



Social Studies Strategies: Finding the Central (Main) Idea

Finding the Central Idea or Issue

What:

Finding the Central Idea or Issue is a strategy used to find the main idea or issue in the text of historical and other social studies materials.

Why:

Students need to be able to determine what the central idea or issue is in order to understand the text they are reading. Identifying the central idea or issue enables them to understand the essence of the selection they are reading and to recognize both the main idea and its supporting details.

How:

The central idea or issue in social studies can relate to people, places, things, ideas, events, dates, culture, or decisions. Answering these four questions can generally identify the main idea:

- What is the general topic or subject of this selection of text?
- What main idea holds the details together?
- What are some details that support the central idea or issue?
- What is one sentence that states the central issue or summarizes the entire selection?

Sentences: Each sentence has a key idea or issue. To find the main idea of a sentence:

- Ask who or what the sentence is about.
- Ask what the person or object is doing or what is happening to the person or object.
- Separate, from this main idea, the less important details that simply add information about it.
- Supporting details often tell the reader when, where, why, what kind, and how.

Paragraphs: Most paragraphs have a central idea or issue embedded in the sentences that form the paragraph. This topic or main idea tells what the paragraph is all about. Often the writer states the central idea or issue of the paragraph simply and clearly in a topic sentence. To find the stated main idea:

- Read the paragraph carefully. Ask the questions, “What is the purpose of the paragraph?” and “What is the general point that the writer is trying to make?”
- Find the words that describe the most important idea of the paragraph. Look for a topic sentence that states this central idea or issue.
- If the paragraph introduces the topic with a question, look for the answer to that question in the paragraph. This will be the central idea.
- Write or state the central idea or issue in your own words. Feel free to use words from different sentences to state or summarize the main idea of a paragraph.



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Sometimes the writer does not tell you the central idea or issue directly, but implies or suggests what the topic is. You need to infer the main idea by thinking about all the sentences of the paragraph and determining what the sentences are concerned with. To find the implied central idea or issue of a paragraph:

- Look at all the ideas and details in the paragraph.
- Ask the question, “Do all the ideas and details relate to a single person or event?” If so, then determine what this topic is.
- Ask the question, “What is the purpose of the paragraph?”
- Use the question “What points are stated most forcefully?” to identify all the key ideas and details being made about the topic.
- Write a complete sentence that identifies the person or event and tells what the person is doing or why the event is important.

Long Selections: In long selections, the central ideas of individual paragraphs build the meaning of an entire selection. The main idea of a long selection, or thesis, is the major point the writer is making throughout the entire selection. To find the central idea or issue of a long selection:

- Identify the topic of the selection. Skim the selection to identify the general subject. Look at the title, the headings, and subheadings for clues to the topic. Ask the question, “What topic do all of the sentences relate to?”
- Decide what the author is saying about this topic. The central idea or issue usually expresses an opinion or takes a position on a topic. Ask the questions, “What major point about the topic does the paragraph make?” or “What was the author’s purpose for writing the work?” to identify the central idea or issue.
- Find the supporting details that add to or clarify the central idea or issue. Ask the question “What details support the main idea?” to find these details.
- Use the information gathered from the main ideas from the paragraphs to decide on the most important idea overall. Remember to focus on key points rather than minor or supporting detail at this point.
- Write in your own words a brief statement that highlights or summarizes the overall meaning to the selection.

When:

Provide students with opportunities to find the central idea or issue using a variety of written, visual, and auditory “texts.” Primary and secondary sources, textbook readings, literature, cartoons and diagrams, graphic information, audio recordings, and video selections are all appropriate materials for finding the central idea or issue.