

LESSON PLAN

What Is This Really About? Finding the Main Idea in Texts That Speak to Our World

Ember Charter School · Ela · 90 min

DRIVING INQUIRY

How do you figure out what a piece of writing is really arguing when the author never comes right out and says it?

LESSON OVERVIEW

Title

What Is This Really About? Finding the Main Idea in Texts That Speak to Our World

Grade / Subject	Ela
Duration	90 min
Standards	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.2 — Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary that is distinct from personal opinion or judgments.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.1 — Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.6 — Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and explain how it is conveyed in the text.</p>
Objective	I can identify the central idea of an informational text, explain how key details support it, and write a main idea statement that names both the topic and the author's argument about that topic.

TEACHING PLAYBOOK

Main idea

◆ The Core Idea

The confusion that kills main idea lessons before they start is this: students learn early that main idea equals topic, and then they spend years writing one-word answers — "sports," "slavery," "community" — and calling it done. That is not a misconception to correct gently. That is a miseducation to name directly. The main idea is never just the topic. The topic is what the text is about. The main idea is what the author is claiming about that topic. These are categorically different intellectual moves, and students who cannot feel the difference will struggle with every analytical task that follows this one.

The one thing students must understand by the end of this lesson is that a real main idea statement has two moving parts: the topic (the subject) and the author's assertion about that topic (the argument or claim). Think of it this way — a topic is a noun. A main idea is a sentence. If a student can write the main idea as a single word or a vague phrase, they have not arrived yet. They have found the address but not read what is written on the door.

The one misconception that derails them is that the first or last sentence of a passage is automatically the main idea. Some texts are structured that way. Many are not, especially the texts these students will encounter in standardized assessments and in college, which are often written by people who assume the reader is already oriented to the genre. When students over-rely on location to identify main idea, they bypass the real analytical work, which is synthesizing all the details to construct what the author is ultimately building toward. The skill is synthetic, not locational.

What deep understanding looks like here is a student who can read a passage, articulate the topic, and then look at the collected details and ask: what do all of these details have in common? What are they all pointing at? What is the author trying to make me believe or understand? When a student can hold those three questions simultaneously and then write a single sentence that answers all three, they have it. That is the intellectual destination of this lesson.

◆ Where Teachers Get Stuck

The most common instructional mistake in main idea lessons is spending too long on the definition and not enough time inside actual text. Teachers will put the definition on the board — main idea is the most important point — and then ask students to identify it in a two-sentence example. That is not enough text to actually practice the skill. The skill requires the presence of noise: supporting details, examples, counterarguments, and distractors. Without complexity in the passage, students are just finding the obvious sentence, not synthesizing.

The second place lessons lose students is the transition from identifying to articulating. Teachers accept answers like "it is about how community gardens help people" and move on. But that sentence still needs to be sharpened. Who does it help? How? Why does the author think so? Accepting incomplete main idea statements trains students to be vague, and vagueness is the enemy of this standard.

Teachers also rush past the distinction between a main idea and a summary. They are related but not the same. A summary recounts what happened. A main idea is the author's central claim. A student who writes a three-sentence summary as the main idea has not failed — they have revealed that they do not yet know the difference. That is the teaching moment, and it is precious. Do not skip it by just marking it wrong.

Finally, be careful about using texts that are too far from students' lives. If students spend cognitive energy decoding the context, they have less processing available for the analytical skill. Use texts rooted in worlds they know — and then teach them to apply that same skill to any text, no matter how foreign.

◆ The Bridge

The conceptual leap in this lesson is from "find the topic sentence" to "construct the argument." The moment of confusion usually hits when students read a passage with no obvious thesis statement — when the author is making a case through accumulation of detail rather than through a stated claim. That is the wall.

The in-the-moment teacher move when a student hits that wall is to stop and ask them to list every detail in the passage. Just list them. What do you notice? What do the details keep coming back to? Then ask: if all these details were a team, what would their coach be telling them to do? That is the main idea. That metaphor tends to unlock something for students who play sports or who think relationally.

