Implied (Unstated) Main Ideas

Anything you read has two basic parts: a main idea and the supporting details that explain and develop that idea.

The main idea is usually clearly stated in one sentence of a selection.

However, the main idea is sometimes implied—only suggested by the supporting details and not clearly stated in one sentence.

To figure out an implied main idea, you'll need to look at the supporting details.

"The others are complaining that you don't leave any coffee for everyone else."

What is the implied main idea of the cartoon?

You can figure out the implied main idea by looking at the supporting details:

1. The man's coworkers are complaining that he doesn't leave coffee for anyone else.

2. He has such a caffeine high that he is flying!

The clearly implied idea is that he is drinking too much coffee.

Read the following paragraph and see if you can figure out its main idea.

All people are concerned about a few great questions: the existence of God, the purpose of life, the existence of an afterlife, and morality. About the first, science has nothing to say: no test tube has either proved or disproved God's existence. As to the purpose of life, although science can provide a definition of life and describe the characteristics of living organisms, it has nothing to say about ultimate purpose. Regarding an afterlife, science can offer no information, for it has no tests that it can use to detect a "hereafter." As for the question of morality, science can demonstrate the consequences of behavior but not the moral superiority of one action compared with another. Science cannot even prove that loving your family and neighbor is superior to hurting and killing them.

The above paragraph has no good "umbrella" statement that covers all the other sentences. To decide on the main idea, we must ask the same three questions we've already used to find main ideas:

• Who or what is this paragraph about? (The answer is the topic of the paragraph.)

• What is the main point the author is trying to make about that topic?

• Does all or most of the material in the paragraph support this main idea?

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• Who or what is this paragraph about?

In the paragraph, all the details are about science and great human concerns, so that must be the topic.

• What is the main point the author is trying to make about that topic?

Science alone cannot tell us about the four main concerns that all people have.

• Does all or most of the material in the paragraph support this main idea?

Yes. Every sentence is about the "great questions" people are concerned about and the lack of information science provides about them.

Check Your Understanding

Read the following selection and try to answer the questions that follow.

The original intention of a school worksheet was intelligent: to discover which students didn't understand the reading lesson, so the teacher could work with them individually. Unfortunately, the teacher had to keep the rest of the class busy while doing that, so more worksheets were passed out. The assessment tool soon turned into a crowd control device. To make matters worse, the worksheets multiplied faster than the loaves and fishes, often reaching 1,000 per child per school year. But research shows no connection between the number of worksheets a student does and how good a reader the child eventually becomes. If you're fed reading as six worksheets a day, 1,000 sheets a year, under the pronouncement,"Boys and girls, it's time for reading," by the time you reach fourth grade you think worksheets are reading, and you mistakenly think you hate reading.

1. What is the topic of the above paragraph?

   A. School worksheets

   B. Books

   C. Teaching tools

   D. Crowd control devices

2. Which statement best expresses the unstated main idea of the paragraph?

   A. School worksheets may do more harm than good.

   B. Reading is one of the most difficult skills for teachers to teach and students to learn.

   C. Over the years, school worksheets have served as both an assessment tool and a crowd control device.

   D. Teachers have a variety of teaching tools to choose from.

The topic, referred to in a number of sentences in the paragraph, is school worksheets.

The implied main idea about worksheets is that they may do more harm than good.

When you think you have figured out an implied main idea, test yourself by asking, "Does all or most of the material in the paragraph support this idea?"

In the paragraph, the author describes how worksheets have multiplied out of control, have not proved to benefit students, and even make students hate reading. So the paragraph clearly supports the idea that worksheets do more harm than good.

Inferences

When you "read between the lines," you pick up ideas that are implied: not directly stated in what you are reading.

These implied ideas are often important for a full understanding of what an author means.

Discovering the ideas that are not stated directly in writing is called making inferences, or drawing conclusions.

What inferences can you make about this cartoon?

Find the two inferences that are most logically based on the information it suggests.

A. The couple is not likely to have a good dining experience at the restaurant.

B. The couple will never eat at the restaurant.

C. The restaurant was recently closed for health violations.

D. Whoever is running the restaurant is not doing a good job.

Answers A and D are logical inferences. Here's why:

A. The couple is not likely to have a good dining experience at the restaurant.
The"help wanted" sign indicates that the restaurant is seriously understaffed.
It would be logical, then, to infer that the restaurant cannot provide patrons
with a good dining experience. You should have chosen this item.

B. The couple will never eat at the restaurant.
The man's comment that"this isn't the best time" suggests that he may be
willing to try the restaurant once it has solved its staffing problems.
Also, experience suggests that it is common for restaurants to change
ownership and/or management. You should not have chosen this item.

