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Main Idea and Summaries

Think of the last book you read. What was it about? Can you answer that question in a single sentence?

Everything you read is about something. Every book, every chapter, every paragraph has a main idea. Identifying that main idea—answering the question “What’s it about?”—is one of the most important reading skills. Once you know what you’re reading about, the details all seem to fall into place. The main ideas of each chapter or section are details that support the main ideas of the book or article. The main ideas of each paragraph are details that support the chapter.

VOCABULARY

cacophony
Cologne
exempted
lapis-lazuli
nymphs

Guided Practice

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

from **Nike**
by Paul Price

1 Chion could hear the hum, like a swarm of bees, from half a mile away. As he came nearer Olympia’s sacred grove, it expanded into a cacophony of human and animal sounds. Chion felt his excitement growing. Now, the sounds were becoming louder and more distinct: shouting, singing, laughter, music, the lowing of sheep and oxen, the ring of a smith’s hammer. Chion rounded a small hill and stared at the swarming field in front of the Temple of Zeus. It was full of tents, and people wandering among them. For five days, the tents would house athletes, coaches, judges, spectators—anyone who could not afford the price of an inn.

2 People wandered through the crowd selling cheese, fruit, meat, bread, and olives. A blind man played on a harp and sang of the heroes of past Olympian Games. A young girl danced to music played by an old woman on a flute. A poet shouted to make his verses heard. An acrobat juggled balls and a Persian magician swallowed fire. Chion munched bread and olives from his bag as he shouldered his way through the crowd. He touched the purse at his waist, mindful of thieves and of the entertainers’ expectation of being paid. If he did not pause to look or listen, perhaps they would not demand money.

3 But here was a woman selling charms bearing the face of Nike, goddess of victory. Chion hesitated, then extracted an obol to pay for the charm. It hung on a leather thong, and Chion slipped it under his tunic.

cacophony
loud confusion of
noise

Research the ancient Greek Olympian games in the library or on the Internet. When and where were they held? What sports were included? How did they differ from the modern Olympic Games?



4 “You’re Chion of Athens, aren’t you?” said a voice at his shoulder. Chion turned to look at the sandy-haired young man but did not immediately recognize him. “I’m Lysander of Corinth,” the man prompted him. “We raced against each other two years ago at the Pythian Games.”

5 Now Chion remembered. “I might have recognized your back,” he said with a grin. “You won the laurel crown that day. You passed me just before the finish.”

6 The Corinthian looked at Chion appraisingly. “Well, you look stronger and faster now,” he said. “Will you be challenging me again?”

7 “Not in the *diaulos*,” Chion said, feeling self-conscious. “Too many people can beat me at two *stadia*¹—like you, for instance. I’m running in the *dolichos*.²”

8 “Been stretching yourself out, have you?” Lysander said. “Well, you look as though you have the endurance, and if you’re as fast as you were at the Pythians, I don’t think my brothers from Corinth will keep up with you. May Nike be with you!”

9 Chion flushed. He wondered whether Lysander had seen him buy the charm. “Do you know where the Athenians are?” he asked, looking around the field of tents for a familiar banner. “I was delayed and only just got here.”

10 “Come, let’s walk to the gymnasium,” Lysander said. “I’m sure you’ll find some there.”

¹two stadia: a distance of $\frac{1}{5}$ mile, or 300 m

²dolichos: a race of about 3 miles, or 5 km

11 The two young men passed many temples, statues, and altars to the gods, a reminder, if Chion needed one, that Olympia was a sacred place. On the first day of the games, tomorrow, a hundred bulls would be sacrificed to Zeus. In the days that followed, boxers and wrestlers would compete before Zeus's altar. To the east of the field was the great *stadion* with its 40,000 seats, where in three days Chion would be racing.

12 Chion felt a surge of pride at being Greek. The gymnasium was filled with athletes from every city-state. Some were there with their slave attendants, and there were a few foreign *barbaros* among the food sellers, but only free Greeks were allowed to compete in the Games or even to watch. Only Greeks understood how athletic training and competition glorified the gods and brought honor to a young man and to his city. Apart from a brave death in battle, being crowned with laurel at the Olympic Games was the highest honor a man could achieve. Chion remembered his grandfather's stories about the wrestler Milo of Croton, who had won the Olympic laurel five times. People spoke of Milo as if he were a god.

