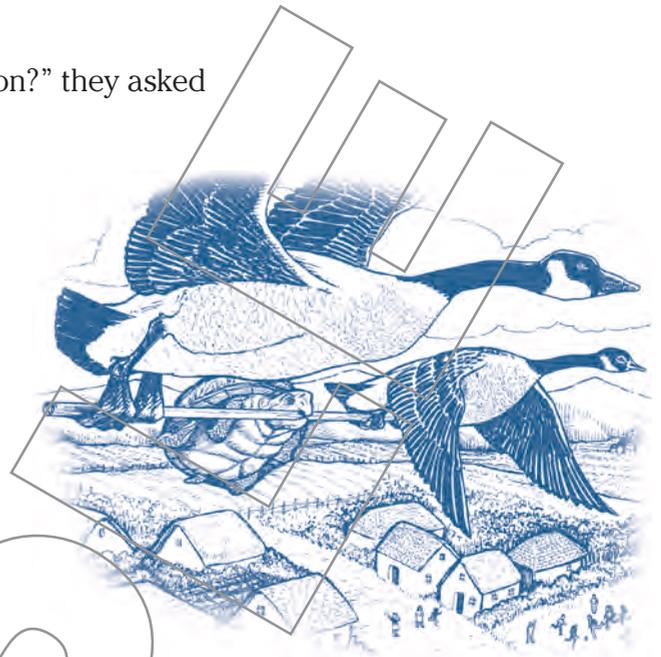
16 “I am not ignorant,” Tortoise said. “I know what will happen if I mutter a sound.”

17 Tortoise enjoyed seeing the beautiful sights on the journey. However, when they came to a large city, he heard people shouting about two geese carrying a silly tortoise. Tortoise could see that they were pointing at him. They were laughing at him so much that he wanted to hide in his shell. He didn’t like that they were saying hurtful things about him, and he became angry.

18 When he couldn’t take it anymore, Tortoise opened his mouth to yell back at the people. He fell from the sky and landed on the ground near the crowd.

19 “What a stupid tortoise,” the people said while the geese cried that they lost their friend.

20 “Didn’t Tortoise know that happiness comes from keeping quiet?” the geese asked each other.



What makes the geese decide they need to leave the forest?

- A The geese were bored.
- B The pond is nearly dry.
- C Tortoise is annoying the geese.
- D The geese wanted to fly south.

This question asks about a detail that supports the main idea of the story: the geese have decided to leave the forest. Look for the reason in the text.

How does Tortoise respond when the geese tell him not to talk while they are traveling?

- A He laughs at them.
- B He refuses to go with them because he is afraid.
- C He tells them he understands this and is not stupid.
- D He finds another way to travel to the new pond.

This is another detail that supports the main idea. Look at paragraph 16. It tells Tortoise's response to the geese's instructions.

What is the main idea of this story?

The main idea of a text is sometimes called its **theme. The theme is different from the plot. The plot tells what happens. The theme is what a text is about. In a fable, the theme is often told as a lesson, or "moral." The lesson results from the way the main character responds to challenges.**

Determine which sentence summarizes how Tortoise would travel.

- A** He would hold onto the middle of a large stick while the geese carried him and the stick through the air.
- B** One of the geese would carry a stick while Tortoise held on to it.
- C** Tortoise would follow the geese by swimming to their new home in a distant pond.
- D** The geese would hold a stick between them while Tortoise held on and floated on the water behind them.

The sentence that best summarizes how Tortoise would travel to his new home with the geese gives the most correct information. Did the threesome travel in the air or on water?

Write a summary of the story.

Because the story is short, your summary should be even shorter. Your answer should include only the main things that happen in the story.

Read the poem. Then answer the questions.

Uphill

by Christina Rossetti

- 1 Does the road wind uphill all the way?
- 2 Yes, to the very end.
- 3 Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
- 4 From morn to night, my friend.
- 5 But is there for the night a resting-place?
- 6 A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.
- 7 May not the darkness hide it from my face?
- 8 You cannot miss that inn.
- 9 Shall I meet other wayfarers¹ at night?
- 10 Those who have gone before.
- 11 Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
- 12 They will not keep you waiting at that door.
- 13 Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
- 14 Of labor you shall find the sum.
- 15 Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
- 16 Yea, beds for all who come.



