

How to recognize a main idea in an essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Dance with a Giraffe” by Christine Jurzykowski**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

Looking for a main idea in an essay is different from looking for a main idea in a short story because generally the main idea or central thesis of a non-fiction essay is explicit rather than implicit. You need to come up with an idea that is related to the majority of the reading rather than focusing on one limited aspect of the text. This is why it is imperative that you mark up the reading and try to make connections among many points. The easiest way to determine the main idea is to comb through the text, finding the controlling idea of each paragraph. As you note each of these ideas, you should end up with an outline of the text. In reviewing this collection of ideas, you should easily be able to state a main idea that provides a focus for the entire text.

Instructions

In this exercise you are going to create an outline of the essay by finding the main topic of each paragraph of the text. For each topic that you note, add a detail of commentary that might later help you with your overall comprehension of the essay. When you have found each paragraph’s topic, you should be able to make a connection to a main idea or a few main ideas that the writer is conveying in the thesis of the essay. One of the first things to note, of course, is the title of the text. Another thing to note is the genre of essay. In this case, you are working with a personal essay that expresses an account of Christine’s Jurzykowski’s experience caring for a giraffe.

Exercise 1

Central topic within each paragraph	Comments
Title <i>(Example)</i> “Dance with a Giraffe” by <i>Christine Jurzykowski</i>	<i>(Example)</i> The title clearly uses a metaphor to convey a potential focus of the essay.
Paragraph 1	
Paragraph 2	
Paragraph 3	
Paragraph 4	
Paragraph 5	
Paragraph 6	
Paragraph 7	
Paragraph 8	
Paragraph 9	

Central topic within each paragraph	Comments
Paragraph 10	
Paragraph 11	
Paragraph 12	
Paragraph 13	
Paragraph 14	
Paragraph 15	
Paragraph 16	
Paragraph 17	
Paragraph 18	
Paragraph 19	
Paragraph 20	
Paragraph 21	

Central topic within each paragraph	Comments
Paragraph 22	
Paragraph 23	
Paragraph 24	
Main ideas A) B) C)	

Answer key

Central topic within each paragraph	Comments
Title “Dance with a Giraffe” by <i>Christine Jurzykowski</i>	<i>The title clearly uses a metaphor to convey a potential focus of the essay.</i>
Paragraph 1 <i>A connection with nature is revealed.</i>	<i>This points to an important message in the text.</i>
Paragraph 2 <i>The writer reflects on her past and the interwoven relationships with the natural world that she had known as a child.</i>	<i>It is evident that Jurzykowski is showing her lifelong love of nature.</i>
Paragraph 3 <i>She describes her passion for the conservation of wildlife.</i>	<i>The writer loves animals and loves caring for a vast variety of species.</i>
Paragraph 4 <i>The giraffe, Old Nick, is mentioned here for the first time and also the connection to his “dance with death.”</i>	<i>This is a transition point in the essay as the writer demonstrates the intimate relationship a human can have with nature/animal, using the giraffe as the key example.</i>
Paragraph 5 <i>description of the giraffe</i>	<i>The giraffe is described as being a six-year-old animal who already has many health problems.</i>
Paragraph 6 <i>more description of the giraffe and explanation of the danger of being horizontal</i>	<i>The author compares how a giraffe sleeps standing up compared to the “lying down” which is a precursor to death.</i>
Paragraph 7 <i>The focus here is on the first step of the giraffe’s dying process and care.</i>	<i>The whole staff seems to be involved in the process.</i>
Paragraph 8 <i>keeping Old Nick warm</i>	<i>The staff shows great compassion.</i>
Paragraph 9 <i>The giraffe herd participate in the process and recognize Nick is dying.</i>	<i>perception within the animal world</i>

Central topic within each paragraph	Comments
<p>Paragraph 10 <i>the interrelationship within nature and the web of life</i></p>	<p><i>the process of honouring all types of relationships</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 11 <i>respect for a dying animal</i></p>	<p><i>honouring Nick</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 12 <i>description of Nick's face and the feeling of closeness the author feels</i></p>	<p><i>compassion</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 13 <i>The partnership in dying is emphasized.</i></p>	<p><i>connection to the animal is almost spiritual</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 14 <i>The rhythm of breathing in unison is noted.</i></p>	<p><i>This paragraph ties in the idea of music.</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 15 <i>a lot of emphasis on energy levels and the process of knowing death is imminent</i></p>	<p><i>sharing in the knowing</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 16 <i>The other giraffes know that Nick is dying.</i></p>	<p><i>The author refers to the circle, possibly the circle of life.</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 17 <i>The herd moves in a frenzied fashion, almost like choreographed dance movements.</i></p>	<p><i>This is the dance of the giraffes.</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 18 <i>The dance continues.</i></p>	<p><i>The herd's dance and the author's breathing move almost in unison.</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 19 <i>The vigil lasts for 24 hours.</i></p>	<p><i>24 hours is like a cycle or circle</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 20 <i>The emphasis is once again on the idea of 24 hours and also on the partnership with nature.</i></p>	<p><i>The writer, again, reflects almost spiritually on her/our connection with nature.</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 21 <i>back to reality - Jurzykowski has to meet with the deans of one of the major universities</i></p>	<p><i>This is a reflection of the continuation of life and the roles people play in this world.</i></p>

