

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

### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **"Powder" by Tobias Wolff**

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

### Reminder

In order to explore your basic understanding of a short story, ask yourself some of the following questions: What is the basic plot of the story? Where does the story take place? Who is/are the main character(s)? What conflicts are developed in the story? What are some of the traits that characterize the main characters? What is the point of view of narration? When does the story take place? Why do certain events occur? Does the title have significance or importance? How does this connect to the main idea of the story?

### Instructions

Complete the series of exercises below. If you respond carefully to each question, your answers will lead you to the central, controlling main idea(s) of "Powder," by Tobias Wolff. Compare your answers to the **Answer key** that follows.

# Exercise 3

## I Elements of literature

### A. Plot

The series of related events in the short story forms the plot structure. To piece together the plot, ask yourself how the story begins, what conflicts are established to build suspense, how the story comes to a turning point or climax and, in the end, how the conflicts are resolved.

1. **Introduction.** How does the story begin?

- a) \_\_\_\_\_
- b) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) \_\_\_\_\_

2. **Conflicts.** State three conflicts that are subtly introduced to the reader as the story unfolds.

- a) \_\_\_\_\_
- b) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) \_\_\_\_\_

3. **Complications.** How is each conflict “complicated” by circumstances that evolve in the plot of the story?

- a) \_\_\_\_\_
- b) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) \_\_\_\_\_

4. **Suspense.** State two examples of suspense that develop as part of the plot.

- a) \_\_\_\_\_
- b) \_\_\_\_\_

5. **Turning point/climax.** Write a sentence that describes this moment in the plot (the dynamic moment of decision or change in the story).

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6. **Resolution.** Write a sentence that describes this moment in the plot (the resolution is the point in the history where the main conflict is worked out – in a sense, it is the “conclusion” of the story).

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## B. Character

Understanding character leads you to an understanding the main idea of the story. For each character, state three personality traits. Think about how these personality traits are revealed to you in the text.

### FATHER

Traits

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

### SON

Traits

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## C. Setting

Answer these five questions about setting. Additionally, think about how the setting affects the characters.

1. Where does the story take place?

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2. What season is it?

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3. What is the weather like?

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4. Describe the landscape.

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

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## D. Point of view of narration

Why is the first-person 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 “Powder.” How does the title relate to other elements in the story and to the overall meaning of the story?

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## F. Theme

Based on the information you have gathered by answering the questions in the exercises above, you should now be prepared to write a theme statement that expresses a main idea of the story. A theme statement that only pertains to one part of the story is not an expression of the central controlling idea of the text. The main idea you select should be a significant, central and unifying idea from the selection. In order to formulate your theme, ask yourself this question: What is Tobias Wolff’s purpose in writing the story? What are the ideas or truths about life the author wants to convey?

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# Answer key

## I Elements of literature

### A. Plot

#### 1. Introduction

- a) The father and son go skiing at Mount Baker.
- b) The mother does not trust the father.
- c) Snow begins to fall and increase in intensity.

#### 2. Conflicts

- a) Father / mother – unstable marriage
- b) Father / son / weather – the increase of snow/ the turbulent weather
- c) Father/ son – there is a distinct personality contrast between them

#### 3. Complications

- a) The father's irresponsible decision to stay at Mount Baker longer will only aggravate the marital conflict.
- b) The snow storm increases, the road is blocked, and they can't return home according to their original plan.
- c) The son wants to return to the comforts of home, while the father seems eager to continue to add risk to their situation.

#### 4. Suspense

- a) Will the parents reconcile their marriage as both father and son want?
- b) Will it stop snowing and will they get home safely and in time for Christmas Eve dinner?

#### 5. Turning point/climax

This is when the father and son break through the barricade and start their trip home.

**6. Resolution**

The reader realizes the parents will probably not get together again; however, father and son, in driving on the “closed road” together, do create a new bond as they share and enjoy the common experience of the powder.

**B. Character****Father’s Traits:**

1. Irresponsible
2. Risk-taker
3. Persistent/persuasive

**Son’s Traits:**

1. Responsible
2. Cautious
3. Anxious

**C. Setting**

1. Mount Baker / the snowy road home
2. Winter/ Christmas Eve
3. It is snowy and stormy
4. There is an empty road, nothing but snow, trees, hills, switchbacks – an almost “uncharted” landscape
5. A tense mood

**D. Point of view of narration**

The point of view of narration, the first person, is effective because the reader understands the story through the eyes of the son, the person in the story who is undergoing conflict, who is trying to make sense of his father’s behaviour and who, in the end, has to deal with his parents’ separation and his own coming of age – his making sense of the whole situation with his father and his own personality. The reader empathizes with his situation and appreciates his learning experience.

