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Main Idea and Summaries

RL.5.2, RI.5.2

Vocabulary

piety

transition

A friend starts to tell you about a great book he just read. Chances are the first question you ask him is, “What’s it about?” If your friend has understood the book, he can probably answer 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.

Guided Practice

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

The Legend of Igo and Ono

by Frank Maltesi

In the mountains of Shasta County, California, are two tiny towns with unusual names. They are called Igo and Ono. Some people say the names are Modoc, the language of American Indians who once lived in these mountains. According to a local legend, the names have a different origin.

The story goes back to the California gold rush of the 1840s and 1850s. People from many parts of the world came to California in those years, hungry for gold. Among them were thousands of immigrants from China. Most of them came from the same province in south China, hoping to escape the crushing poverty of the region. A few returned to China with a fortune in gold, but many stayed in the United States. In the late 1860s, Chinese workers built the first railroad over the California mountains. Many of them later settled in small mountain communities as farmers, miners, or small business owners.

All too frequently, racism would rear its ugly head against the Chinese Americans. Other people resented their presence. The Chinese were beaten up and abused in other ways. Laws were passed to prevent their families from joining them.



rear its ugly head
(idiom)—*appear or
be mentioned, said of
something unpleasant
or unwanted*



Find Igo and Ono
in an atlas or on an
electronic map. Research
how many people live in
the towns today.



In one community, so the legend goes, a mob of miners and cowboys attacked their Chinese neighbors. They forced them out of their homes with clubs and other weapons. The Chinese are said to have shouted, “I go! I go!” as the mob chased them out of town. This pained cry of people driven from their homes was remembered in the name of the town. The Chinese regrouped and settled in another mountain valley several miles away.

A year or two later, some people in Shasta County grew resentful of the “foreigners” in their midst. Again, they whipped up a mob against the Chinese. But the Chinese had had enough of being pushed around. This time, when the mob tried to force them to leave their homes and shops, they shouted “Oh, no! Oh, no!” They fought back. The Chinese remained, and the town of Ono had its name.

Or so, at least, goes the story. Did it really happen? As with all legends, no one is sure today how much is real and how much is colorful make-believe.

What is this article *mainly* about?

- A** the gold rush in California
- B** separating legend from fact
- C** the Chinese in early California
- D** how two towns got their names

✓ The passage is “about” all these things in one way or another. But only the second paragraph mentions the gold rush. “The Chinese in California” is a much more general idea than the topic of the article, and so is “separating legend from fact.” The article is concerned with one specific legend, of how the two towns got their names. The correct answer is choice D.

Which sentence expresses the main idea of the first paragraph?

- A In the mountains of Shasta County, California, are two tiny towns with unusual names.
- B They are called Igo and Ono.
- C Some people say the names are Modoc, the language of American Indians who once lived in these mountains.
- D According to a local legend, the names have a different origin.



In most paragraphs, there is one sentence that carries the main idea of the paragraph. It's called the **topic sentence**. In this paragraph, the first three sentences are details that point to the last sentence. The last sentence tells you that the article will be about how the towns got their names, which is the main idea of the passage. Choice D is the correct answer.

What is the topic sentence of the third paragraph?



This paragraph introduces the subject of how the Chinese in early California were sometimes treated. This topic in turn supports the main idea of the article—how the towns got their names. The first sentence states the topic. All the other sentences in the paragraph give details that support or explain it. Your answer should be a restatement of the first sentence. Here is a sample answer:

All too frequently, racism would rear its ugly head against the Chinese Americans.

What is a second main idea in the passage?



Many items that you read have a secondary main idea connected to the first. This passage is mainly about how Igo and Ono got their names. But it is also about people choosing to stand up for themselves. Here is one way of stating the answer:

After being driven out of one community, the Chinese fought back.

Which of these ideas should be left out of a summary of the passage?

- A** A legend tells how Igo and Ono got their names.
- B** The names may have come from an American Indian language.
- C** Chinese immigrants settled in a small mountain town.
- D** When their second settlement was attacked, the Chinese fought.



A **summary** is a short restatement of the ideas in a passage. It should only include the main ideas and the most important supporting details. For this passage, choices A, C, and D are all important details, but a summary need not include that the towns' names may come from an American Indian language. The correct answer is choice B.