What is the main idea that Rossetti expresses in this poem?

- A When we travel to any place, we always go uphill.
- B Life's travels are hard, but you find friends and rest.
- C We will all find a place to rest on a bed during life's journey.
- D People will wait for you, and they will give you a bed to rest.

Rossetti was an important female poet in England in the 1800s. She was brought up in a family of poets and artists. She was religious. Many of her poems reflect that. In "Uphill," Rossetti compares walking up a hill to a journey through life. Look at the first line of each stanza. Each is a question and main idea for the stanza.

¹wayfarers: people who travel on foot

Interpret what Rosetti means by “Will there be beds for me and all who seek?” in line 15.

In this poem, Rosetti is asking questions about her journey through life. The journey is not easy and is filled with difficulty. In each stanza, she crafts the main idea as a question. Then she uses details to answer her question.

Test Yourself

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

Fort Johnson *by Li Zhou*



1 At Fort Johnson, you'll visit a house that's over 250 years old. You'll see rooms furnished as they were when it was new. You'll see tools, weapons, and crafts of early America. George Washington visited this house once. He may even have used the privy which still stands. At least, people around here say he did.

2 Fort Johnson stands near Amsterdam, New York. The Mohawk River flows nearby. In colonial days, the river was a busy highway. That's why William Johnson built this house in 1742.

privy
outdoor restroom

3 Johnson was an English soldier and trader. He owned a lot of land in the Mohawk Valley. He traded with American Indians and settlers. Johnson wanted to preserve peace in the region. Because he learned their language and traded honestly, he won the trust of the powerful Iroquois people. He married an Iroquois woman in the Iroquois way. When he held regular meetings with Iroquois leaders at Fort Johnson, he wore Iroquois clothing. He helped make peace between the Iroquois and their enemies. When war broke out against France, he led Iroquois warriors in battle. The British government named him their official representative among all the American Indian peoples. He became Sir William Johnson.

4 Sir William died in 1774. Soon afterward, America's War of Independence from England began. American patriots tore the lead roof off Fort Johnson to make bullets. The furniture was sold. But the sturdy old house remained.

5 In 1905, people began restoring it as a museum. They were able to buy back some of the Johnson family's original possessions. At Fort Johnson today, you'll see the house restored almost as it was when Sir William lived there. The original kitchen is still there. A table is set for supper. Colonial and American Indian items from the region are on display. Guides dressed in costumes of the time show you the rooms.

6 One fascinating item at Fort Johnson dates from 1833. It's a faded work of art in a second-floor bedroom. A girl named Mary Ann Pierson made it. It's a sampler—a picture made by stitching colored yarn in cloth. There are animals, flowers, trees, an alphabet, and this rhyme by 10-year-old Mary:

*Children look and see
What care my parents took of me,
That gave me learning in my youth
That I might learn to practice truth.*

fascinating
very interesting

- 1 Which sentence tells the main idea of paragraph 1?
- A At Fort Johnson, you'll visit a house that's over 250 years old.
 - B You'll see rooms furnished as they were when it was new.
 - C You'll see tools, weapons, and crafts of early America.
 - D George Washington visited this house once.

- 2 Which is the topic sentence of paragraph 2?
- A Fort Johnson stands near Amsterdam, New York.
 - B The Mohawk River flows nearby.
 - C In colonial days, the river was a busy highway.
 - D That's why William Johnson built this house in 1742.

- 3 The main idea of paragraph 3 is that _____.
- A Johnson was an English trader and soldier
 - B Johnson won the respect of American Indians
 - C Johnson built the biggest house in the area
 - D in Johnson's day, New York was ruled by England

- 4 What is paragraph 5 about?



- 5 Which of these facts about the sampler in the last paragraph would be most important to include in a summary?
- A It is not from Sir William Johnson's time.
 - B It was made by a 10-year-old girl.
 - C It is a picture made in yarn stitched on cloth.
 - D It is located in a second-floor bedroom.

- 6 Write a summary of the passage. Include the main idea and a few important supporting details.

