

## How to recognize a main idea in a short story

### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **1 hour**

### Reminder

In working through the four exercises in Module 1 (two exercises based on the short story “Cranes Fly South” and two based on the short story “Powder”), you should gain a clear sense of ways you can approach a text to derive the main idea. A thorough understanding of the short story is necessary to allow you to build a solid foundation so you can prepare to write a strong essay about the text. These exercises will take you through that process.

### Instructions

In order to identify the main idea of the short story “Cranes Fly South,” complete the series of exercises below: I) vocabulary, II) word connotation, III) elements of literature, and IV) theme. They will help you to connect the components of the text so you can make a **confident choice of a main idea**. This clear identification of a main idea in the text is the foundation for building and writing an Exit Exam essay. Check your answers in the **Answer key**.

# Exercise 1

## I Vocabulary

Always define any vocabulary in the text you are unsure of. Defining unknown words helps clarify the meaning of the text. When you write your Exit Exam, be sure to define unknown words by decoding the word within the context of the sentence or using a dictionary. Remember that the short story writer economizes by writing a shorter text: often every word contributes to the overall meaning of the story.

**Define each word in the list below:**

1. crane \_\_\_\_\_
2. slough \_\_\_\_\_
3. disconsolately \_\_\_\_\_
4. irresolute \_\_\_\_\_
5. wheedle \_\_\_\_\_
6. placatingly \_\_\_\_\_
7. shambling \_\_\_\_\_
8. bleak \_\_\_\_\_
9. bluff \_\_\_\_\_
10. stagnant \_\_\_\_\_
11. alkali-encrusted \_\_\_\_\_
12. whooper \_\_\_\_\_
13. exultation \_\_\_\_\_
14. raving \_\_\_\_\_
15. anguish \_\_\_\_\_

## II Word connotation (an association or idea expressed by a word)

In the short story, a writer's choice of diction frequently conveys a mood or feeling/meaning. Find the following groups of words in the text. Highlight the words as you locate them. Note the repetition of some of the words, as well. Once you have completed the word search,

1. identify the mood or feeling each group of words conveys, and

Group A

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Group B

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2. explain how this meaning (connotation) may be connected to the main idea of the story.
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Group A				Group B
thunder	shamble	shrunk	crazy	south
black	bleak	fury	pain	sun
winter	cold	screamed	dimly	dazzled
flatness	stagnant	old		whiteness
fear	dim	slough		exultation
dying	nighttime	convulsive		heaven
dead	fall	drab		triumphant
feeble	twisted	sick		sprang

3. What mood or feeling does each group of words convey?

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4. How does the feeling evoked by each group of words connect to a main idea or theme of the story?

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### III Elements of literature

If you are unfamiliar with any of the terms in the exercises below, consult *Exit with Success*, a dictionary, or your course tutor. Identifying the elements of literature in the short story will assist you in defining the story’s main idea. (You should also be able to show an understanding of these elements of literature in the “Techniques and devices” objective.)

#### A. Plot

“Cranes Fly South” uses a common plot “formula”: a) the main character aims at a goal, b) the main character is confronted with various obstacles, c) the main character overcomes the obstacles and d) the main character achieves the goal.

#### Questions based on plot

1. Who is the **central character** in the story?

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2. Identify each part of the **plot** in relation to the main character’s motivation (achieving his goals).

a) goal

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b) obstacles

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c) overcoming the obstacles

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d) achieving the goal

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3. How is **suspense** created in the story? What is the outcome of the suspense?

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4. How is **foreshadowing** used in the story?

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5. Identify three main **conflicts** in the story. How are the conflicts resolved?

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## B. Character

1. Describe Lee and Grandpa. How does each character react to emotions, conflicts, and situations? What are their personalities? What motivates these characters?

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2. How does the **dialogue** in the story help the reader to better understand the grandfather and Lee?

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3. What is the relationship between the grandfather and grandson?

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### C. Setting

Describe the main setting of the story.

1. Where does the story take place?

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2. During what time period do you think the story is set?

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3. What season is it in the story?

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4. What is the weather like?

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5. Describe the landscape.

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6. What is the mood/atmosphere created by the setting?

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### D. Point of view of narration

Why is the third-person (omniscient) narration effective in this story? (What effect does the point of view have on your understanding of the story?)

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### E. Title

Explain the title “Cranes Fly South.” How does the title relate to the other elements in the story and to the overall meaning of the story?

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## IV Theme

Based on the information you have gathered by answering the questions in the **Vocabulary, Word Connotation** and **Elements of Literature** exercises above, you should now be prepared to write a theme statement that expresses a main idea of the story. Remember this theme statement must express a main idea that demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the entire text. This main idea should be a significant, central and unifying idea from the selection. In order to formulate your theme, ask yourself these questions: What is Edward McCourt's purpose in writing this story? What are the ideas or truths about life the author wants to convey?

