

Generalizing to Determine the Central Idea

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How can you develop skills for generalizing and determining the central ideas of a text?

Generalizing is drawing broad conclusions based on several pieces of evidence. The skill of generalizing will help you determine the central ideas of a text. As you read, you should look for important ideas in a text. Based upon these important ideas, you should make a generalization in order to find the central idea.

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To strengthen your skill at generalizing to determine central ideas, use the following three steps.

Step 1: Find the central idea in a text.

Step 2: Analyze how a central idea is developed by supporting ideas.

Step 3: Provide an objective summary of the text.

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Step 1: Find the central idea in a text.

If an idea is central to a text, it is often mentioned multiple times. It might be:

- stated initially in one of the first few paragraphs
- expressed in one or more places in the body of the text
- restated in the final paragraph

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Scholars have several theories to explain why myths endure. Some of these are the following:

- Myths explain acts of nature that people cannot understand.
- Myths teach people how to act correctly in their culture.
- Myths express basic values that people everywhere share.

Directions: Following are three passages from scholar Joseph Campbell about the role of myths. After you read each one, describe its main idea.

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Passage 1

[Myth] puts you in touch with a plane of reference that goes past your mind and into your very being, into your very gut. The ultimate mystery of being and nonbeing transcends all categories of knowledge and thought. . . . The function of mythological symbols is to give you a sense of "Aha! Yes. I know what it is, it's myself."

Main Idea

Myth teaches people about how they fit into the world.

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Passage 2

What you're learning in myth is about yourself as part of the being of the world.

Main Idea

Myth makes people aware of themselves.

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Passage 3

A ritual is the enactment of a myth. And through the enactment it brings to mind the implications of the life act that you are engaged in. Now, people ask me, what rituals can we have today? My answer is, what are you doing? What is important in your life? What is important, they say, is having dinner with their friends. That is a ritual.

Main Idea

People act out their myths by doing what is important to them.

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Directions: What common idea can be generalized from these three passages?

- Passage 1: Myth teaches people about how they fit into the world.
- Passage 2: Myth makes people aware of themselves.
- Passage 3: People act out their myths by doing what they find important.

In all three, Campbell focuses on how people use myths for personal, internal reasons.

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Step 2: Analyze how a central idea is developed by supporting ideas.

If the central idea is that people use myths for internal, personal reasons, identify specific statements or words that develop or refine this idea.

Directions: Read each of the three passages by Campbell and identify specific statements or words that support the central idea.

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Passage 1

[Myth] puts you in touch with a plane of reference that goes past your mind and into your very being, into your very gut. The ultimate mystery of being and nonbeing transcends all categories of knowledge and thought. . . . The function of mythological symbols is to give you a sense of "Aha! Yes. I know what it is, it's myself."

Supporting Ideas

Myth goes beyond normal categories of knowledge.

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Passage 2

What you're learning in myth is about yourself as part of the being of the world.

Supporting Ideas

Myth makes people aware of how they fit into the world.

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Passage 3

A ritual is the enactment of a myth. And through the enactment it brings to mind the implications of the life act that you are engaged in. Now, people ask me, what rituals can we have today? My answer is, what are you doing? What is important in your life? What is important, they say, is having dinner with their friends. That is a ritual.

Supporting Ideas

A dinner with friends can be a ritual.

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Step 3: Provide an objective summary of the text.

The summary of the text should include the central idea, as well as the most relevant support for it.

Campbell focuses on how people use myths for personal, internal reasons. He thinks myths go beyond normal categories of knowledge and help make people aware of how they fit into the world. People express their myths through rituals, which might include having dinner with friends.