SPEAKING LIFE:

Before students touch the first passage, say exactly this — "I need you to hear me before we start. This

skill — figuring out what someone is really arguing, underneath everything they say — is one of the most powerful things a person can know how to do. It is how you know when a politician is actually talking about something real or just filling air. It is how you know when a company's advertisement is honest or manipulative. It is how you read a lease, a contract, a news story. The people in this room have always had the intelligence to do this work. What was sometimes missing was someone handing you the tool. Today we are handling the tool together. Do not let the difficulty of this fool you into thinking you cannot do it. The difficulty is the point."

INTELLECTUAL COURAGE:

Say to the class: "I want someone to give me a main idea statement they are not sure about — something they think might be wrong. Because a main idea statement you are not sure about teaches us more than a safe one that you are certain of."

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY:

After the workshop, ask students: "If you had to change one word in the main idea statement you wrote — just one — which word would you change and why? What would make it more accurate?"

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

For generations, the skill of identifying what powerful people are really arguing — as opposed to what they claim to be saying — was considered dangerous enough to restrict. Literacy laws in this country did not just ban reading. They banned the ability to read critically. That history is not an accident. It is a reason this room is here.

COGNITIVE RESTORATION · ELA · MIDDLE SCHOOL

The adolescent brain (6-8) processes social narrative — stories about people like them — through the same circuits that process personal experience. This means culturally responsive texts are not just engaging, they are neurologically efficient: less cognitive translation required to access meaning. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang's research shows that content connected to deeply held values activates the default mode network — responsible for self-concept and long-term memory consolidation.

Emotion & learning — Immordino-Yang; IB MYP Global Contexts

LESSON FLOW

ENTRY POINT (Opening) (8-10 min)

Put four statements on the board — no passage attached, just the statements themselves.

Statement A: Social media is popular with teenagers.

Statement B: Social media companies deliberately design their platforms to keep young people addicted.

Statement C: A lot of teenagers use social media.

Statement D: Teenagers and adults both use social media differently.

Tell students: Two of these are topics. Two are main ideas. Do not tell me which — argue for your position.

Give Kevin, Tracy, Keisha, Jose, and Jamika sixty seconds to decide independently, then have them turn and defend their choices to a partner. Do not confirm or deny anything yet. Let the disagreement sit.

Call on someone who is wrong and ask them to explain their reasoning fully before you address the error. The goal is not to reveal the answer — the goal is to surface what students currently believe about the difference between a topic and an argument.

After two minutes of discussion, bring it back whole-group and use what students said to name the distinction cleanly: a topic tells you the subject. A main idea tells you the claim. A is a topic. B is a main idea. C is a topic. D is somewhere in between — and that ambiguity is exactly where this skill gets interesting.

Reflection prompt for the teacher: Notice who argues confidently and is wrong versus who hedges and is right. That gap tells you something important about metacognition. Keisha and Tracy may have the right instinct but need the language to back it up. Jose or Kevin may name it confidently using street logic — a form of rhetorical intelligence that already exists in the room.

THE BUILD (Direct Instruction) (12-15 min)

Tell students: Finding the main idea is not a treasure hunt. You are not looking for a hidden sentence.

You are doing something more sophisticated — you are reading all the details a writer gives you and then asking yourself what claim those details are all working together to support.

Introduce the two-part formula out loud and write it where everyone can see it.

Main Idea equals Topic plus Author's Claim About That Topic.

A topic answers: what is this about?

A main idea answers: what is the author arguing about this topic?

THE METHOD	
Step 1	Read the full passage once without stopping to annotate.

WORKSHOP (Guided Practice)
(15-20 min)

Students work in pairs or triads on problems 2 and 3 from the student worksheet. Tell them to use the Method steps — not to shortcut to Step 5. They must be able to name their topic, their detail list, and their synthesis before they write the main idea statement.

