

Determining the Central Idea of an Informative Text

What's the Big Idea?

What Is a Central Idea?

- The Central Idea of an informative passage is what a passage is all about--stated in a broad sentence. In past years, you may have called this the “Main Idea.”
- Central Ideas are the **most ESSENTIAL** ideas to help you understand an informative text.
- An informative passage may have more than one central idea (just like a short story may have more than one theme).

Steps to Find the

Why did I use a
numbered list here?

Central Idea

1. **Use basic text features:** One of the central ideas of a text will be conveyed in the **HEADING** of the passage. Other central ideas will be conveyed in the **SUBHEADINGS**.
Although some subheadings convey supporting details, so be careful!
2. **Determine the Text Structure:** Transition words show you the text structure; text structure helps indicate the writer's **purpose**. Does the text use chronological order to explain a historical event? Does the text compare and contrast 2 items? Does the text describe a problem and explain ways to solve it?

Steps to Find the Central Idea

- 3. Ignore supporting details:** Central ideas are GENERAL topics stated in a word or two. Do not look at very specific details found in body paragraphs of the text. These ideas are too specific to be what the ENTIRE article is about. Instead, those details SUPPORT the central ideas of the text.
- 4. If all else fails, find the Thesis Statement:** Introduction and conclusion paragraph paragraphs often have a THESIS STATEMENT, which is a main idea sentence that shows what the entire passage is about (similar to your on-demand writings). However, some articles do not contain specific thesis statements because the central idea is something you should INFER.

Example: "Michaela, Triumphant"

Read the article
"Michaela, Triumphant."

Example: "Michaela, Triumphant"

Step 1: Use Text Features

- What is the heading? → Michaela, Triumphant
- What big idea does this express? → a girl who has overcome a great struggle
- What are the subheadings? →
 - Life in the orphanage
 - a new life
- Do the subheadings give general ideas or specific supporting details? → These are GENERAL ideas related to Michaela's victory—not specific details.

Example: "Michaela, Triumphant"

Step 2: Determine Text Structure

- Choose from the 5 structures you have studied previously:
- chronological order
- compare/contrast
- statement & support
- problem & solution
- cause & effect

We can determine the text structure of "Michaela, Triumphant" by looking at the transition words used at the beginnings of paragraphs:

"Civil war raged Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002."

"After her mother died..."

"Through it all..."

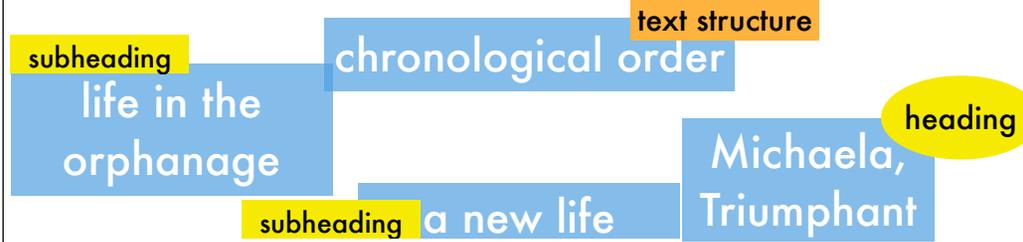
"In 1999....."

"Today..."

This article uses
Chronological Order to tell
the story of Michaela's life

Example: "Michaela, Triumphant"

- So....what have we determined about this article's central idea? (Putting it all together)...



Now put these ideas all together in a sentence (you don't have to use every word as long as the big ideas are conveyed):

Michaela overcame the great difficulty of being orphaned to achieve a new life.

Example: "Michaela, Triumphant"

So...what would we choose in a multiple choice question?

Q: What is the Central Idea of this article?

- a)how the war in Sierra Leone affected its citizens
- b)why a girl from Sierra Leone was featured on *Dancing with the Stars*
- c)how an orphaned girl overcame difficulties to achieve her dreams
- d)why a girl in an orphanage was called a "devil child"

THINK: Which answer choice expresses what the OVERALL article is about--not just a section or two? Also remember what you've learned from the article's HEADING, SUBHEADINGS, and TEXT STRUCTURE.

ANSWER: C

Example: "Michaela, Triumphant"

In addition to finding Central Ideas in an entire article, you can also find a Central Idea in a particular section of a text, such as a subheading.

What is the Central Idea of the section "Life in the Orphanage?"

- a) Michaela was the favorite child at the orphanage.
- b) There are thousands of orphans in Sierra Leone.
- c) Orphanages don't provide much love for children.
- d) Michaela experienced many difficulties as an orphan.

THINK: Which answer choice expresses a general statement of what the OVERALL section is about--not just a particular paragraph or sentence?

ANSWER: D

Example: "Michaela, Triumphant"

What is the Central Idea of the section "A New Life?"

- a) Being adopted helped Michaela achieve her goals.
- b) Michaela was able to join the Dance Theatre of Harlem.
- c) Michaela was very sick after she was adopted.
- d) Being adopted was a difficult journey for Michaela.

THINK: Which answer choice expresses a general statement of what the OVERALL section is about--not just a particular paragraph or sentence?

ANSWER: A

How to Analyze the Development of a Central Idea

How is the central idea supported?
What details illustrate the central idea?

How is a Central Idea Developed?

- A central idea is developed by supporting details (specific statements that explain and “prove” the central idea).
- Supporting Details are found in strategies such as examples, statistics, descriptions, causes & effects, quotes, analogies, stories....(i.e. DRAPES)
- There are multiple supporting details for one central idea.
- Ask yourself, “What does this detail show?”

Analyzing How Central Ideas Are Developed

Which detail from the article demonstrates the central idea “how an orphaned girl overcame difficulties to achieve her dreams”?

- a) Michaela was adopted after living as an orphan for several years.
- b) Michaela was very sick but soon received medical care.
- c) Dance helped Michaela overcome her horrible memories.
- d) all of the above

THINK: Which answer choice expresses specific statements that PROVE the central idea listed?

ANSWER: D

Analyzing How Central Ideas Are Developed

How does the author illustrate the central idea that Michaela experienced difficulties as an orphan? (*HINT: what strategies does the author use?*)

- a) By giving statistics of how many people died in the war
- b) By giving examples of difficult situations Michaela experienced
- c) By giving quotes from other children in the orphanage
- d) By comparing the orphanage to a prison

THINK: Which answer choice expresses specific statements that PROVE the central idea listed?

ANSWER: B

Analyzing How Central Ideas Are Developed

Which detail best illustrates the idea that Michaela has achieved her dreams?

- a) In 1999 she was adopted by an American couple.
- b) She said the photograph of a dancer saved her life.
- c) Her adoptive mother enrolled her in dance classes.
- d) She has been accepted into the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

THINK: Which answer choice expresses specific statements that PROVE the central idea listed?

ANSWER: D