

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.

This excerpt from President Richard M. Nixon's memoirs is about wiretapping, or bugging—planting a concealed microphone to get information. The diagram that follows identifies and organizes information in the passage.

HOW TO FIND MAIN IDEAS

Strategy 1 Identify the topic by looking at the title, or by looking for key words. This passage repeats the words *bugged*, *bugging*, *tapped*, and *wiretap*.

Strategy 2 Look for a topic sentence. Ask whether any one sentence sums up the point of the whole passage. In this passage, the second sentence states Nixon's attitude toward bugging.

Strategy 3 Look for details or examples. The many examples support the attitude that wire-tapping was a common practice.

NIXON ON WIRETAPPING 1

I had been in politics too long, and seen everything from dirty tricks to vote fraud. 2 I could not muster much moral outrage over a political 1 bugging.

Larry O'Brien [director of the Democratic National Committee] might affect astonishment and horror, but he knew as well as I did that political bugging had been around nearly since the invention of the wiretap. 3 As recently as 1970 a former member of Adlai Stevenson's [Democratic candidate for president in 1952 and 1956] campaign staff had publicly stated that he had tapped the [John F.] Kennedy organization's phone lines at the 1960 Democratic convention. 3 Lyndon Johnson felt that the Kennedys had had him tapped; 3 Barry Goldwater said that his 1964 campaign had been bugged; 3 and Edgar Hoover [director of the FBI, 1924–1972] told me that in 1968 Johnson had ordered my campaign plane bugged.

Source: Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), pp. 628–629.

SKILL: Analyzing Cause & Effect

A **cause** is an action in history that prompts something to happen. An **effect** is a historical event or condition that is the result of the cause. A single event may have several causes. It is also possible for one cause to result in several effects. Historians identify cause-and-effect relationships to help them understand why historical events took place. The following paragraphs describe the early events leading to the Battle of Little Bighorn. The diagram that follows the passage summarizes the chain of causes and effects.

HOW TO IDENTIFY CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Strategy 1 Look for reasons behind the events. Here the discovery of gold motivated white Americans to move into Sioux territory.

Strategy 2 Look for clue words indicating cause. These include *because*, *due to*, *since*, and *therefore*.

Strategy 3 Look for clue words indicating consequences. These include *brought about*, *led to*, *as a result*, *thus*, *consequently*, and *responded*. Remember that a cause may have several effects.

Broken Treaties

The Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) had promised the Sioux that they could live forever in Paha Sapa, the Black Hills area of what is now South Dakota and Wyoming. The area was sacred to the Sioux. It was the center of their land and the place where warriors went to await visions from their guardian spirits.

Unfortunately for the Sioux, the Black Hills contained large deposits of gold. 1 As soon as white Americans learned that gold had been discovered, they poured into the Native Americans' territory and began staking claims.

2 Because the Sioux valued their land so highly, they appealed to the government to enforce the treaty terms and remove the miners. The government 3 responded by offering to purchase the land from the Sioux. When the Sioux refused, the government sent in the Seventh Cavalry to remove the Native Americans.

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.

The following excerpt describes the 1886 Haymarket affair in Chicago. The chart summarizes the facts and opinions.

HOW TO DISTINGUISH FACT FROM OPINION

Strategy 1 Look for specific events, dates, and statistics that can be verified.

Strategy 2 Look for assertions, claims, hypotheses, and judgments. Here a speaker at the event is expressing an opinion.

Strategy 3 Look for judgments the historian makes about events. Here the writer states the opinion that the event was a disaster and then backs up this opinion by explaining the negative consequences of the event.

The Haymarket Affair

1 At ten o'clock another speaker stepped forward, the main burden of his address being that **2** there was no hope of improving the condition of workingmen through legislation; it must be through their own efforts. . . .

The speaker hurried to a conclusion, but at that point 180 police officers entered the square and headed for the wagon that had served as a speakers' platform. The captain in charge called on the meeting to disperse. . . .

1 At that moment someone threw a bomb into the ranks of the policemen gathered about the speakers. After the initial shock and horror, the police opened fire on the 300 or 400 people who remained. One policeman had been killed by the bomb, and more than 60 injured. One member of the crowd was killed by police fire, and at least 12 were wounded. . . .

3 In almost every . . . way Haymarket was a disaster. It vastly augmented [increased] the already considerable paranoia of most Americans in regard to anarchists, socialists, communists, and radicals in general. It increased hostility toward . . . foreigners. . . . It caused a serious impairment of freedom of speech in every part of the country.

Source: Page Smith, *The Rise of Industrial America* (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 244–256.

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.

The following passage is from a speech by President Ronald Reagan promoting his economic program. The chart below lists some inferences that can be drawn from the first paragraph.

HOW TO MAKE INFERENCES

Strategy 1 From the facts in the text and historical knowledge, you can infer that Reagan is blaming the Democrats for the poor economy.

Strategy 2 Look for clues about the writer's opinion. From Reagan's language and the goals of his program, you can infer that he sees government spending and taxation as a major cause of the economic crisis.

Strategy 3 Note opinionated language. You can infer from words such as *exaggerated* and *inaccurate* that Reagan disagrees with criticism of his plan.