Central topic within each paragraph	Comments
<p>Paragraph 22 <i>Part of being alive is knowing everything belongs to something else.</i></p>	<p><i>The writer reflects on the meaning of life/living and connections in life.</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 23 <i>cycle of life/nature</i></p>	<p><i>Again, the writer is reflecting on the harmony among living beings.</i></p>
<p>Paragraph 24 <i>“You are my friend, you are safe here, you will be taken care of.”</i></p>	<p><i>A repetition of the lines in the intro - the essay has come full circle.</i></p>
<p>Main ideas</p> <p>A) the complex relationship between man and nature</p> <p>B) the cycle of life and death / the circle of life /interconnections with nature</p> <p>C) the harmony of nature</p>	<p><i>All of the ideas are related to an exploration of the connection between all living things and the greater responsibility to take care of each other.</i></p>

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What you need:

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Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

If you have already completed Exercise 1 in this module you should have a good sense of the main idea of this text. Remember that the main idea of the essay should be related to the entire text, not just to one part of it. Also recall, as stated in the *Course Companion*, that when you are searching for the main idea, you should ask the following questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?

Instructions

Answer the following questions about the text “Dance with a Giraffe.”

Exercise 2

1. In this essay, whose personal story is being told? What is the author's profession? Where does she live and work?

2. Identify three places where the author lived when she was younger. Why is it important that the reader know these details?

3. Explain the significance of making Old Nick, a giraffe, the centre of the story. Would the story be different if it were about a human being dying rather than an animal?

4. What is the meaning of the title of this essay?

5. The writer and the giraffe have a very close relationship. What important connection does the writer want her readers to discover through this story?

6. How does Jurzykowski structure her story at the beginning, middle and end of the text?
How does this structure parallel the cycle of life?

7. How does Jurzykowski use the recurring idea of the “web” of relationships in her essay.
What purpose does this serve?

8. How does the author use the herd of giraffes to illustrate the power of nature?

9. What are three main ideas that you feel encompass the message conveyed in Jurzykowski's essay?

10. What is the thesis of Jurzykowski's essay? You could cite a direct statement from the essay to show this.

Answer key

1. Christine Jurzykowski's story is being told in this personal essay. She and her husband own and operate a small ranch that is actually a sanctuary for over a thousand animals. She lives in Texas and works at her ranch called Fossil Rim.
2. When the author was younger she lived in Sao Paolo, Brazil, Paris and New York. It is important that the reader know these details so that we can understand her experience in the context of someone who has lived in different parts of the world and clearly has a sense of how different places are connected. She refers to the "natural world" she had known as a child and how she remembers the "interwoven relationships."
3. It is necessary that an animal be at the centre of this story as the author is connecting the animal world and the human world throughout her text. Also, the giraffe is such a powerful animal, yet it is quite helpless as it lies dying, reinforcing the idea that we need to take care of each other. It is interesting to observe the importance of respecting the dying process and death of all species, not only that of the human species.
4. The title of the essay directs the reader to the companionship between Jurzykowski and the giraffe and to the metaphor of the dance that illustrates how closely connected they are.
5. The writer wants her readers to note that people should honour their relationships with nature in order to comprehend how we are connected to the world around us. Also, she emphasizes at the end of the text how "nothing exists in isolation."
6. The essay begins with her childhood experience and awareness of nature, the middle of the text describes the dying process of Old Nick and the companionship the adult author provides for Nick in this process, and the end of the text examines the death of the giraffe and the author's reflection on the cycle of nature. Overall, this structure parallels the cycle of life in that all things do come full circle and harmonize.
7. The recurring idea of the "web" of relationships reflects the main idea of the text in demonstrating how all parts of nature are connected in some way.

8. The herd of giraffes majestically responds to the death of Old Nick as they “dance” an almost frenzied dance in respect of Nick’s passing. This is incredible because it not only shows the power of instinct, but how even within the animal kingdom the animals know that “everything belongs to something” and that “nothing exists in isolation.”
9. Three main ideas that encompass the message conveyed in Jurzykowski’s essay are, for example, 1. *the complex relationship between man and nature*, 2. *the cycle of life and death/the circle of life/interconnections with nature* and 3. *the harmony of nature*.
10. The thesis of her essay could be stated in these words: All of the ideas in Jurzykowski’s essay are related to an exploration of the connection between all living things and the greater responsibility to take care of each other. One line from the end of the text that expresses her thesis is “In the awakening of our own cellular memories, we may remember the way we evolved in harmony with each other within the cycles of life, the nature of nature.”