

How to recognize a main idea in an essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas**

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. Because of the structure of “Seven Wonders” and Thomas’s approach to illustrating his thesis, the central focus of his essay only appears in its concluding paragraphs. This is not an uncommon approach. Although many writers state their main idea near the beginning of their essay and support its development throughout, some prefer a more “inductive” format, where the conclusions are only drawn and the thesis stated at the end of the presentation of ideas or argument. When analysing an essay in order to meet the Exit Exam’s “Comprehension and Insight” objectives, remember to mark up the reading and summarize the main points as you proceed through the reading of the essay. Comb through the text, finding the controlling or central idea of each paragraph. If 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/topic that provides a focus for the entire text.

Instructions

In this exercise, you are going to outline the main ideas of each “part” of the text, rather than the main idea of each paragraph (as we did in **Module 5, Exercise 1**). Trace the seven wonders Thomas reveals in his essay in the order he presents them. As you locate each “wonder” he enumerates, jot it down in the chart below. Beside each of the seven wonders on the chart, write a phrase or statement that expresses why Thomas feels he is justified in his choice. By the time you have listed the seven wonders and added a brief commentary for each, you should be able to state what you think the main idea of the essay is.

Exercise 3

I Questions

The Seven Wonders	Commentary
Wonder 2 Bacterial species (Sample)	<i>(Sample)</i> <i>These bacteria live at extreme temperatures and are possibly the original archeobacteria (origin) of the human species. What is most remarkable about these bacteria is that they only survive at temperatures that ironically no human being could ever endure.</i>
Wonder 3	
Wonder 4	
Wonder 5	
Wonder 6	
Wonder 7	

The Seven Wonders	Commentary
Wonder 1	
Conclusion 1	
Conclusion 2	

Answer key

The commentary may vary slightly.

The Seven Wonders	Commentary
Wonder 2 Bacterial species (Sample)	<i>(Sample)</i> <i>These bacteria live at extreme temperatures and are possibly the original archeobacteria (origin) of the human species. What is most remarkable about these bacteria is that they only survive at temperatures that ironically no human being could ever endure.</i>
Wonder 3 Oncideres (beetle)	This beetle species always follows the identical three steps when laying eggs and reproducing. What is amazing here is that there appears to be a symbiotic partnership, something evident throughout nature. (This was also noted in “Dance with a Giraffe.”)
Wonder 4 Scrapie virus	This virus seemingly consists entirely of proteins, with almost no traces of DNA or RNA. Because of this unusual make-up, it is a wonder the virus can replicate itself.
Wonder 5 Olfactory receptor cell	This cell relates to sensory perception and miraculously reproduces every few weeks, always helping us to “remember” what we have smelled.
Wonder 6 Termite(s)	A termite alone is not a wonder, but the termite colony can work together incredibly and, as Thomas says, is like a “brain on a million legs.”
Wonder 7 Human child/human species	The wonder of human children is their ability to acquire language. Also, Thomas notes that the human species has the ability to be useful to each other. But the irony of the human species is that we are also capable of self-destruction, something unseen in any other species in all of nature. This wonder contains more disbelief, rather than the wonder that Thomas attaches to all of the other examples he gives.

The Seven Wonders	Commentary
<p>Wonder 1 The word/the planet earth</p>	<p>There is nothing that matches the wonder of the planet earth. As Thomas says, it is “wonderful and marvellous.”</p>
<p>Conclusion 1 Hope for the planet</p>	<p>Man must learn not to destroy—it is our responsibility to protect the planet. Man has such great potential.</p>
<p>Conclusion 2 Fear for the future</p>	<p>Again, man has great potential because of our remarkable genetic code. And our species, the human species, needs a future at this early stage of our evolution.</p>

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What you need:

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Reminder

If you have already completed Exercise 3 in this module, you should have a good sense of the main idea or thesis of this text. Remember that the main idea of the essay should be related to the entire text and not just one part of it, even if the thesis is only made clear to the reader at the end of the essay. Also recall that when 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 “Seven Wonders.”

Exercise 4

I Questions

1. **Whose** voice does the reader hear in this essay? **What** do you suppose is one of this writer's key areas of interest in his profession and in his writing?

2. **How** does the title entice the reader? **What** classic *seven wonders* is the author comparing to his list of *seven wonders* and **why** is this an interesting approach to draw in the reader at the beginning of the essay?

3. **Why** does the writer choose this structure to format his essay? For example, look at **how** he begins the essay, **how** he structures or enumerates his list of seven wonders and **how** he concludes his argument/discussion? **How** is this structure especially effective for a topic such as Thomas's?

4. **What** is the purpose of defining the word “wonder” in one of the introductory paragraphs of the essay? In **what** other ways does this writer use definition to lead the reader to the main idea?

5. **Why** do you think that Thomas chooses unusual insects, bacteria and viruses to create his list of seven wonders rather than places in the world, as in the original list (that is alluded to in the essay's introduction)? **How** does this approach help you to better understand his conclusions and warnings at the end of the essay?

6. **What** fascinates Thomas about the human child? **Why** does he separate his description of the qualities of the child from his critique of the world at large?

7. **How** and **why** does Thomas simplify the scientific jargon he uses?

8. **When** in the essay does Thomas shift his tone of voice and start to issue warnings?

9. **How** does Lewis Thomas end his essay? **Why** is the last line poignant?

10. **What** is the main idea/thesis of the essay? Express this as both a) a few words and b) a complete statement.

a) _____

b) _____

Answer key

1. The voice is that of Lewis Thomas. The writer's area of interest is science and this is likely connected to his career and general area of interest.
2. The reader first thinks of the well-known Seven Wonders of the World. This is an interesting technique to draw in the reader because the familiarity of the topic arouses the reader's interest.
3. In the beginning the writer uses a personal anecdote to draw in the reader. In the middle of the essay he describes his choice of seven wonders, going from the second to the seventh and leaving the first to last. This builds the suspense and adds impact to the essay's last page, which is the most philosophical part of the text. The conclusion raises some very important issues about human beings and their potential to both build and destroy. This is the paradox of mankind.
4. Defining "wonder" helps the reader to understand the focus of the essay from the same point of view as the writer. When the writer defines the word "world" towards the end of the essay, he leads the reader to see the world from his perspective.
5. He uses these unique examples because they are intriguing and so unusual. The facts presented are a wonder. He shows us how every living species plays an integral part in this planet.
6. What fascinates him is language – the single human trait that differentiates us from other species most obviously. He separates the child from the adult world to show how mankind has a destructive tendency whereas childhood is a formative and constructive stage in human development.
7. This allows the reader to clearly and easily understand the wonder of each of his seven wonders by explaining the magnificence simply yet maintaining the scientific tone.
8. When he starts to describe "us" – those who make up the planet – in the last part of the essay, Thomas shifts from praising the wonders of the world to pointing out his fears about humanity and the planet earth.

9. He ends his essay by looking at the future, almost as if he is issuing a warning about the fate of the world if man is not cautious and caring and respectful of nature.

10. Main idea/thesis

a) wonders of the world

b) Lewis Thomas explores the wonders of the world on many levels—from bacteria to the human species. He points out the interdependency of the various species on the planet earth and how quickly mankind could potentially destroy this “wonder” unless we proceed in the world with care and caution.