SAMPLE

Write a summary of the passage.



One way to summarize a well-written passage is to think of the main ideas of each section or paragraph. Here is one possible summary of this passage:

There is a legend about how the towns of Igo and Ono in California got their names. Chinese immigrants settled in one mountain town after the gold rush. When a mob attacked them, they fled the town, crying, "I go!" They started another community nearby. However, when another mob tried to drive them out, they fought back, shouting, "Oh, no!"

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

The Washerwoman's Donkey

a fable from India

There once was a poor woman who earned her living by taking in laundry. She had a donkey that would carry the dirty laundry down to the river and the clean laundry back to town. The donkey became weak and broken-down from carrying the heavy loads. Finally, one day he refused to carry any more. The woman wanted him to get well, but she was too cheap to buy him hay. She covered him with a tiger's skin to keep him warm and, during the night, brought him to a neighbor's pasture where he could graze.

The donkey soon discovered that the other animals kept their distance from him. He realized that they all thought he was a tiger. So he ate as much as he wanted and soon began feeling strong again.

The farmer who owned the pasture came by. He was alarmed when he saw a tiger among his animals. He wrapped his gray cloak around himself and began to sneak away.

Test Yourself

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

Flying Cars: Here at Last

by Al Landsdown

Is it a flying car or a plane you can drive on the highway? Whatever you call it, it's no longer the stuff of science fiction. It's a road machine with wings that unfold for flying. You may see one zooming through traffic—or above it—by 2012.

The new vehicle is called the Transition. It's a product of a Massachusetts company called Terrafugia. That's an Italian word that means, "escape from the ground." It was designed by five former students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who are also pilots.

Flying cars have long been a dream of engineers—and technology fans. They were first proposed in 1909, when both cars and planes were new. In the 1950s and 1960s, some models were actually built and tested. They could not be built well or cheaply enough to sell. They did help to inspire an animated TV series, *The Jetsons*. It was about a suburban family in an imagined future that got around in flying cars. The 1982 film *Blade Runner* was a science-fiction thriller in which police of the future patrolled Los Angeles in flying squad cars. But in 1982, cell phones, too, were the stuff of science fiction. And in 1960, no one could have even imagined the Internet.

The Transition is not designed to take off from a street or highway. It needs about half a mile of runway to get airborne. Its builders see it as a private plane that you can drive to the airport. On the highway, it gets about 30 miles per gallon of gas. It takes about a minute to unfold the wings. In the air, it can fly about 400 miles on a tank of gas at a speed of 115 miles per hour. When the trip is over, you don't have to leave the Transition in a hangar. You just fold up the wings, drive home, and park in your garage.

In June 2010, the Transition passed government air and highway safety tests. By then, Terrafugia had already received 70 orders. Don't expect to see many of them around the neighborhood just yet, though. The price tag is \$194,000, and that's without a radio or a parachute. For the near future, flying cars will be luxuries for the wealthy, but back in 1909, so were cars.



transition
act of changing from
one place, form, or
activity to another



- 1 What is the main idea of this article?
- A Flying cars have long been a subject of science fiction.
 - B The Transition has wings that fold up for highway use.
 - C You can expect to see Transitions soon in your town or city.
 - D The first practical flying car is almost ready for road and sky.
- 2 What is the *most* important supporting idea of this article?
- A The Transition gets better gas mileage than most cars.
 - B The Transition is too expensive ever to become popular.
 - C Yesterday's science fiction can become today's technology.
 - D The first flying cars were actually built more than 50 years ago.
- 3 Which of these is the topic sentence of the first paragraph?
- A Is it a flying car or a plane you can drive on the highway?
 - B Whatever you call it, it's no longer the stuff of science fiction.
 - C It's a road machine with wings that unfold for flying.
 - D And you may see one zooming through traffic—or above it—by 2012.
- 4 Which of these would make the *best* heading for paragraph 4?
- A How a Flying Car Works
 - B No Need for a Cab to the Airport
 - C Your Transition: An Owner's Manual
 - D Facts and Figures About the Transition

5 Write a sentence that expresses the main idea of paragraph 3.

6 Write a summary of the article.

SAMPLE