



## Lesson 2: Main Idea and Theme

After you read a book or see a movie, do you ever tell someone else what it is about? When you do this, you state the main idea. The **main idea** is what something is mostly about.

In this lesson, you will practice finding the main idea of a reading passage. You will also learn to find the theme in a passage. The **theme** is the lesson or message that the writer wants to get across in his or her story.

Read the following passage. It will help you understand the tips in this lesson.

### *The King and the Shirt*

a fable by Leo Tolstoy

adapted by J. M. Wasson

Many years ago, in a land very far away, a mighty king suddenly became weak with illness. He could not command the royal army from his golden throne. He could not ride his graceful black stallion. He could barely even raise his head from his purple satin pillow.

The royal physician tried every medicine he possessed—potions, pills, and lotions—but the king's health did not improve. The royal magician tried every cure he could come up with—charms, chants, and bubbling brews—but the king did not get well.

The royal advisors whispered among themselves at the king's bedside. "What is to be done? We must have a cure for the king!" they said. Then, for a long time, they stood and thought in silence.

Finally, the youngest of the advisors—the short one whose wispy, golden curls escaped from under his tall advisor's hat—stepped forward. He spoke in a strong, bold voice that echoed off the marble walls of the king's bedchamber. "We must find a happy man, take his shirt, and put it on the king. Then the king will be well again."

The king slowly turned his aching head in the direction of the young man's voice. With eyes fogged from fever, he struggled to see who had spoken the promise of a cure. "So be it," he whispered. Then he fell into a restless sleep.

The king's most trusted advisor—the gray-bearded one whose wide stomach struggled to stay inside his long, scarlet robe—summoned the royal messengers.

“Search the kingdom for a happy man,” he ordered. “When you find one, take his shirt, and bring it back to the royal castle. Tell the happy man that he will be handsomely rewarded for his trouble.”

The royal messengers traveled far; they traveled wide. They traveled throughout the kingdom, from one end to the other and from side to side. But try as they might, they could not find a truly happy man. No one was ever completely satisfied with his life. The rich man argued with his wife. The man who had a joyful marriage had children who caused him no end of worry. It was always one thing or another. Everyone could complain about something.

Over many days, the king’s health did not change. Concerned for his father, the royal son—the one who had been running the kingdom during his father’s illness—decided to join in the search. He had not traveled far from the castle when he passed by a tiny hut. From inside the house of sticks, he heard a clear voice say, “I am truly blessed. I have completed my work for the day. I have eaten enough to keep my body healthy. Now I can relax and enjoy the quiet at the end of the day. What more could anyone ever want?”

Excited, the royal son thought, “I must go inside and take this man’s shirt for the king!” As he prepared to knock at the door of the humble cottage, he fingered the sack of gold pieces at his side. For curing the king, this happy man would be richly rewarded.

As the door opened, the king’s son could only stand and stare. This happy man—the only happy man in the entire kingdom—had almost nothing he could call his own. Not even a shirt.



### TIP 1: Fiction and nonfiction passages have main ideas.

**Fiction** consists of made-up stories. The main idea of a fiction passage is what happens in the story. For example, the main idea of the story about the tortoise and the hare is that the tortoise beats the hare in a race.

**Nonfiction** is writing that is about something real. It includes articles, reports, instructions, and true stories about people’s lives. The main idea of a nonfiction passage is the central point that the author wants the readers to know. For example, the main idea of an article about berries might be that berries have many health benefits.

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**TIP 2: As soon as you finish reading, tell yourself what the passage is mostly about.**

Main ideas aren't always stated directly. Most of the time, you'll have to put them in your own words. One way to do this is to tell someone what the passage is mostly about. Of course, during a test, you can't actually talk to anyone, so you may have to silently imagine this conversation.

Practice finding the main idea by answering the question below.

1. What is the main idea of the story "The King and the Shirt"?

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**TIP 3: Find the answer choice that is closest to your statement of the main idea.**

When you see a multiple-choice question about main idea, study each answer choice carefully. Which one is closest to the statement you made to yourself? You might not find an exact match, but you'll likely find a near-match. And that near-match will most likely be the correct answer.