Check on Jose first — he may move fast and skip the detail-listing step. His instincts are often right but his process is thin, which will hurt him on extended tasks. Ask him to show you his list before he writes the main idea statement.

Check on Tracy next — listen for whether she is summarizing or arguing. Tracy has strong reading comprehension and will often write a beautiful summary that misses the analytical target. Ask her: what is the author trying to convince you of?

Listen for Keisha — she tends to take on a facilitation role in group work. That is valuable, but make sure she is producing her own written thinking and not just organizing the group's verbal discussion. Ask her to show you what is on her paper.

Jamika may go quiet in the struggle. That is not disengagement — it is processing. Give her the think-out-loud prompt: "Just tell me in plain words what you think this text is about and what the author thinks about it." Let her talk before she writes.

Reflection prompt for the teacher: Productive struggle looks like students debating which details matter, crossing things out, and changing their main idea statement after they test it. Lost looks like students staring at the passage waiting for a sentence to stand out and announce itself. The difference is

whether they are working the process or waiting for the answer to appear.

OWN IT (Independent Practice)
(12-15 min)

Students work independently on problems 4, 5, and 6. No partner support. Tell them this is the moment to find out what they actually know how to do on their own — and that finding out is worth more than getting every answer right.

Problem 5 contains an embedded irrelevant detail. Students must practice discernment — identifying which evidence actually supports the main idea and which is noise. This is the close-reading move. Students who are not yet discriminating between relevant and irrelevant evidence will try to use everything in the passage. That is a key diagnostic moment.

Problem 6 asks students to write a short argument to a named audience using evidence. This is the synthesis and application task — it requires them to not just identify a main idea but to construct one and back it up.

Reflection prompt for the teacher: Students who finish quickly and correctly are ready for extension — ask them to identify what the author left out of the passage and why that omission might be significant. Students who are struggling to start problem 4 need the topic identification scaffolded — ask them: what keeps coming up in this passage? Name that first. Everything else comes after.

SYNTHESIS (Closing) (8-10 min)

Return to the driving inquiry: How do you figure out what a piece of writing is really arguing when the author never comes right out and says it?

Ask two or three students — call on someone who struggled, not just someone who is confident — to answer that question in one sentence. What do you do when the author does not give you a thesis sentence? Listen for whether they can name the process: look at the details, find what they have in common, write the claim.

Exit ticket: Give students one final short passage — two or three sentences — and ask them to write the main idea statement using the six-step method. Collect it. That is your assessment data for tomorrow.

Bridge to Quick Practice: Tell students that the worksheet follow-up will give them more chances to apply this exact skill to new texts. The skill is the same. The texts change. That is the whole game.

Reflection prompt for the teacher: What would you do differently tomorrow based on what you saw? If most students wrote topics instead of main idea statements on the exit ticket, the lesson needs another

round of explicit modeling with a new passage before students practice independently again. If students wrote strong main idea statements for problems 2 and 3 but fell apart on problems 4 and 5, the close-reading piece — distinguishing relevant from irrelevant evidence — needs its own focused lesson. Let the student work tell you where to go next.