**Theme/statement of a main idea about the text:**

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# Answer key

## I Vocabulary

Depending on the dictionary you refer to, your definition may vary slightly from those in this **Answer key**. These definitions are from the *Collins English Dictionary* (one of the dictionaries recommended in *Exit with Success*).

1. any large, long-necked, long-legged wading bird inhabiting marshes and plains
2. (in the prairies) a large hole where water collects or the water in such a hole
3. in a sad manner, in a manner that seems beyond comfort
4. uncertain how to act or proceed
5. to try to persuade someone by coaxing
6. in a manner that aims to pacify, appease or calm down
7. walking or moving along in an awkward or unsteady way
8. exposed, barren; cold and raw
9. a steep bank or cliff
10. (water) standing still, without flow or current; not advancing or developing
11. salt-encrusted earth
12. North American crane
13. joy or jubilation especially because of triumph or success; delight
14. delirious, frenzied; uttering in a wild or incoherent manner
15. extreme pain or misery (mental anguish)

## II Word connotation (an association or idea expressed by a word)

### 1. Group A

The mood or feeling this list of words evokes is one of **darkness, gloom and desperation**.

### Group B

The mood or feeling this list of words evokes is one of **brightness, light and hope**.

### 2. (suggested response is...)

The contrast conveyed by the two groups of words, **dark and light**, indicates that there is hope, even when the world seems dark.

## III Elements of literature

### A. Plot

#### 1. **The main character is Lee.**

#### 2. **a) goal:** Lee wants his grandfather to see the power of the flight of the whooping crane, after 40 years, once again.

#### **b) obstacles:**

Grandpa – weak, frail, tired

forbidden outing

the cold landscape

**c) overcoming the obstacles:** Lee and Grandpa reach the slough safely and see the bird take flight into the pale sky.

**d) achieving the goal:** Grandpa sees the whooper – he is exulted – his life is fulfilled.

#### 3. **Suspense** is created because the reader is unsure whether the grandfather will complete the trip to the slough to see the whooping crane. Additionally, the reader wonders whether the whooping crane will still be where Lee had seen it before.

4. **Foreshadowing** is used when Grandpa says at the beginning of the story, “Me, I’m going south, too... Man gets mighty tired of flatness – after eighty years.” This fore shadows Grandpa’s death at the end of the story. Other references to the grandfather’s extreme fatigue and the old mare’s fatigue indicate that little time is left for Grandpa.

5. **Conflicts:**

Lee’s physical struggle to take Grandpa to the slough to see the whooping crane

Lee struggling against the landscape and time

Lee feeling responsible, but not guilty, for his grandpa’s death  
(because Grandpa was so sick)

Note: You might have identified other acceptable conflicts, as well.

## B. Character

1. Lee: excited, determined, considerate, loving

Grandpa: old, weak, frail, determined

2. Dialogue: This creates an effect of authenticity. The dialogue is colloquial. The tone of their conversation is realistic; we can feel the desperation and excitement in the voices of Grandpa and Lee.

3. The grandfather and Lee are very close. Their common goal is to see the crane, and their bond is strengthened by their shared amazement at the bird’s incredible presence, especially in flight.

## C. Setting

1. The story takes place in the Prairies.

2. The story is likely set in the 1950s (or earlier). The story was published in *Weekend Magazine*, April 9, 1955. [Check the publishing information that follows the text of the story.]

3. The season is fall. (The cranes fly south to Texas in the fall.)

4. The weather is cold and windy – but the sun is bright and dazzling.

5. The landscape is flat, bleak, and the sky is pale and vast.

6. Mood – a combination of sadness and extreme joy.

## D. Point of view of narration

The third-person narration allows the reader to observe Grandpa and Lee together while they achieve their common goal and experience their shared perspective. The reader understands the story mainly through the eyes of Lee, but also “observes” Grandpa in action. This perspective adds to the tenderness of the story.

## E. Title

The cranes fly south to find a warm and safe haven just as Grandpa is able to do in his death – when “he’s gone south” [final line of the story].

## F. Theme

These are possible theme statements expressing a main idea about the text:

- Death is not so tragic if life has been fully lived.
- It is important at the end of life to recapture the past and what is meaningful in life.
- In sharing common experience, such as between a grandfather and grandson, the cycle of life continues.
- Escaping the mundane and bringing joy and excitement into life is important in living life to the fullest.

\*Your theme statement may differ from those suggested in the above list, but your main idea should be similar to those expressed in the samples.

