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QUICK TIPS

Identifying Central Ideas

WHY?

We have all asked students what they think the central idea is in the nonfiction text they are reading only to be met by blank stares, wild guesses, or rereading of a fact directly from the page. So many students struggle to figure out central ideas even though we teachers have been teaching it year after year since at least the first grade. When students summarize a text or pick a fact directly from the text, it reveals some misunderstanding about what *central* means and often what we mean by *idea*. Sometimes the best way to figure out that students struggle with identifying central ideas is by simply looking at their notes. If they list everything as equally important down a page (or write nothing at all), it often indicates they are not yet synthesizing small facts to figure out central ideas. All of our disciplinary standards emphasize this skill, so in theory students should be able to transfer their learning from English to social studies to science, and yet that is often not the case.

Proficient readers in any discipline know what to focus on as they read. They recognize what is important and less so. In the book *Mosaic of Thought*, Keene and Zimmermann (2007) explain, “There are at least three levels at which proficient readers make decisions about what is important in any text: the whole-text or idea level, the sentence level, and the word level” (p. 210). Of course, what is important depends on the purpose for reading. Students need to have a clear purpose for reading a text, ideally not just to get a good grade in a class, but an authentic purpose that stems from curiosity and inquiry.

Many students struggle to determine importance because they are unclear of the purpose of the reading. It is essential to have that clear purpose because it focuses the reader as they read and helps them note key words (word level), connections and explanations (sentence level), and bigger ideas and themes (whole-text level). At first you, the teacher, may set a purpose for reading, but over time you can also invite students or groups of students to collaborate to generate their own purpose and/or inquiry questions to pursue.

GETTING STARTED

Every time we ask students to read a text, whether it is a whole-class text or a text they chose, the first step is to make sure they have a clear purpose. The chart that follows gives a few examples. You can refer to your own standards and curriculum maps to make a chart like this for your students. Either students can select a purpose from a chart, or you can assign them one. No one can read a text for all of these purposes at once. A chart like this might

- *Make it intentional.* Every reading needs to have a clear purpose that all students understand.
- *Invite students to set the agenda.* Create opportunities for students to create their own purpose for reading based on their curiosities to increase engagement.
- *Define the terms.* Explain what *central* means and what *idea* means so students recognize the difference between a summary or tiny fact and a central idea.
- *Take it easy.* You can practice this skill with accessible texts such as visuals, videos, or even pop culture examples before asking students to try it with challenging academic texts to develop student confidence.

grow across the year, and you can add the bullets one at a time until you have a collection students can choose from. Underscore for students that readers in so-called real life often go into a piece paying attention to a few facets (purposes) and then may reread to examine additional aspects. They then “roll up” all they have noticed to form a nuanced, comprehensive take on the text. Lessons on determining central ideas are all part of learning to read closely; when we select a purpose for reading, we often then look through a few distinct lenses to discover what we want to discover.

Some Purposes for Reading True Stories

- Understand the human experience.
- Learn more about character relationships.
- Interpret themes that can be used in our own lives.
- Examine how settings impact characters and how characters impact settings.
- Connect past events to current events.

Some Purposes for Reading News

- Understand the *what*, *why*, *when*, and *how* of an important event.
- Make connections between key events.
- Interpret motivations.
- Identify perspectives and bias.
- Recognize who has power and how they use it.
- Form our own nuanced ideas about controversial issues.

Once students know their purpose for reading, it is helpful to model a lesson like the one that follows. Through this modeling, you can actually show them the thinking that happens in order to determine central ideas across a section of a text.

A central idea tends to have three parts to it, and most of us have only ever taught students two of the parts. Here are the three parts that help students understand what a main idea consists of:

Part 1: The general topic

Part 2: The specific category (or part of the topic)

Part 3: The idea

Yes! A central idea has to have an idea in it. Many students think the central idea is a word or phrase such as “causes of the war,” but a central idea is a sentence that contains all three parts. Let’s take a look at this example. Say we are reading a section from *Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing* by Bronson and Merryman (2013):

For decades, social science theory has professed that, in competition against others, our motivation is extrinsic, while when we perform an activity on our own, motivation is *intrinsic*. Thus the concern is that competition skews people to be extrinsically motivated, and they’ll lose touch with their natural intrinsic love for an activity. But it’s not really that simple: some people *love* to compete. For them, competing makes an activity *more fun*. A study of distance runners, for instance, reveals that those who compete at the national level (for money, medals, and glory) have the greatest intrinsic motivation. It’s only the intermediate runners who are externally focused. Similarly, ROTC cadets learning to shoot rifles develop more love of it—and more respect for their opponents—when they are part of a team-based competition than when they are taught to master and excel at rifle shooting without competition. (pp. 18–19)

