

Historical Thinking & Reading Skills

SKILL: Determining Main Ideas

The **MAIN IDEA** is a statement that sums up the most important point of a paragraph, a passage, an article, or a speech. Determining the main idea will increase your understanding as you read about historic events, people, and places. Main ideas are supported by details and examples.

STRATEGY: IDENTIFY THE TOPIC. To find the main idea of a passage, first identify the topic. Then, as you read, define the central idea about the topic that the many details explain or support. The following passage contains information about the Renaissance. The diagram organizes the information to help you determine the main idea.

1 Identify the topic by first looking at the title or subtitle. This title suggests a quick way to identify the topic by looking for the name of the Renaissance woman, Isabella d'Este.

2 Look at the beginning and ending sentences of each paragraph for possible clues to the main idea.

3 Read the entire passage. Look for details about the topic. What central idea do they explain or support?

1 A Renaissance Woman

Isabella d'Este was a woman who lived during the Renaissance. This historic period produced the ideal, or "universal," man—one who excelled in many fields. The concept of universal excellence applied almost exclusively to men. **2** Yet a few women managed to succeed in exercising power.

2 Isabella d'Este was one such woman. Born into the ruling family of the city-state of Ferrara, she married the ruler of Mantua, another city-state. Isabella brought many Renaissance artists to her court and acquired an art collection that was famous throughout Europe. She was also skilled in politics. When her husband was taken captive in war, Isabella defended Mantua and won his release. **3**

SKILL: Analyzing Cause & Effect

CAUSES are the events, conditions, and other reasons that lead to an event. Causes happen before the event in time; they explain why it happened. **EFFECTS** are the results or consequences of the event. One effect often becomes the cause of other effects, resulting in a chain of events. Causes and effects can be both short-term and long-term. Examining **CAUSE-AND-EFFECT RELATIONSHIPS** helps historians see how events are related and why they took place.

STRATEGY: KEEP TRACK OF CAUSES AND EFFECTS AS YOU READ. The passage below describes events leading to the rise of feudalism in Japan. The diagram that follows summarizes the chain of causes and effects.

1 Causes: Look for clue words that show cause. These include *because, due to, since, and therefore.*

2 Look for multiple causes and multiple effects. The weakness of the central government caused the three effects (a,b,c) shown here.

3 Effects: Look for results or consequences. Sometimes these are indicated by clue words such as *brought about, led to, as a result, and consequently.*

4 Notice that an effect may be the cause of another event. This begins a chain of causes and effects.

Feudalism Comes to Japan

For most of the Heian period, the rich Fujiwara family held the real power in Japan. Members of this family held many influential posts. By about the middle of the 11th century, the power of the central government and the Fujiwaras began to slip. This was **1** due in part to court families' greater interest in luxury and artistic pursuits than in governing.

2 Since the central government was weak, **(a)** large landowners living away from the capital set up private armies. **3** As a result, **(b)** the countryside became lawless and dangerous. Armed soldiers on horseback preyed on farmers and travelers, while pirates took control of the seas. **(c)** For safety, farmers and small landowners traded parts of their land to strong warlords in exchange for protection.

4 Because the lords had more land, the lords gained more power. This marked the beginning of a feudal system of localized rule like that of ancient China and medieval Europe.

SKILL: Distinguishing Fact from Opinion

FACTS are events, dates, statistics, or statements that can be proved to be true. Facts can be checked for accuracy. **OPINIONS** are judgments, beliefs, and feelings of the writer or speaker.

STRATEGY: FIND CLUES IN THE TEXT. The following excerpt tells about the uprising of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. The chart summarizes the facts and opinions.

- 1 Facts: Look for specific names, dates, statistics, and statements that can be proved.** The first two paragraphs provide a factual account of the event.
- 2 Opinion: Look for assertions, claims, hypotheses, and judgments.** Here Goebbels expresses his opinion of the uprising and of the Jews.
- 3 Opinion: Look for judgment words that the writer uses to describe the people and events.** Judgment words are often adjectives that are used to arouse a reader's emotions.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

With orders from Himmler to crush the Jews, **1** the Nazis attacked on April 19, 1943, at the start of the holiday of Passover. **1** Two thousand armed SS troops entered the ghetto, marching with tanks, rifles, machine guns, and trailers full of ammunition. The Jewish fighters were in position—in bunkers, in windows, on rooftops. **1** They had rifles and handguns, hand grenades and bombs that they had made. And they let fly. . . .