## How to recognize a main idea in a short story

### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **15 minutes**

### Reminder

Looking for the main idea in a short story is related to the process of exploring different components of the text, from the language of the text to the plot structure to character analysis and setting. Although you may be able to read a text once and understand the main idea conveyed in the text, it is more likely that you will want to do a thorough critical reading while you mark up the text and discover the layers of intricacy of the story.

### Instructions

It is assumed that you have already completed **Module 1, Exercise 1** based on “Cranes Fly South.” The practice exercise you will find here is built on the general understanding of the short story you should now have. To double-check some of your answers, you could refer back to **Module 1, Exercise 1**. After you have completed the comprehension questions on the next page, your understanding of the text should be reinforced.

You will find ten reading comprehension questions listed below. In working through this exercise, you will review some of the ways to find the central controlling idea of a text, also known as the theme or main idea. Select the response that best completes the statement. Check your answers in the **Answer key** that follows.

## Exercise 2

### I Reading comprehension questions: Reinforcing the main idea of the text

1. The word **exultation** taken from this passage, “Again the harsh cry burst from his lips – ‘Great God in Heaven!’ – the cry that was once a shout of **exultation** and prayer” means \_\_\_\_\_ .
  - (a) joy or jubilation
  - (b) anger
  - (c) fear
  - (d) creativity
  
2. The word **raving** in “Lee’s mother led the boy to the door. ‘He’s **raving**,’ she said, and there were tears in her eyes and voice” means \_\_\_\_\_ .
  - (a) anguished
  - (b) laughing
  - (c) petrified
  - (d) delirious
  
3. Select an appropriate alternative title for this short story. \_\_\_\_\_
  - (a) *Ducks in the Pond*
  - (b) *Life on the Prairies*
  - (c) *Enchantment of Nature*
  - (d) *Sound of Thunder*
  
4. Edward McCourt is exploring the relationship of \_\_\_\_\_ .
  - (a) parents and children
  - (b) man and nature
  - (c) cranes and nature
  - (d) trains and whooping cranes

5. At first, Lee is \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) reluctant to take Grandpa to the slough
  - (b) confused as to why Grandpa would want to see a whooping crane
  - (c) inconsiderate of his mother's concerns
  - (d) wishing he could take Grandpa to Texas
6. True or false \_\_\_\_\_
- Lee wishes he had never taken Grandpa to the slough.
7. In this short story, the author implies that \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) The elderly should be kept safely at home and sheltered from the world in order to avoid risk.
  - (b) Lee will be punished for taking Grandpa to see the cranes because the trip caused Grandpa's death.
  - (c) The prairies are an uninteresting place to live and people should move to the warmth of Texas.
  - (d) Life should be lived to the fullest.
8. True or false \_\_\_\_\_
- Grandpa wants to return home because he feels tired.
9. At the moment Grandpa sees the crane rise into the sky where the bird remains "suspended in space beyond the limits of the world," the reader knows that \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) Grandpa has died and gone to heaven.
  - (b) Other cranes will soon join in the flight.
  - (c) Lee has accomplished his goal.
  - (d) Lee and Grandpa are sad that they have only seen one whooping crane.
10. Which statement best expresses the main idea of "Cranes Fly South"? \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) Grandparents and grandchildren should spend time together because life is short.
  - (b) Escaping the mundane and bringing joy and excitement into life is important in living life to the fullest.
  - (c) Cranes are almost extinct in the world and must be seen by young and old.
  - (d) Children should always follow their parents' rules; otherwise, a dangerous situation could result.

# Answer key

## I Reading comprehension questions: Reinforcing the main idea of the text

1. (a) In this passage the reader is aware that Grandpa is overjoyed upon seeing the crane.
2. (d) The mother assumes Grandpa is ranting and raving nonsense because he is delirious when, in fact, Grandpa is reliving the moment when he saw the whooper.
3. (c) This title shows the important connection between man and nature that is conveyed in this story.
4. (b) McCourt wants the reader to understand that nature can bring great joy and wonderment to humans.
5. (a) At first Lee isn't sure he should take Grandpa to the slough, but Grandpa is in a defiant mood. He very much wants to go and convinces Lee to take him.
6. **False.** Even though Lee knows the excitement of the day might have been "too much" for Grandpa, in his heart he recognizes the importance of the experience for Grandpa.
7. (d) McCourt does demonstrate the importance of living life to the fullest, if possible, right up until the last moment of life.
8. **True.** Grandpa does become discouraged and wants to give up, but Lee convinces him to keep going because they have almost reached the slough.
9. (c) Lee knows he has accomplished what he has set out to do when Grandpa witnesses the flight of the crane.
10. (b) The story shows the importance of bringing joy to others by helping them to experience the best of life.