C. The restaurant was recently closed for health violations.
Nothing in the cartoon suggests that the restaurant was recently closed for
health violations. Perhaps if it continues to operate without sufficient staff,
it may be closed, but we have no way of knowing that. You should not have
chosen this item.

D. Whoever is running the restaurant is not doing a good job.
Experience tells us that good managers are able to hire and retain qualified
employees. The"help wanted" sign suggests quite the opposite—that
a number of employees have recently quit or been fired. The lack of staff,
in turn, has caused the couple to decide against dining there. Clearly, this is no
way to run a business! You should have chosen this item.

Check Your Understanding I

Read the following passage and find the two inferences that are most firmly based on the information given.

A sociology professor wrote on the board,"A woman without her man is nothing" and, with a smile, asked students to punctuate the sentence correctly. The men all wrote,"A woman, without her man, is nothing." However, the women wrote,"A woman: Without her, man is nothing."

A. The professor was definitely a man.

B. The professor did not believe students could punctuate the words correctly.

C. The professor knew there was more than one way to punctuate the words correctly.

D. The professor is not a good teacher.

E. Gender differences caused students to read and punctuate the professor's words differently.

A sociology professor wrote on the board,"A woman without her man is nothing" and, with a smile, asked students to punctuate the sentence correctly. The men all wrote,"A woman, without her man, is nothing." However, the women wrote,"A woman: Without her, man is nothing."

The two logical inferences are …

C. The professor knew there was more than one way to punctuate the words correctly.

Since the professor chose the particular sentence and smiled while writing the words, we can conclude that the professor was aware of more than one punctuation possibility.

E. Gender differences caused students to read and punctuate the professor's words differently.

Male and female students had very different responses to the sentence. Gender was the only apparent difference among the students, so we can conclude that it caused the different responses.

Check Your Understanding II

Read the following passage and find the three inferences that can most logically be drawn from it.

A famous psychology experiment conducted by Dr. John B. Watson demonstrates that people, like animals, can be conditioned—trained to respond in a particular way to certain stimulations. Watson gave an eleven-month-old baby named Albert a soft, furry white rat. Each time Albert tried to stroke the rat, Dr. Watson hit a metal bar with a hammer. Before long, Albert was afraid not only of white rats but also of white rabbits, white dogs, and white fur coats. He even screamed at the sight of a Santa Claus mask.

A. Dr. Watson did not like small children.

B. Before the experiment, Albert was not afraid of white rats.

C. Albert had been familiar with rats before the experiment.

D. If he had seen a black fur coat, Albert would have screamed.

E. Albert connected the loud noise of the hammer striking the metal bar with the white rat.

F. Albert was afraid of unexpected loud noises.

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The three logical inferences are …

B. Before the experiment, Albert was not afraid of white rats.

This is a logical inference. Because Albert tried to pet the rat, it is fair to assume that he wasn't frightened of the animal.

E. Albert connected the loud noise of the hammer striking the metal bar with the white rat.

This is a logical inference. Because the noise appears to have changed Albert's attitude toward the rat, we can assume he associated the noise with the rat.

F. Albert was afraid of unexpected loud noises.

This is a logical inference. Since the noise is what made Albert afraid of the rat, we have to infer that he was afraid of the noise. In addition, experience tells us that babies are likely to be frightened of unexpected loud noises.

Guidelines for Making Inferences in Reading

Keep these guidelines in mind as you work on the exercises in this chapter:

1 Never lose sight of the available information.

As much as possible, base your inferences on the facts. For instance, in the paragraph about Watson's experiment, we are told,"Albert tried to stroke the rat." On the basis of that fact, we can readily conclude that the baby had no fear of rats.

2 Use your background information and experience to help you in making inferences.

Our understanding and experience with babies, for example, help us realize that Albert was frightened of unexpected loud noises.

3 Consider the alternatives.

Don't simply accept the first inference that comes to mind. Instead, consider all the facts of a case and all the possible explanations.

Inferences in Graphs and Tables

Other"pictures" that require inferences are graphs and tables, which combine words with visual representations.

Authors of textbooks, professional and newspaper articles, and other materials often organize large amounts of material into graphs and tables.

Very often, the graphs and tables are used to show comparisons and changes that take place over time.

