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 Central Idea

Why did I use a numbered list here?

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**: The text’s overall structure used 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 the problem?
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, use the introduction and conclusion paragraphs**: These paragraphs often have a THESIS STATEMENT, which is a main idea sentence that shows what the entire passage is about. The THESIS statement is usually (but not always) the last sentence of the introduction paragraph.
Example: “Stomp Out Bullying”

Step 1: Use Text Features

• What is the heading?  stomp out bullying

• What idea does this express?  get rid of bullying

• What are the subheadings?  join the fight to end bullying both on- and offline

• Do the subheadings give BIG ideas or smaller, supporting details?  a serious problem
• working for change
• speak up
• 6 things you can do
Example: “Stomp Out Bullying”

Step 2: Determine Text Structure

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

We can determine the text structure of “Stomp Out Bullying” by looking at the subheadings:

A Serious Problem
Working for Change
6 Things You Can Do

This article obviously uses Problem & Solution
What are the main ideas expressed in this paragraph?

Put them in your own words:

Bullying is a serious problem that many people are trying to solve.
Example: “Stomp Out Bullying”

- So....what are the central ideas? (Putting it all together)...

  **serious problem**
  **problem & solution**
  **working for change**
  **get rid of bullying**

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):

**Bullying is a serious problem that we can work to solve.**
So....what would we choose in a multiple choice question?

Q: What is the Central Idea of this article?

a) the effects of bullying on American teenagers
b) reasons why bullying is a problem in schools
c) why bullying is a problem and how it can be solved
d) personal stories of celebrities who have been bullied

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
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 “Working for Change?”

a) how Demi Lovato has joined the fight against bullying.
b) why a school in Arizona formed an anti-bullying program
c) what teachers think about bullying prevention programs
d) how various individuals and groups are trying to prevent bullying

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

ANSWER: D
What is the Central Idea of the section “A Serious Problem?”
a) the significant effects bullying has on its victims
b) how bullying affects a person’s self-esteem
c) how bullying affect a student’s school attendance
d) the way bullying has spread across the U.S.

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

ANSWER: A
What is the Central Idea of the section “Speak Up?”

a) Victims of bullying are often bullied even more after they tattle on the bully.
b) Although students are reluctant to report bullying, they should tell an adult.
c) There are many reasons why people don’t report bullying.
d) Many school counselors have opinions about reporting bullying.

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

ANSWER: B