Unbelievably, the Jews won the battle that day. The Germans were forced to retreat. . . . **1** The Germans brought in more troops, and the fighting intensified. German pilots dropped bombs on the ghetto. . . .

2 On May 1, Goebbels [Nazi propaganda minister] wrote in his diary: "Of course this jest will probably not last long." He added a complaint. "But it shows what one can expect of the Jews if they have guns."

Goebbels' tone was mocking. But his forecast was inevitable—and correct. . . . Goebbels did not record in his diary, when the uprising was over, that the **3** starving Jews of the ghetto, with their **3** pathetic supply of arms, had held out against the German army for forty days, longer than Poland or France had held out.

Source: *A Nightmare in History*, by Miriam Chaikin. (New York: Clarion Books, 1987) pp. 77–78

SKILL: Making Inference

Inferences are ideas and meanings not stated in the material. **MAKING INFERENCES** means reading between the lines to extend the information provided. Your inferences are based on careful study of what is stated in the passage as well as your own common sense and previous knowledge.

STRATEGY: DEVELOP INFERENCES FROM THE FACTS. This passage describes the Nok culture of West Africa. Following the passage is a diagram that organizes the facts and ideas that lead to inferences.

- 1 Read the stated facts and ideas.**
- 2 Use your knowledge, logic, and common sense to draw conclusions.** You could infer from these statements that the Nok were a settled people with advanced technology and a rich culture.
- 3 Consider what you already know that could apply.** Your knowledge of history might lead you to infer the kinds of improvements in life brought about by better farming tools.
- 4 Recognize inferences that are already made.** Phrases like "the evidence suggests" or "historians believe" indicate inferences and conclusions experts have made from historical records.

The Nok Culture

1 The earliest known culture of West Africa was that of the Nok people. They lived in what is now Nigeria between 900 B.C. and A.D. 200. Their name came from the village where the first artifacts from their culture were discovered by archaeologists. The **2** Nok were farmers. They were also **2** the first West African people known to smelt iron. The Nok began making iron around 500 B.C., using it to make tools for farming and weapons for hunting. **3** These iron implements lasted longer than wood or stone and vastly improved the lives of the Nok.

Nok artifacts have been found in an area stretching for 300 miles between the Niger and Benue rivers. **2** Many are sculptures made of terra cotta, a reddish-brown clay. Carved in great artistic detail, some depict the heads of animals such as elephants and others depict human heads. The features of some of the heads reveal a great deal about their history. One of the human heads, for example, shows an elaborate hairdo arranged in six buns, a style that is still worn by some people in Nigeria today. **4** This similarity suggests that the Nok may have been the ancestors of modern-day Africans.

SKILL: Analyzing Motives

ANALYZING MOTIVES means examining the reasons why a person, group, or government takes a particular action. To understand those reasons, consider the needs, emotions, prior experiences, and goals of the person or group.

STRATEGY: LOOK FOR REASONS WHY. On June 28, 1914, Serb terrorists assassinated Austria-Hungary's Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife when they visited Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. In the following passage, Borijove Jevtic, a Serb terrorist, explains why the assassination occurred. Before this passage, he explains that the terrorists had received a telegram stating that the Archduke would be visiting Sarajevo on June 28. The diagram that follows summarizes the motives of the terrorists for murdering the Archduke.

- 1 Look for motives based on basic needs and human emotions.** Needs include food, shelter, safety, freedom. Emotions include fear, anger, pride, desire for revenge, and patriotism, for example.
- 2 Look for motives based on past events or inspiring individuals.**
- 3 Notice both positive and negative motives.**

The Assassination of the Archduke

How dared Franz Ferdinand, not only the representative of the oppressor but in his own person an **1** arrogant tyrant, enter Sarajevo on that day? Such an entry was a **1** studied insult.