Reading a Graph

Changes in U.S. Work Force, 1900–2010
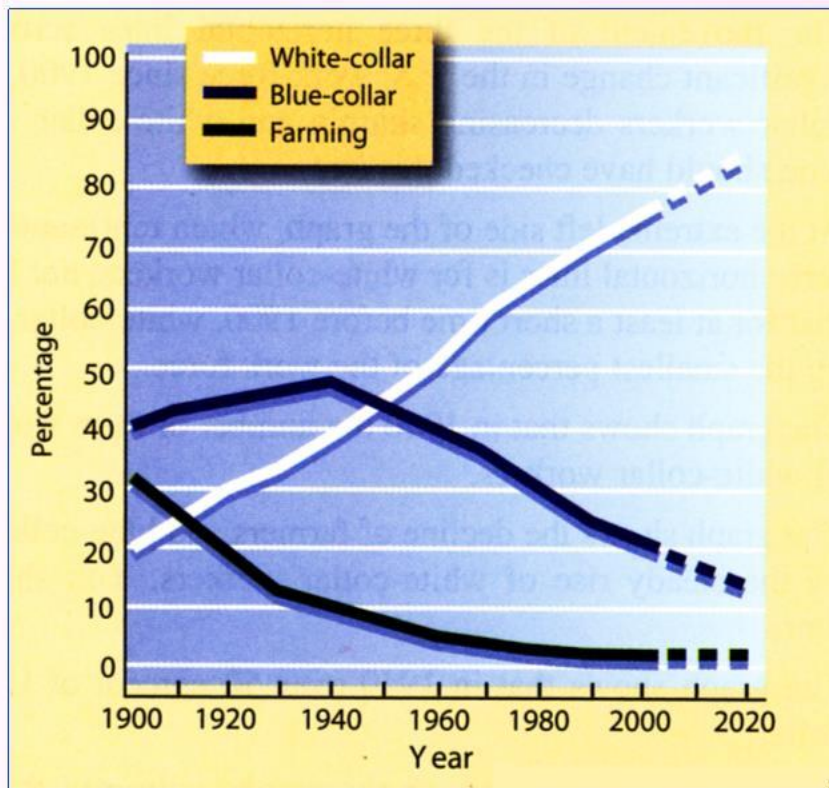
Can you find the three inferences that are most logically based on the graph to the left?

1. The work force of 1900 was very different from the work force of today.

2. Before 1900, farmers made up the smallest percentage of workers.

3. In 1940, the percentages of farm workers and white-collar workers were about equal.

4. In general, as the number of farming and blue-collar workers has decreased, the number of white-collar workers has increased.

5. In 1940, blue-collar workers made up about 25 percent of the U.S. work force.

6. In the future, most U.S. workers are likely to be white-collar workers.

The three logical inferences are …

1.   The workforce of 1900 was very different
       from the workforce of today.

4.   In general, as the number of farming and
     blue-collar workers has decreased, the
     number of white-collar workers has
     increased.

6.   In the future, most U.S. workers are
     likely to be white-collar workers.

Stem Questions

- Which statement best expresses the main idea of the article?

- .Which statement from the essay best summarizes the narrator's"___"

- Read this excerpt from the homepage. (Quoted text). From the information provided in the excerpt and the text links, the reader can predict that… Answer stems reflect plausible information. (2010 9th Grade Predictions)

- .According to the passage, ___ (a general statement from the article, e.g. the language of The Earth) is … (answer stems two pairs of words and two descriptions.) (10th Grade Relevant Details)

- .From reading the article, the reader can infer that ___ (topic/information/fact from the text) … (answer stems reflecting specific information from the text).

- .Based on the passage, which action will the ___ (narrator/ character/author) most likely take in the future?

Authors Point of View

- Read this sentence from the passage. The author uses this comparison to"___"
-
- 2. Which statement from the essay reveals the author's initial bias toward ___
-
- 3. What was the author's purpose in writing this passage?
-
- 4. Explain how ___ (the text) persuades readers to __?
-
- 5. The author would most likely make the statement next that ___
-
- 6. Read this example from the selection ___ In this excerpt, the author's information displays a bias against all of the following groups EXCEPT __.

Literary Analysis

- 1. Which sentence from the passage indicates that "__" (character) wants to "___" (statement from the passage reflecting a character point of view, e.g. "gain control over his hectic schedule.")

- 2. How does the setting of the essay contribute to the development of the narrative? (2010 9th Grade Setting)

- 3. How does the author use imagery to illustrate the beauty of the setting?

- 4. What event in the essay is most important in changing the narrator's opinion of "__"

- 5. Which sentence best expresses the central conflict in the passage?

- 6. What is the central conflict in this passage?
  Which line from __ (title of poem) most clearly reveals its theme?
- 7. What phrase best describes both "___" (character from a poem such as the gardener) and the speaker in "___" (second poem)?

- 8. Which statement best expresses the speaker's point of view in the first stanza of the poem, "___".
- Which statement best conveys the resolution in the poem ?___"

- 9. How do the changes in the narrator's feelings contribute to the theme of __ (title of text).