13 Chion knew, too, that if he came home with a laurel crown, Athens would reward him with a gift of money. He might be exempted from taxes for life. Chion eyed a slave wiping down his master with a strigil, and he shuddered inside. Perhaps that slave had once been a free man like himself who'd been sold because his family had fallen into debt—like Chion's own. Few besides their creditors knew, but two years of bad harvests, on top of the expenses his father had incurred as a member of Athens' high council had pushed them to the edge.

14 He *had* to win.

What is this story mainly about?

- A** the ancient Greek Olympic Games
- B** two friends going head-to-head in an Olympic race
- C** a young man's struggle to free his family from debt
- D** a young man competing in the ancient Olympic Games

You know from this first part of the story what it's going to be about. It is about the ancient Greek Olympic Games—but that states the idea too broadly. Think about the overall picture and what the main character is doing.

**exempted
released from an
obligation**

Which sentence expresses the main idea of paragraph 1?

- A Chion could hear the hum, like a swarm of bees, from half a mile away.
- B Chion felt his excitement growing.
- C Chion rounded a small hill and stared at the swarming field in front of the Temple of Zeus.
- D For five days, the tents would house athletes, coaches, judges, spectators—anyone who could not afford the price of an inn.

In most paragraphs, the **topic sentence** carries the main idea. This paragraph is about Chion's approach to the site of the Games. The scene is what is important.

Write a sentence that expresses the main idea of paragraph 2.

Paragraph 2 has no topic sentence. It does have a topic, though. Here is a sample answer:

Chion notices the sights and sounds as he arrives at Olympia.

Analyze what happens in paragraph 3, and explain why it is important.

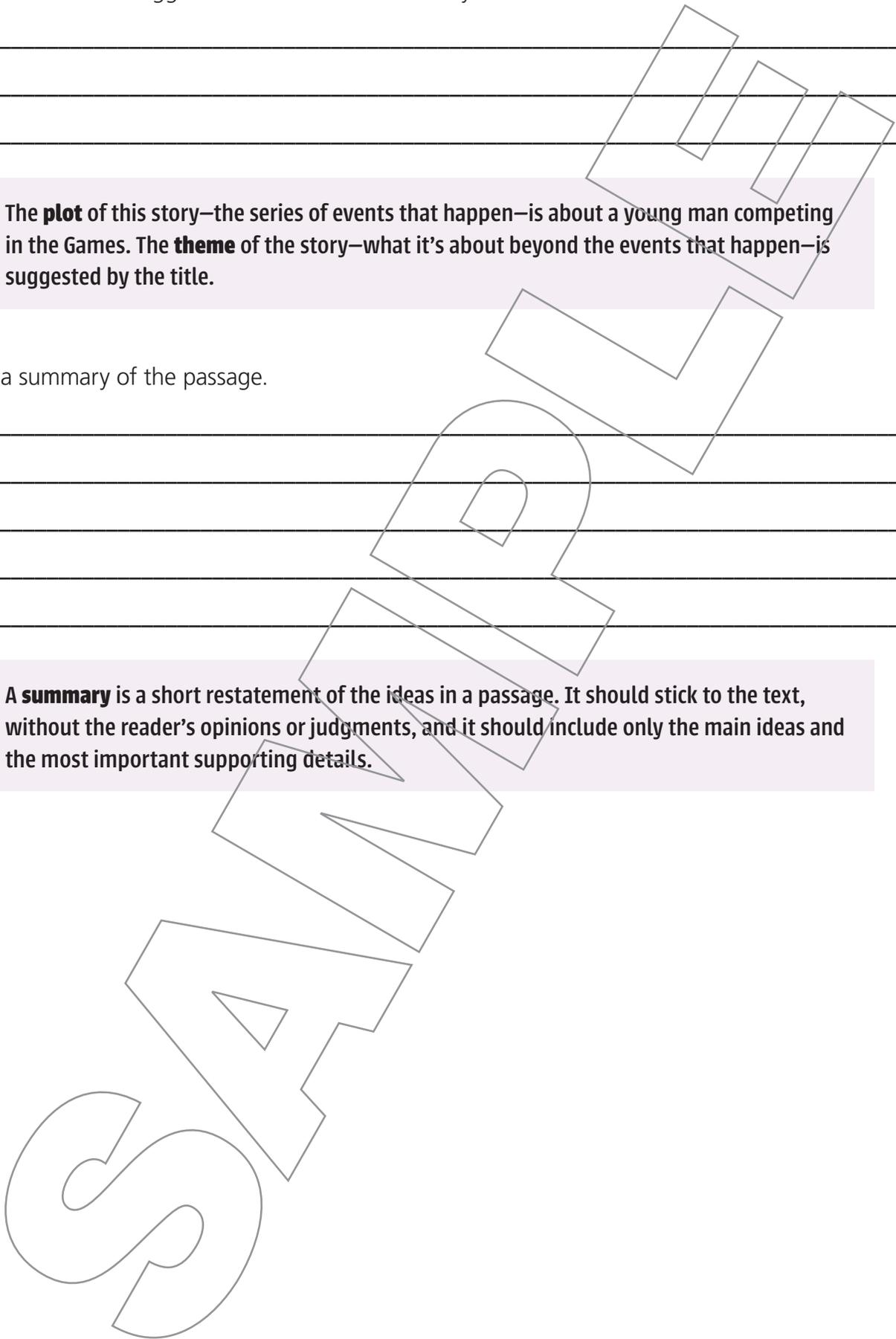
Look at what Chion does in this paragraph. What does it tell you about him?

