

MENTAL MODEL FOR IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEA

IDENTIFY THE TOPIC (OR GENERAL SUBJECT) OF THE PIECE.

Clues to help identify the topic:

- a) Look at the title.
- b) Look at the first and last paragraph: the topic is often named and always implied.
- c) Ask yourself, What throughline topic is discussed through the whole selection? What general subject spreads across the whole text?
- d) Look at captions, pictures, words in bold, headings, and so forth for clues to topic. What do all of these have in common? What do they all have something to do with?
- e) Remind yourself: The topic must connect to all the major details and events from the selection. Caution: Not every detail has something to do with the topic. The topic is the common element or connection among the *major* details.
- f) What do all the major details have in common?

CHECK YOURSELF: It's not a true topic if . . .

- a) It's too general or too big. (Note well: The topic statement suggests or could include many ideas not stated in the text.)
- b) It's off the mark, totally missing the point.
- c) It only captures one detail, rather than what *all* of the key details have in common.
- d) It captures only some of the details. (For example, maybe you didn't think about the ending, the climax, or a shift or major change of some kind.)

QUESTIONS to ask yourself:

- a) Does the topic I've identified give an accurate picture of what the whole selection is about? (Note well: Any text may have multiple possible topics—just make sure you identify a topic that is justifiable.)
- b) Was I as specific as possible in accommodating all of the key details?
- c) After naming the topic, can I now fairly specifically picture in my mind what the piece is about? Or might I picture something radically different that also fits my topic statement? If so, how can I revise my topic statement to correct this problem?

IDENTIFY THE KEY DETAILS/EVENTS AND THE PATTERN AND TRAJECTORY THESE CREATE BY WORKING TOGETHER.

Authors signal key details by using rules of notice, e.g.,

- a) Details that reflect or refer to the title
- b) Details at the beginning of the text or front and center of the picture
- c) Details at the end
- d) Surprises, revelations, whenever your expectations are not met
- e) Repetition
- f) Lots of attention given to a detail—for instance, long explanation or description
- g) Subheadings, bold print, italics
- h) Single-sentence paragraphs
- i) Changes in character, tone, mood, setting, plot twists
- j) A question near the beginning or the end

CHECK YOURSELF: It's not a key detail if . . .

- a) It's interesting, but it doesn't develop the topic or lead to the main idea.
- b) It provides a reminder or is personally relevant. However, if removed from the piece, the work does not lose significant meaning or impact.

QUESTIONS to ask yourself:

- a) Are all the details related to the topic?
- b) How do the key details relate to each other?
- c) What pattern do the details form when brought together?
- d) What point does this pattern add up to and imply when we have connected all the dots?
- e) What can we extrapolate or interpolate from the pattern?

IDENTIFY THE MAIN IDEA (the theme or point the author makes about the topic)

- a) The statement of main idea you name must make a point about the topic and cover the whole selection. This is typically phrased as a topic-comment: topic (noun or noun phrase) + comment made by the arrangement and patterning of the details about the topic (verb phrase).
- b) Ask yourself: Is the main idea directly stated? If not, it must be inferred from the pattern and relationship of the key details.
- c) Which details help me decide on the main idea? Why are these details important?

- d) The main idea considers how the details relate to one another or lead to one another (what caused or correlated or led to what?).
- e) The main ideas must consider the ending and how the details, character, setting, perspectives, and their interactions with events led to this conclusion.

CHECK YOURSELF: IT'S NOT THE MAIN IDEA IF . . .

- a) It is so literal and specific it doesn't allow the reader to apply the main idea to her own life.
- b) It is too general—more like a topic statement than a comment about the topic, main idea, or point that can be applied to life.
- c) It is true but misses the point of this text. It wasn't what the author was saying through this combination of these details.
- d) It misses the point.
- e) It only fits one detail, event, or part of the text, not the coherent whole.
- f) It does not incorporate all the details but only a few.
- g) It doesn't fit the ending or final situation.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- a) What point do the key details repeat and add up to when taken all together?
- b) Is the main idea or point a comment about the topic?
- c) Is it something useful that can help you to think or act in the world?
- d) Also consider: Do you agree with the statement as applied to life? Will you use this idea to undertake action in the world or to think about the world? Why, or why not?