2. What is "The King and the Shirt" mostly about?
  - A. A king's son offers to buy a man's shirt as a present for the king.
  - B. A royal physician cannot cure his king of a serious illness.
  - C. A great king lies in bed mysteriously ill and his son is worried.
  - D. An ill king's men search for a happy man whose shirt can heal the king.

**TIP 4: Don't mistake a detail for the main idea.**

A detail is a small part of a passage. Details usually support or are related to the main idea. For example, in "The King and the Shirt," one detail is that the king's stallion is black. Another detail is that the happy man lives in a tiny hut. Both of these details are connected to the main idea in slightly different ways. The king can no longer ride his black stallion because he is ill. The happy man's hut is small but contributes to his happiness.

Test questions about the main idea often include answer choices that are just details from the passage. These choices can be tricky because they are true. Remember, though, just because a statement is true doesn't mean it's the main idea. Details are different from the main idea.

Keep in mind that if an answer choice is mentioned only once in the story, then chances are good that it's a detail and not the main idea. In general, the main idea will come up again and again.

You'll learn more about details in Lesson 3.

3. Look at Number 2 again. Which choices are only details from the passage?

**TIP 5: Questions about the title are questions about the main idea.**

Sometimes you'll answer questions about the title of a passage. You can think of these questions as main idea questions in disguise. A good title gives you clues about the main idea. The title probably won't give away any secrets about the passage, but it should tell you something about what to expect.

4. Which of the following would be another good title for "The King and the Shirt"?
  - A. "The Source of Happiness"
  - B. "Potions, Pills, and Lotions"
  - C. "A Fortune in Fashion"
  - D. "All the King's Men"

This material is part of this book, published by ian.



**TIP 6: Summarize what the author says.**

When you read a sentence or paragraph, one way to make sure you understand it is to put it into your own words, or summarize it. When you **summarize**, you come up with a shorter, simpler restatement of what you've read.

Reread this paragraph from the passage.

The king slowly turned his aching head in the direction of the young man's voice. With eyes fogged from fever, he struggled to see who had spoken the promise of a cure. "So be it," he whispered. Then he fell into a restless sleep.

5. There are a lot of details in this paragraph, such as the king's "aching head" and his "eyes fogged from fever." On the lines below, summarize the main idea of the paragraph.

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Now answer Number 6, based on the paragraph above.

6. What is the main idea of the paragraph?
- A. The king is so sick that he falls asleep.
  - B. The king has a headache and a fever.
  - C. The king agrees with his advisor's idea.
  - D. The king can barely see who has spoken.



### TIP 7: Think about the theme of the passage.

Another way to understand what a passage is mostly about is to think about its theme. The **theme** is the lesson or message the author is trying to get across. Usually, the theme is a statement about life or the way the world works. People apply these lessons or ideas to their own lives.

To remember the difference between main idea and theme, think of them this way:

	Definition	Example
main idea	a statement about the events or facts of the passage	John and Joe stuck together through the ups and downs of being seventh-graders at Pleasant View Middle School.
theme	a statement that relates to people or life in general	True friends will be there for you during good times and bad.

To find the theme, ask yourself, *What lesson did the main character in the story learn or fail to learn?* Other questions to ask yourself or to expect to see on a test include:

- What is the moral of this story?
  - What lesson is the author trying to teach?
  - Which idea in the story can relate to everyday life?
7. Which sentence best states the theme of “The King and the Shirt”?
- A. Planning ahead can save a lot of work later.
  - B. True friends are with you even in the worst times.
  - C. Happiness does not come from possessions.
  - D. Stay loyal to those people who are loyal to you.

### Common Themes

The more you read, the more you will notice that some themes are used again and again. Here are some common themes.

- Too much pride can destroy a person.
- Crime does not pay.
- Love conquers all.
- It is better to tell the truth than to lie.
- Going through hard times can make a person stronger.
- Treat others the way you want to be treated.
- Fight for what you believe in.



**TIP 8: Compare main ideas and themes.**

Sometimes you will compare two passages to see how their main ideas or themes are alike or different. To figure it out, first determine the main idea or theme of each passage individually. Think about what each passage is mainly about. Identify the message or lesson in each passage. Then, find connections between these main ideas and themes.

Read these passages and answer Numbers 8 through 10.