How does the title suggest the main idea of the story?

The **plot** of this story—the series of events that happen—is about a young man competing in the Games. The **theme** of the story—what it’s about beyond the events that happen—is suggested by the title.

Write a summary of the passage.

A **summary** is a short restatement of the ideas in a passage. It should stick to the text, without the reader’s opinions or judgments, and it should include only the main ideas and the most important supporting details.



Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

from **Interview with Catherine Thomas Morris**
a pioneer woman in Oregon, interviewed in her old age

1 For my 13th birthday, I was given a spinning wheel. This was in 1854. Mother was a good hand at carding wool. People used to bring in their wool, and we washed, carded, spun, and wove it on shares, so soon we had plenty of clothes. Mother used alder bark to dye the cloth brown and oak bark to dye it butternut color....

2 Each generation thinks that it is a great improvement on past generations. In a way I suppose this is true or we would make no progress, but in some ways I cannot help thinking that, as busy as they were, the pioneers of Oregon had more time to be kindly, thoughtful, and considerate than the people of today. When I was a girl, if a woman got sick she didn't have to hire a trained nurse. Her neighbors came in, did the housework, took her children to their homes to care for till she was well, brought her homemade bread and jellies and other things, and if a man met with an accident or was sick, all the men in the neighborhood would put in his crop for him or reap his grain, making it a day's picnic.... If he was out of wood, they would haul wood and cut it up, and in every way the neighbors showed a spirit of helpfulness and service.

3 In these days, many families have no children and others have one child. In those days, there were usually from 10 to 15 children in the family so that children had no chance to grow up spoiled or selfish. They had to learn to share their things and to help each other. Both the boys and the girls had certain duties that they had to perform, so they had very little time to get into mischief....



What is the main point Mrs. Morris makes in her interview?

- A She and her mother made their own clothes.
- B She had a busy life growing up as a pioneer girl.
- C People who got sick could not rely on skilled care.
- D People of her generation were helpful and resourceful.

Each paragraph in this excerpt has its own topic, but they all support one central idea. Mrs. Morris expresses that idea best in the middle of paragraph 2: "...the pioneers of Oregon had more time to be kindly, thoughtful, and considerate than the people of today."

Summarize what paragraph 1 is mainly about.

The first paragraph describes a process: how pioneer women made clothes. Every sentence about spinning, carding, and dyeing wool is a detail that supports the main idea.

Which of these sentences would best be left out of a summary of the passage?

- A Catherine describes how she and her mother made clothes.
- B Catherine expresses the usual criticisms that older people make of the young.
- C Catherine reflects on the kindness and selflessness of the pioneer generation.
- D Catherine believes that large families are better for children's upbringing than one-child families.

Three of the sentences summarize the three paragraphs of the passage. The fourth one, however, is not a summary of what Catherine said but an opinion judging her reflections—and not restating them in an accurate way.

Write your own summary of the passage. Analyze how Morris's central idea is conveyed through the supporting details.

The answer choices for the last question give you a good model for your summary.

Read the poem. Then answer the questions.