On the Program for Economic Recovery

1 All of us are aware of the punishing inflation which has for the first time in 60 years held to double-digit figures for 2 years in a row. Interest rates have reached absurd levels of more than 20 percent and over 15 percent for those who would borrow to buy a home. . . . Almost 8 million Americans are out of work. . . .

2 I am proposing a comprehensive four-point program . . . aimed at reducing the growth in government spending and taxing, reforming and eliminating regulations which are unnecessary and unproductive or counterproductive, and encouraging a consistent monetary policy aimed at maintaining the value of the currency.

Now, I know that **3** exaggerated and inaccurate stories about these cuts have disturbed many people. . . . Those who, through no fault of their own, must depend on the rest of us—the poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need—can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts.

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.

The following paragraphs tell how the early Mormons were treated and why they moved west in the mid-1800s. The diagram below the passage summarizes the Mormons' motives for that journey.

HOW TO ANALYZE MOTIVES

Strategy 1 Look for different kinds of motives. Some motives are negative, and others are positive.

Strategy 2 Look for the influence of important individuals or leaders in motivating others.

Strategy 3 Look for basic needs and human emotions as powerful motivators. Such needs and emotions include food and shelter, greed, ambition, compassion, and fear.

The Mormon Migration

Some of the Mormons' beliefs alarmed and angered other Americans. **1** Plagued by persecution and violence and seeking to convert Native Americans, Mormon church founder Joseph Smith led his followers west to a small community in Illinois. Conflict soon developed again when Smith allowed male members to have more than one wife. This idea infuriated many of Smith's neighbors, and he was eventually murdered by a mob.

2 The Mormons rallied around a new leader, Brigham Young, who urged them to move farther west. There they encountered a desert area near a salt lake, just beyond the mountains of what was then part of Mexico. The salty water was useless for crops and animals. Because the land was not desirable to others, **3** Young realized that his people might be safe there. The Mormons began to build Salt Lake City.

SKILL: Analyzing Assumptions & Bias

An **assumption** is a belief or an idea that is taken for granted. Some assumptions are based on evidence; some are based on feelings. A **bias** is a prejudiced point of view. Historical accounts that are biased reflect the personal prejudices of the author or historian and tend to be one-sided.

The following passage is from *The Americans at Home* by the Scottish minister David Macrae, who wrote the book after visiting the United States in the 1860s. The chart below the excerpt helps to summarize information about the writer's assumptions and biases.

HOW TO ANALYZE ASSUMPTIONS AND BIASES

Strategy 1 Identify the author and information about him or her. Does the author belong to a special-interest group, religious organization, political party, or social movement that might promote a one-sided or slanted viewpoint on the subject?

Strategy 2 Examine the evidence. Is what the author relates consistent with other accounts or supported by factual data?

Strategy 3 Look for words, phrases, statements, or images that might convey a positive or negative slant, and thus reveal the author's bias.

The Americans at Home

1 by David Macrae

[T]he American girls are very delightful. **2** And in one point they fairly surpass the majority of English girls—they are all educated and well informed. . . . The admirable educational system . . .

covering the whole area of society, has given them education whether they are rich or poor, has furnished them with a great deal of information, and has quickened their desire for more. . . .

3 Their tendency is perhaps to talk too much, and . . . it seemed to me sometimes to make no perceptible difference whether they knew anything of the subject they talked about or not. But they usually know a little of everything; and their general intelligence and vivacity make them very delightful companions.

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.

The following passage describes the explosion of the first atomic bomb in 1945. It is mainly a secondary source, but it quotes an eyewitness account that is a primary source.

APPLYING THE SKILL

The following passage describes the explosion of the first atomic bomb in 1945. It is mainly a secondary source, but it quotes an eyewitness account that is a primary source.

HOW TO LOCATE AND IDENTIFY PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Strategy 1 Locating sources: The catalog in your school library or a local public library lists resources alphabetically by subject, title, and author. Most of these are secondary sources but may contain copies or excerpts of primary sources. Articles in a general encyclopedia such as *World Book* or *Encyclopedia Americana* can give you an overview of a topic and usually provide references to additional sources.

Strategy 2 Secondary source: Look for information collected from several sources.

Strategy 3 Primary source: Identify the title and author and evaluate his or her credentials. What qualifies the writer to report on the event? Here the writer actually worked on developing the bomb.

1

The First Atomic Bomb

As the time to test the bomb drew near, the air around Los Alamos crackled with rumors and fears. 2 At one end of the scale were fears that the bomb wouldn't work at all. At the other end was the prediction that the explosion would set fire to the atmosphere, which would mean the end of the earth.

On July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb was detonated in the desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico. 3 In his book *What Little I Remember*, Otto Frisch, a Manhattan Project scientist, described what happened next:

"[T]hat object on the horizon which looked like a small sun was still too bright to look at. . . . After another ten seconds or so it had grown and . . . was slowly rising into the sky from the ground, with which it remained connected by a lengthening grey stem of swirling dust. . . ."

4 That blinding flash was followed by a deafening roar as a tremendous shock wave rolled across the trembling desert. The bomb not only worked, but it was more powerful than most had dared hope.

Strategy 4 Secondary source: Look for information collected after the event. A secondary source provides a perspective that is missing in a primary source.