Passage 1: One Saturday, Bai helped her elderly neighbor, Mrs. Gold, clean out her garage. For hours, Bai moved boxes, reorganized shelves, dusted, and swept. At the end of the day, Mrs. Gold gave Bai twenty dollars, despite Bai's protests. Bai smiled and thanked her.

Passage 2: Raoul desperately wanted to make the school soccer team, but he knew he needed practice. Over the summer, he played soccer with his friends. He got up early day after day to practice in the park. On the day of the soccer tryouts, Raoul impressed the coach and made the team.

8. What is the main idea of passage 1?

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9. How is the main idea of passage 1 different from the main idea of passage 2?

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10. Write a theme that relates to both passages.

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Directions: This passage is about the search for a mythical kingdom. Read the passage. Then answer Numbers 1 through 8.

## The Legend of El Dorado

by Julian Green

In 1541, rumors began to spread throughout the colonial city of Quito, Ecuador. Spanish conquerors heard tales of a rich king from a faraway land. The great ruler was said to cover his body from head to toe in gold dust. At the end of each day, the king would wash away the gold. The next day, he would be painted all over again. The Spaniards referred to this wealthy king as *el dorado*, which is Spanish for “the golden man.”

The Spanish already believed that beyond the mountains east of Quito lay wide, flat lands. They thought these lands were thick with cinnamon, which was a valuable spice. They also thought these lands were rich with gold. The Spanish had been amazed by the gold dust in the soil of the Timaná region and by the wealth of the Muisca tribe nearby. Also, the Yalcones people had fought to keep the Spanish invaders out of Timaná. This made the Spaniards suspect that the native tribes were protecting great riches. The conquerors also knew that many of the native tribes painted their bodies to keep cool and to keep insects away. So it made sense to them that the king of a rich land would paint himself with gold dust. Eager to find gold and cinnamon, the explorers began to seek the golden man’s kingdom. They called the kingdom El Dorado.

Over the next few years, new details were added to the legend of El Dorado. Many believed that the golden man rode a raft out onto a holy lake. On the lake, he offered a sacrifice of gold and jewels, which he dumped into the water. Stories like this just made the conquerors even more eager to find El Dorado.

### The Quests for El Dorado

Gonzalo Pizarro, a Spanish explorer, was the first to attempt the great search for cinnamon trees and the land of El Dorado. In 1541, he gathered more than 200 Spanish soldiers and 4,000 native slaves. He led them eastward, from Quito. Like many of the Spanish conquerors, Pizarro was a hard-hearted leader.





## Unit 1 – Reading

The expedition ended in dense, hilly forests with no rich, flat lands in sight. Pizarro then commanded his men to torture the natives until they revealed the secret location of El Dorado. Under Pizarro's command, the Spaniards put hundreds of natives to miserable deaths. But none of the natives revealed the location of the mysterious land.

Meanwhile, conditions were terrible for Pizarro's men. Pizarro had led them into the wild Amazon rain forest, where they had to hack through thick vines, bushes, and trees. They were attacked by mosquitoes and vampire bats, alligators and snakes, and a fog that seemed to carry disease. They became so hungry that they ate their horses and even their shoes. Hundreds of Spaniards died on the quest for El Dorado.

Pizarro eventually returned to Quito without finding the fabled city of El Dorado. He regretted ever beginning the quest. Yet his failure did nothing to stop others from going on the same journey. Another Spaniard, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, and a German explorer, Philipp von Hutten, both led expeditions in search of gold that year. Over the next century, dozens of groups would set out looking for the mythical land. All of them failed. Even the famous British explorer Sir Walter Raleigh ignored the dangers of the jungle and the poor results of others' attempts. He tried twice to find El Dorado and failed each time. On his second trip, Raleigh's son was killed, and Raleigh returned to England in shame.

### Paradise Found

The "real" El Dorado was never found, but its name can be found everywhere on U.S. maps. There is an "El Dorado" or "Eldorado" in Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Texas. There is an "Eldorado Springs" in both Colorado and Missouri. Hardly a grain of gold was mined in most of these places.

The legend of El Dorado makes people think about the possibility of gaining unimaginable wealth. It is easy to see why pioneer settlers chose to name their towns after the mythical kingdom of "the golden man."