Cologne

by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

- 1 In Köln, a town of monks and bones,
- 2 And pavements fang'd with murderous stones
- 3 And rags and hags, and hideous wenches;
- 4 I counted two and seventy stenches,
- 5 All well defined, and several stinks!
- 6 Ye Nymphs! that reign o'er sewers and sinks,
- 7 The river Rhine, it is well known
- 8 Doth wash your city of Cologne;²
- 9 But tell me, Nymphs, what power divine
- 10 Shall henceforth wash the river Rhine?

Cologne, or Köln, was originally an ancient Roman military fortress. Its name comes from *Colonia*, Latin for "colony."

¹nymphs: water spirits from mythology

²Cologne: a city in Germany; also a fragrant liquid or mild perfume. Köln is the German name for the city.

Interpret the main idea that Coleridge expresses in this poem.

- A Cologne is a bad place to visit.
- B Cologne is a bad-smelling city.
- C The streets of Cologne are dangerous.
- D Travel can be an unpleasant experience.

Coleridge comments on the streets (a metaphor compares the paving stones to fangs), but he's not critical of foreign places in general, and most of the poem focuses on one negative feature.

Analyze the poem's meaning. What is the source of the humor in this poem?

What do people usually associate with the word *cologne*?

Test Yourself

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

En-Hedu'Anna

by Tamara McPhaden

1 Ancient peoples made little if any distinction among magic, science, and religion. "Medicine men" channeled spiritual powers to heal the sick. Various cultures held the sun, moon, planets, and even numbers to be gods and goddesses. Physicians, astronomers, and mathematicians were therefore also priests and priestesses.

2 The earliest astronomer-priestess whose name we know was En-Hedu'Anna of Ur. That wasn't her real name; it was a title meaning "High priestess-ornament of heaven." Her real name has been lost to history. What is known was that she lived from about 2285 to 2250 BC, and was appointed to her high post by her father, the mighty King Sargon of Akkad.



3 This was in Mesopotamia, the land known today as Iraq. Sargon was an emperor who ruled the city-states of Sumer from his capital at Babylon. His daughter was the first known holder of the title En-Hedu'Anna. It was an important political post. As high priestess of Inanna, the moon goddess, it was her job to observe and record the movements of the planets and stars. Those movements could mean life or death to the people of Mesopotamia, as they regulated the agricultural cycle of planting, growing, and harvesting. The high priestess could make or bring down kings, if she declared that they had lost the goddess's favor. Perhaps this was why Sargon began the tradition of appointing royal daughters to the position.

4 The Temple of Inanna was En-Hedu'Anna's observatory. It was also a learning center where people studied math, science, and the arts. The calendar they created from their observations is still used today to mark religious holidays by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

5 None of En-Hedu'Anna's scientific writings have survived. Besides being the first known astronomer, she was also the first known poet. Many copies of her poems still exist, written on clay tablets. One of them refers to her sacred work as astronomer-priestess:

6 The true woman who has surpassing wisdom,
She uses a tablet of lapis-lazuli,
She gives advice to all lands...
She measures the heavens,
She places measuring cords on the earth.

lapis-lazuli
a stone of deep blue color

1 What is the main idea of this passage?

- A** Ancient people confused religion with science.
- B** En-Hedu'Anna was the earliest known scientist.
- C** Early farmers depended on astronomical calculations.
- D** En-Hedu'Anna was appointed to her position by her father, the king.

2 Which of these is the topic sentence of paragraph 1?

- A** Ancient peoples made little if any distinction among magic, science, and religion.
- B** "Medicine men" channeled spiritual powers to heal the sick.
- C** Various cultures held the sun, moon, planets, and even numbers to be gods and goddesses.
- D** Physicians, astronomers, and mathematicians were therefore also priests and priestesses.

- 3 Paragraph 2 mainly explains ____.
- A who En-Hedu'Anna was
 - B when En-Hedu'Anna lived
 - C what the title En-Hedu'Anna meant
 - D why Sargon of Akkad was important

- 4 Which of these best states the main idea of paragraph 3?
- A Mesopotamia was where scientific observation began.
 - B The position of high priestess held a great deal of power.
 - C People in ancient Mesopotamia believed in a moon goddess.
 - D Kings traditionally named their daughters as high priestesses.

- 5 What is the main thing the author wants you to know about women in ancient Mesopotamia?

- 6 Write a summary of the passage.