Part 1: The general topic: Motivation

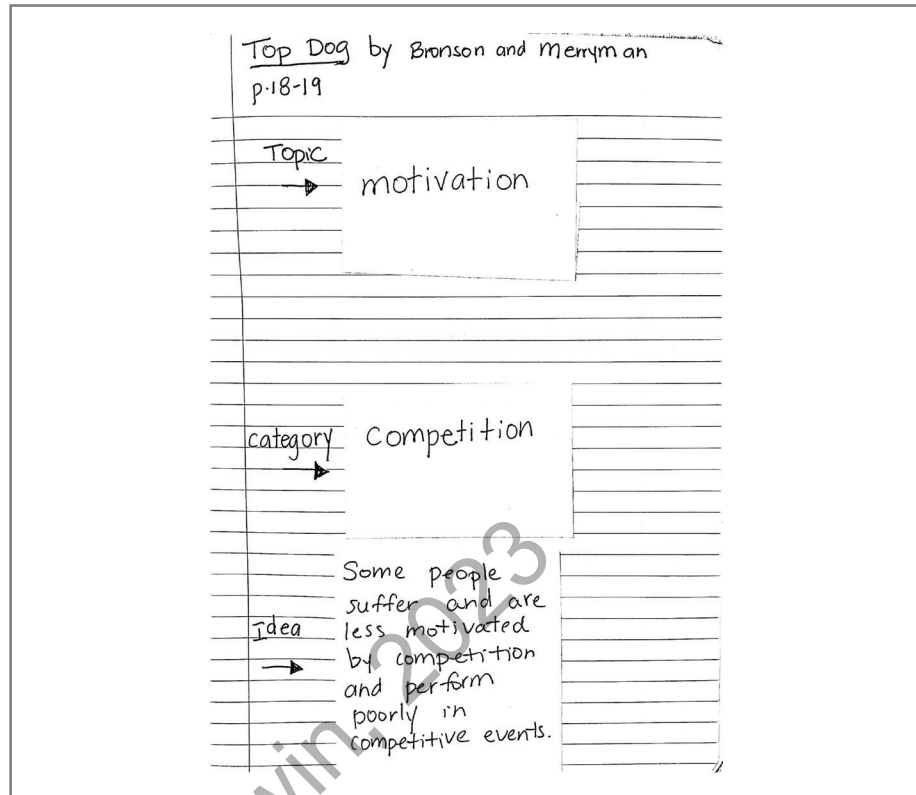
Part 2: The specific category or part: Competition

These first two parts are right in the text. The tricky part comes with part 3—the idea. This is because the reader has to read the facts and synthesize an idea about this topic and category. In other words, they have to consider, “What idea can I form about this topic and category based on the information given?”

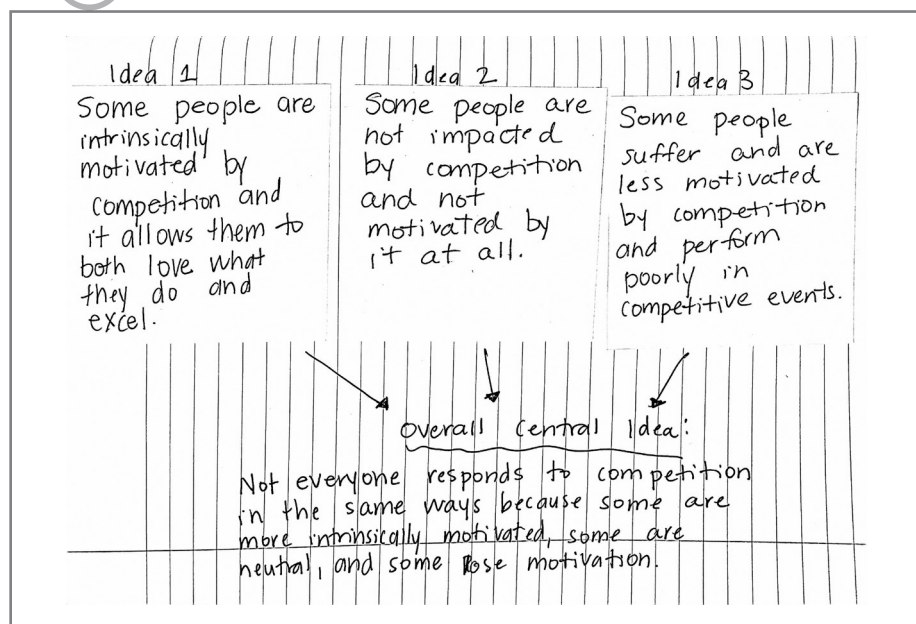
Part 3: The idea: Some people are intrinsically motivated by competition, and it allows them to both love what they do and excel at the highest levels.

The confusion lies in the common misconception that the central idea is the specific category. Students tend to stop at part 2 and think the category is the central idea. A typical student response could be “Motivation and competition is a central idea,” but this is missing the idea part. When you

model the process, it helps to create a visual of what your notes might look like as you read.



After modeling how you figured out central ideas of a section, you can look across sections and form a larger central idea across an entire chapter or text. Place each section's central ideas side by side and show how you connect them to form an even bigger idea.



HEADS UP

Keep it open-ended. Be aware of turning central idea development into a multiple-choice experience. While every state's tests do ask a multiple-choice question about a central idea, teaching students first how to generate their own will lead to deeper understanding of the content and the strategy itself. Once they can create their own central idea, you can teach them how to do similar work on a state test question.

Acknowledge there are multiple central ideas. Students will form their own language and ideas based on the details of the text. As long as the central idea is supported by the information in the text, there can be more than one idea. Comparing students' ideas and talking about why they formed the ideas yields rich conversations and deeper content knowledge than trying to get everyone to agree to one idea (which is often our own). Students often come up with compelling ideas that we can all learn from (even us teachers).

Lead with curiosity. Encourage students to bring their own authentic curiosity to texts when deciding on a purpose for reading. This is especially helpful when conducting research and inquiries. Two or three students may be reading about the same topic with the same texts but have different purposes, thus leading to different ideas.



KEY IDEA

When teaching students to identify central ideas, make sure they have a clear purpose for why they are reading. Model the three parts: general topic, specific category, and idea.

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