1. What would be the best new title for this passage?
  - A. "Gold for Everyone"
  - B. "Anything for Riches"
  - C. "A Name Lives On"
  - D. "The Cruellest Conqueror"

2. This passage is mostly about
- A. Walter Raleigh and his son's attempts to find a lost city in the jungle.
  - B. a Muisca chief who painted his body with gold dust every day.
  - C. the explorers who wasted lives on hopeless searches for El Dorado.
  - D. Gonzalo Pizarro, who led a search for El Dorado but failed to find it.
3. Which statement best summarizes the main idea of paragraph 2?
- A. The Spanish accepted the El Dorado story because they already believed there was a rich land to the east.
  - B. The Yalcones people fought especially hard to expel the Spanish because they were protecting their riches.
  - C. Many native tribes painted their bodies with gold dust to keep themselves cool and to keep insects away.
  - D. The Spanish found gold dust in the soil of the Timaná region and saw the Muisca's wealth.
4. What is the meaning of the Spanish term *el dorado*?
- A. great king
  - B. rich land
  - C. lost city
  - D. golden man

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Unit 1 - Reading

5. Read this sentence from the passage.

"The expedition ended in dense, hilly forests with no rich, flat lands in sight."

What is the meaning of the word *dense* as it is used in this sentence?

- A. difficult
  - B. intense
  - C. dull
  - D. thick
6. According to the passage, what is a quest?
- A. a carefully planned, safe, and successful trip
  - B. an adventure or journey in search of something
  - C. a strong desire to conquer new lands
  - D. a demand for something secret and hidden
7. Which statement best summarizes the section "Paradise Found"?
- A. Inspired by the myth, pioneers across the United States named the towns they settled "El Dorado."
  - B. Despite repeated attempts by explorers, the mythical El Dorado was never found.
  - C. The legend of El Dorado inspires people to do strange things.
  - D. Arkansas and Illinois have towns named "El Dorado."
8. What is the main lesson that can be learned from the explorers' actions?
- A. Obtaining riches and fame is a worthwhile quest.
  - B. Exploring new lands is a remarkable adventure.
  - C. Greed will drive people to foolish and evil acts.
  - D. Persistence can lead to great rewards.

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## Focus Lessons

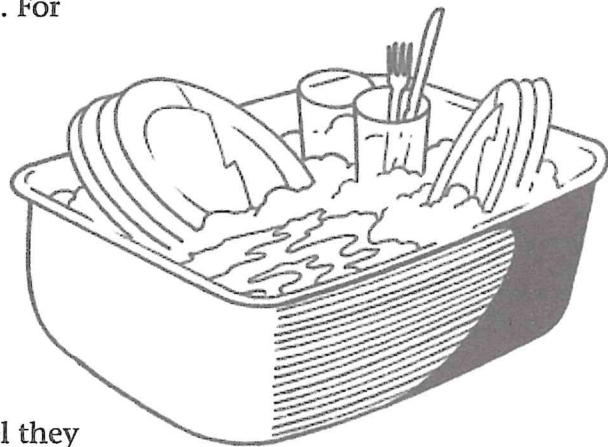
### Lesson 15: Determining Main Idea

The **main idea** of a passage is the most important point expressed in the work. Sometimes an author will tell us directly what the **main idea** is, and sometimes the author will imply it.

**DIRECTIONS:** Read the following excerpt from a camper's manual about washing dishes. Then answer the questions that follow.

#### *Dishwashing*

- 1 You will notice that we have no dishwashers or washing machines at our camp. This is because we try to interact with nature and preserve a natural surrounding. As a result, all dishes must be washed by hand.
- 2 It is essential that all dishes be washed immediately after use. Any open food, even crumbs on a plate, will attract unwanted animals to your campsite. Brown bears have been spotted here as early as late March, so you don't want to try to skirt this rule!
- 3 In order to conserve water, you are allowed two basins of hot water per day for washing dishes. This means that you will have to reuse your dishwater for snack dishes and for one meal each day. We suggest that you come for your first tub of water after breakfast. Have one site member retrieve the water while another site member scrapes uneaten food into the trash. This way, you will be ready to wash your dishes while the water is hot, and you won't get lots of food in your water. Then you can save your water from your breakfast for any other dishes you have until dinner. We have found that breakfast and lunch produce the least "muck," and are therefore the best meals to share dishwater.
- 4 Also, remember that the detergent you use will be dumped with the dishwater onto the ground. For this reason, we insist upon your using diluted detergent, as a little soap goes a long way. We have found that, because cups and glasses generally don't contain a lot of greasy substances, they don't dirty the water, and washing drinking vessels first followed by plates and pans cuts down on the amount of detergent that people feel they need to use. We want to protect our site!



