

Main Idea and Themes

Determining Main Idea

NAME: _____

CLASS: _____

The main idea of a text tells what the text is mainly about. Usually, the main idea can be stated in a one-sentence summary. This sentence tells you the “who” and “what” of the story. The main idea tells what happened and who it happened to.

For many stories, there is another important piece of information you need to know in addition to the main idea. It is the *theme* of the story. The theme is the lesson or message of the story.



The theme of a story is its message or lesson.

► Read these paragraphs.



A rabbit liked to show off about how fast he could run. He boasted about his speed to everyone. A tortoise got tired of the rabbit’s boasts. “You and I should race,” she said.

The rabbit laughed. “You are a slow tortoise! I am a fast rabbit! Of course I will win!” The two animals started their race. The rabbit was out of sight in a moment.

The Tortoise jogged along with a slow, steady pace. She headed straight to the finish line.

The rabbit, believing he was way ahead, stopped running. He took a break to eat some grass and flowers. He rested. He watched the clouds in the sky. He lay down for a nap. As he fell asleep, he thought, “She is behind me. I have nothing to worry about.”

When the rabbit awoke, he ran quickly to the finish line. But when he reached it, he was greeted by the tortoise! She had won the race.

What is the main idea of this story? The main idea can be stated in one simple sentence:

A rabbit and tortoise raced each other, and the tortoise won.

The theme of this story is its message or lesson. The theme is:

Slow and steady often wins the race.

In other words, this story is about a race between a rabbit and a tortoise (main idea), and it teaches you a lesson about working slowly and constantly toward a goal, rather than trying to rush and possibly making a mistake (theme).

As you read, try to determine both the main idea and the theme. Knowing both will help you to better understand and remember the story.

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► Read these paragraphs and answer the questions that follow.



City Mouse went to visit his friend in the country. Country Mouse served City Mouse some bits of hay. That was the only food Country Mouse had.

“My friend,” said City Mouse. “How can you live here if this is the only food you have? How can you stay in such a quiet place? Come with me to the city. You and I will have plenty to eat.” Country Mouse thought about this. He was tired of eating hay. He agreed to go to the city.

When they got to the city, City Mouse took Country Mouse to the place where he got food. It was in a busy food store. For a few moments, the two mice happily ate bits of food from the floor and from the store shelves. It was the best food Country Mouse had ever tasted.

Suddenly, without warning, store workers began chasing the mice with brooms. The store owner’s cat chased the mice around the room. City Mouse and Country Mouse barely escaped!

As they ran from the store, Country Mouse cried, “If this is city life, I am leaving! Who needs all this food if it comes with so much danger? I will happily eat bits of hay in my safe, quiet home.”

1. What is the main idea of this story?



- A. A food store’s workers chase after two mice.
- B. A country mouse finds out what it is like to live in the city.
- C. A city mouse decides to move to the country.
- D. Two mice are captured by a cat.

2. What is the theme of this story?



- A. It is more important to have friends than to be famous.
- B. You should not try to do too many things at one time.
- C. It is better to have simple things and be safe, than it is to have fancy things and be in danger.
- D. Do not say anything that might hurt the feelings of friends or family, or cause them any pain.

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► Read these paragraphs and answer the questions that follow.



A mother told her son he could take some candy from a jar. The boy stuck his hand inside the jar. But he took such a large fistful of candy that he could not pull his hand out. He was unwilling to give up even one piece that he gripped in his fist.

He tried and tried to pull his hand from the jar. At last he gave up and started to cry. His mother saw him sobbing, and she said, "Dear Son, listen to me. You should be happy with just half the amount of candy that you hold in your hand. Holding half as much will make it easy to pull your hand out of this jar. Then perhaps you can have more candy another time."

3. What is the main idea of this story?



- A. A mother hides candy from her son.
- B. A boy's hand gets stuck in a jar.
- C. A boy breaks a jar and gets hurt.
- D. A mother sells candy to make money.

4. What is the theme of this story?



- A. There is a time for work and a time for play.
- B. Kindness is never wasted.
- C. Do not try to do too much at once.
- D. Do not play tricks on your friends or family.