## E. Title

The title, “Powder,” appropriately applies to the snow, the storm, and the challenge of driving through the deep powder. But it also relates to the father’s free spirit, the motion that can be associated with powder snow, and the son’s eventual acceptance and feeling of freedom, the experience that driving through the fresh powder snow under unknown driving conditions allows him to feel.

## F. Possible main ideas/theme statements:

- Parent and child relationships can become stronger if both respect their differences in approach to life and, as a result, enjoy their common experiences.
- In order to mature and learn to appreciate life, it is essential to experience one’s surroundings and accept and overcome the challenges that life contains.
- Escaping the ordinary and experiencing the extraordinary is important in living life to the fullest.
- It is important to know yourself and understand your limits, but also to respect others for their approach to life.

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



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

### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **"Powder" by Tobias Wolff**

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

### Reminder

It is assumed that you have already completed **Module 1, Exercise 3** and that you have already reviewed some of the ways to find the main idea of a text. This practice exercise is built on the general understanding of the short story "Powder" that you should now have developed. To double-check some of your answers, you could refer back to **Module 1, Exercise 3**. Completing the comprehension questions below will reinforce your understanding of the text.

### Instructions

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

# Exercise 4

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

1. The word **coercion** from this passage, “All persuasion, no **coercion**. Such subtlety at the wheel, such tactful pedal work...” means \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) contradiction  
 (b) argument  
 (c) duress or force  
 (d) agreement
  
2. The word **wheedle** in “What I did not know was that my father would **wheedle** and plead his way past them...” means \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) to wiggle  
 (b) to humour  
 (c) to dispute  
 (d) to persuade
  
3. Select an alternative title for this story. \_\_\_\_\_  
 (a) *The Austin-Healey*  
 (b) *Christmas Eve*  
 (c) *Marriage Breakdown*  
 (d) *Hail Storm*
  
4. Tobias Wolff is exploring the relationship between \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) adults and children  
 (b) mothers and sons  
 (c) skiers and snowstorms  
 (d) husbands and wives

5. The narrator is at first \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) reluctant to relax and enjoy the car ride on the closed road
  - (b) anxious to help his father move the barricade because he wants to get home
  - (c) determined to take a final run in the blinding snow
  - (d) excited to be an accomplice in breaking the law
6. True or False? \_\_\_\_\_
- The parents will definitely reconcile their differences and get back together again.
7. In this short story, the author implies that \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) fathers should be daring around their children in order to impress them
  - (b) the mother encouraged the father and son to go on the ski trip because of the bonding the ski trip would create
  - (c) the narrator's parents do not get back together again, most likely because the father has been irresponsible once again
  - (d) the father regrets he has developed reckless driving habits
8. True or false? \_\_\_\_\_
- The son is confident his father will get him home safely because the father is a great driver.
9. At the end of the story when the son says, "Except maybe to say this: if you haven't driven fresh powder, you haven't driven," the reader knows \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) driving through fresh powder is better than driving on icy or slippery roads
  - (b) the father has finally decided to turn back and not risk the drive home
  - (c) that everybody should get a driver's license
  - (d) the son is relaxed and enjoying the shared experience
10. Which statement best expresses the main idea of "Powder"? \_\_\_\_\_
- (a) The father and son drive through the barricade because they want to prove they are daredevils.
  - (b) The father and son respect each other's differences in their approaches to life and as a result enjoy their common experience.
  - (c) Turbulent marriages can cause people to take risks they wouldn't normally take.
  - (d) nowstorms cause skiers a lot of problems, especially when they have to drive home at the end of the ski day.

# Answer key

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

1. (d) In this passage the reader is aware that the son is happily cooperating with his father as they drive along the snowy highway.
2. d) The father seems to have mastered the art of persuasion.
3. (b) “Christmas Eve” is the most fitting title from the list because most of the events of the story take place on Christmas Eve as the father tries his hardest to bring him home safely for his holiday meal with his mother.
4. (a) **Adults and children** is the best response because the author is using the father and son relationship, in particular, to show how sometimes children are more adult in their behaviour than the significant adults in their lives.
5. (a) The narrator is portrayed as nervous, anxious and cautious.
6. **False** – In the story when the narrator says “buying a little more time before my mother decided to make the split final,” the reader realizes there isn’t probably any hope for reconciliation between the parents.
7. (c) The father knows he has behaved irresponsibly and that, once again, his excuses won’t be accepted by his (ex) wife.
8. **True** – By the end of the story, the son is ready to relax and trust his father, a very skilled driver.
9. (d) The son is very impressed by his father’s ability to drive the fresh powder, knowing it is a unique driving skill.
10. (b) Obviously, the son and father learn from each other and appreciate each other’s differences.