## Lesson 12: Determining Main Idea

The main idea of a passage is the most important point reported in the text. Identifying the main idea will help you to understand the author's purpose for writing the text. The main idea is often found in the first or last sentence of a paragraph, but it can also be found in the middle of a paragraph.

### Identifying the Main Idea

To identify the main idea of a passage, you should look for the sentence that states the author's purpose for writing the text. This sentence is often found in the first or last sentence of a paragraph, but it can also be found in the middle of a paragraph. The main idea is often stated in a direct and explicit manner, but it can also be implied. To identify the main idea of a passage, you should look for the sentence that states the author's purpose for writing the text. This sentence is often found in the first or last sentence of a paragraph, but it can also be found in the middle of a paragraph. The main idea is often stated in a direct and explicit manner, but it can also be implied. To identify the main idea of a passage, you should look for the sentence that states the author's purpose for writing the text. This sentence is often found in the first or last sentence of a paragraph, but it can also be found in the middle of a paragraph. The main idea is often stated in a direct and explicit manner, but it can also be implied.



How do you identify the main idea of a passage? The main idea is often found in the first or last sentence of a paragraph, but it can also be found in the middle of a paragraph. The main idea is often stated in a direct and explicit manner, but it can also be implied. To identify the main idea of a passage, you should look for the sentence that states the author's purpose for writing the text. This sentence is often found in the first or last sentence of a paragraph, but it can also be found in the middle of a paragraph. The main idea is often stated in a direct and explicit manner, but it can also be implied.

# Focus Lessons

1. Identify two suggestions in this passage. Explain what effect these suggestions have on determining the main idea of the passage.

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2. Identify two camp rules in this passage. Explain what effect these rules have on determining the main idea of the passage.

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3. Identify two places in this passage where the writer points out facts that the reader may not have been aware of. Explain what effect this has on determining the main idea of the passage.

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4. Briefly define what you think is the main idea of this passage. Explain why you think so.

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For more information on determining main idea, see *Glencoe Literature, Course 2*, pp. 142, 374, and R6.





## Lesson 2: Main Idea and Theme (Answer Key)

### *The King and the Shirt*

1. Advisors of an ailing king seek a happy man's shirt in an effort to make the king well again
2. "D" is the correct answer. "A" doesn't occur, and "B" and "C" are details
3. "B" and "C"
4. "A" is the correct answer
5. The king tells his advisors he approves of the new cure idea
6. "C" is the correct answer
7. "C" is the correct answer
8. Bai helped Mrs. Gold clean out her garage
9. Passage 1: a girl helps a neighbor Passage 2: a boy practices hard to make the soccer team
10. Hard work pays off

### *The Legend of El Dorado*

1. "B" is the best answer
2. "C"
3. "A"
4. "D"
5. "D"
6. "B"
7. "A"
8. "C"

### Focus Lesson 15: Determining the Main Idea *Dishwashing*

1. The passage suggests that campers use the same dishwater for both breakfast and lunch. It also suggests that drinking vessels be washed first. This makes it clear that the main idea of the passage concerns why efficient water use is important.
2. Rules: 1. Dishes must be washed immediately after use. 2. Two basins of hot water are allowed per day. 3. Dishwashing detergent must be diluted. This leads the reader to understand that the main idea of the passage has to do with using water wisely and protecting the camping environment.
3. Brown bears are attracted to food that is left in the open. Dinner dishes produce the most "muck." These bits of information supplement the rules and suggestions and help the reader to better understand those points.
4. The main idea of the passage is that dishwashing at this camp must be done in a way that preserves the natural surroundings of the campsite and that least disturbs the camper's ability to interact with nature. All rules and suggestions in the passage support this premise.

