Central ideas: main point of a passage

The central idea is the main point the whole passage supports: the claim or focus...



Lesson `rw.infoideas.I1`

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The idea

The central idea is the main point the whole passage supports: the claim or focus that its details develop. To find it, ask what the passage as a whole is about and what point it makes, then choose the option that captures that whole, in language no stronger than the text uses.

What is the passage as a whole about, and what point does it make about that topic?

Summarize the whole in a sentence using measured language. Test each option: is it the main point, a mere detail, an overstatement, a distortion, or a contradiction?

Watch every step

Tardigrades, microscopic animals often called water bears, can survive conditions that kill almost all other life: extreme heat, the vacuum of space, and doses of radiation thousands of times what humans can withstand. They achieve this by entering a dehydrated, dormant state in which their metabolism nearly stops.

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- ✓ **A.** Tardigrades survive extreme conditions by entering a dormant, dehydrated state.
- **B.** Tardigrades are microscopic animals. ✗ *detail-as-main-idea*
- **C.** Tardigrades are the most advanced animals on Earth. ✗ *too-extreme/broad*
- **D.** Tardigrades cannot survive exposure to radiation. ✗ *contradiction*

Why **A** — "Tardigrades survive extreme conditions by entering a. . . ." Select the option that matches the whole-passage point.

Now a harder one

Early electric cars in the 1900s briefly outsold gasoline models, prized for being quiet and easy to start. But their limited range and the spread of cheap gasoline soon pushed them aside. Only a century later, as battery technology improved, did electric vehicles return to prominence.

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- ✓ **A.** Electric cars were once popular, faded because of their limitations, and returned much later as technology advanced.
- **B.** Early electric cars were quiet and easy to start. ✗ *detail-as-main-idea*
- **C.** Gasoline cars were always more popular than electric cars. ✗ *contradiction*
- **D.** Electric cars faded because people disliked driving them. ✗ *distortion/half-right*

Why **A** — "Electric cars were once popular, faded because of their. . . ." Select the option that matches the whole-passage point.

The method, in one line

Central ideas: main point of a passage

Summarize the whole in a sentence using measured language. Test each option: is it the main point, a mere detail, an overstatement, a distortion, or a contradiction?

Is my choice the overall point (not a detail)? Is its strength matched to the text (no always/never if the text hedges)? Does it distort or contradict anything?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

⚠ detail-as-main-idea

Selects a true but minor detail from the passage instead of its overall point (too narrow).

⚠ too-extreme/broad

Selects an overstated or overgeneralized claim (often using always/never/all) that goes beyond what the text supports.

Name the trap before you pick — most wrong answers are one of these two.

Try it, then watch the walk-through

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