2 28 June is a date engraved deeply in the heart of every Serb, so that the day has a name of its own. It is called the vidovnan. It is the day on which the old Serbian kingdom was conquered by the Turks at the battle of Amsselfelde in 1389. It is also the day on which in the second Balkan War the Serbian arms took glorious revenge on the Turk for his old victory and for the years of enslavement.

3 That was no day for Franz Ferdinand, the new oppressor, to venture to the very doors of Serbia for a display of the force of arms which kept us beneath his heel.

Our decision was taken almost immediately. Death to the tyrant!

SKILL: Analyzing Bias

BIAS is a prejudiced point of view. Historical accounts that are biased tend to be one-sided and reflect the personal prejudices of the historian.

STRATEGY: THINK ABOUT THE WRITER AS YOU READ. The European explorer Amerigo Vespucci reached the coast of Brazil in 1502, on his second voyage to the Americas. Below are his impressions of the people he met.

- 1 Identify the author and information about him or her.** Does the author belong to a special-interest group, social class, political party, or movement that might promote a one-sided or slanted viewpoint on the subject?
- 2 Search for clues.** Are there words, phrases, statements, or images that might convey a positive or negative slant? What might these clues reveal about the author's bias?
- 3 Examine the evidence.** Is the information that the author presents consistent with other accounts? Is the behavior described consistent with human nature as you have observed it?

1 Amerigo Vespucci Reports on the People of Brazil

For twenty-seven days I ate and slept among them, and what I learned about them is as follows.

Having no laws and no religious faith, they live according to nature. **2** They understand nothing of the immortality of the soul. There is no possession of private property among them, for everything is in common. They have no boundaries of kingdom or province. They have no king, nor do they obey anyone. Each one is his own master. **3** There is no administration of justice, which is unnecessary to them, because in their code no one rules...

They are also **2** a warlike people and very cruel to their own kind... That which made me... astonished at their wars and cruelty was that I could not understand from them why they made war upon each other, considering that they held no private property or sovereignty of empire and kingdoms and **3** did not know any such thing as lust for possession, that is pillaging or a desire to rule, which appear to me to be the causes of wars and every disorderly act. When we requested them to state the cause, they did not know how to give any other cause than that this curse upon them began in ancient times and they sought to avenge the deaths of their forefathers.

SKILL: Analyzing Primary & Secondary Sources

- **PRIMARY SOURCES** are written or created by people who lived during a historical event. The writers might have been participants or observers. Primary sources include letters, diaries, journals, speeches, newspaper articles, magazine articles, eyewitness accounts, and autobiographies.
- **SECONDARY SOURCES** are derived from primary sources by people who were not present at the original event. They are written after the event. They often combine information from a number of different accounts. Secondary sources include history books, historical essays, and biographies.

STRATEGY: EVALUATE THE INFORMATION IN EACH TYPE OF SOURCE. This passage describes political reforms made by Pericles, who led Athens from 461 to 429 B.C. It is mainly a secondary source, but it includes a primary source in the form of a speech.

1 Secondary Source: Look for information collected from several sources. Here the writer presents an overall picture of the reforms made by Pericles and the reasons for them.

2 Secondary Source: Look for analysis and interpretation. A secondary source provides details and perspective that are missing in a primary source. It also provides context for the primary source.

3 Primary Source: Identify the author and evaluate his or her credentials. How is the speaker connected to the event? Here, this speaker is Pericles himself.

4 Primary Source: Analyze the source using historical perspective. Read the source for factual information while also noting the speaker's opinions, biases, assumptions, and point of view.

Stronger Democracy in Athens

1 To strengthen democracy, Pericles increased the number of public officials who were paid salaries. Before, only wealthier citizens could afford to hold public office because most positions were unpaid. Now even the poorest could serve if elected or chosen by lot. **2** This reform made Athens one of the most democratic governments in history. However, political rights were still limited to those with citizenship status—a minority of Athens' total population.

The introduction of direct democracy was an important legacy of Periclean Athens. Few other city-states practiced this style of government. In Athens, male citizens who served in the assembly established all the important policies that affected the polis. In a famous "Funeral Oration" for soldiers killed in the Peloponnesian War, **3** Pericles expressed his great pride in Athenian democracy:

4 *Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, as long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty.*