NU TEACHER NOTES

WATCH FOR THESE MOMENTS

- ▶ A student writes a one-word or one-phrase response as the main idea — for example, "bodegas" or "urban renewal." The underlying cause is that the student has not yet internalized the distinction between a topic and a claim. They have found the address but not the argument. The teacher move is to ask: what does the author think about that topic? What are they trying to convince me of? Prompt the student to answer that question out loud before they write anything.
- ▶ A student includes every detail from the passage in their main idea statement. The underlying cause is that the student is conflating main idea with summary — they are retelling rather than synthesizing. The teacher move is to ask the student to write the main idea in exactly one sentence and then ask: does every word in this sentence need to be here? What is the single claim the author is making?
- ▶ A student identifies the first or last sentence of the passage as the main idea and stops there without testing it. The underlying cause is an over-reliance on structural heuristics — they have been taught that the thesis is always at the beginning or end. The teacher move is to ask: go back and check — do all of the other details in this passage support that sentence? Ask them to verify, not just locate.
- ▶ A student in problem 5 defends the irrelevant detail by arguing it is still related to the topic. The underlying cause is that the student is not yet distinguishing between proximity to the subject and functional support for the argument. They know the cooking detail is about a bilingual person so they assume it counts as evidence. The teacher move is to say: relevance to the topic is not the same as support for the claim. Ask them — if you were trying to prove that bilingual students have stronger cognitive flexibility, would this detail help you do that? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS THAT OPEN DOORS

- ◆ *Think about a time when someone told you what was going on — in school, in the news, in the neighborhood — and later you found out there was more to the story than what they said. How did you figure out the real point of what they were telling you? What did you actually do to get there?*
- ◆ *If an author is trying to convince you of something important, why would they not just come right out and say it in the first sentence? What do you gain or lose as a reader when the main idea is built from details instead of stated directly?*
- ◆ *We talked about the fact that literacy — especially critical reading — was historically restricted from Black and Latino communities. If you had to name one thing that reading critically, identifying real arguments, would allow someone to do that they could not otherwise do, what would that be?*

- ◆ *When you read something written by someone in power — a principal, a politician, a company — and you identify their real main idea underneath their stated message, what does that knowledge allow you to do that you could not do before?*
- ◆ *If you could write one passage — on any subject — and trust that these six steps would help someone else find exactly what you were really arguing, what would you write it about? What would you want a reader to discover when they worked through it?*

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Students in under-resourced schools have often been taught to receive knowledge rather than generate it — to follow procedures rather than reason. Every lesson that asks “why does this work?” instead of “what is the answer?” is restoration work. Every moment you pause and say “your reasoning matters” is restoration work. This is not remediation. It is reclamation. You are not filling a deficit. You are clearing a path.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY

“Toni Cade Bambara said that the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible — and the same might be said of the teacher. Your job in this room is not to hand students answers but to make the act of thinking so compelling that they cannot imagine settling for anything less. The struggle inside a text is not an obstacle to learning. It is the learning. Trust the room.”

— Nu Renaissance

STUDENT PRACTICE WORK

Name: _____

Date: _____

What Is This Really About? Finding the Main Idea in Texts That Speak to Our World**WHY THIS MATTERS**

Every time you figure out what someone is really arguing — not just what they said, but what they are trying to convince you of — you are exercising a kind of power that has not always been available to everyone. For generations, Black and Latino communities in this country were legally prevented from accessing full literacy precisely because the ability to read critically, to see through rhetoric, to identify what is really being claimed — that is a political power as much as it is an academic skill. You are not learning something new today. You are inheriting something that belongs to you.

Historian and journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones has spent her career doing exactly this work in public — reading the structures of American institutions, identifying the central claims those institutions make about themselves, and then holding those claims up against the evidence. That is advanced main idea work. It is what this skill grows into when you practice it long enough.

RETRIEVE · Quick recall. No notes. Do your best.

1. In your own words, what is the difference between a fact and an opinion? Give one example of each.

Show your work here

2. Finding What the Author Is Really Saying

Read this short passage and use the six-step method to identify the main idea.

"Keisha's school replaced all of its art and music classes with extra test-prep periods starting in 2019. Within one year, student attendance dropped by twelve percent. Counselors reported an increase in student anxiety. Teachers noted that students seemed less engaged during the school day."

Use the method: name the topic, list the details, find what they have in common, write your main idea statement, and then test it against the details.

(What is the author trying to convince you happened when the school made this change? Write the topic, the detail list, and the main idea statement separately before you combine them.)

3. When the Author Does Not Say It Directly

Before you respond — write in your own words what this text is actually saying. Plain-language: who is speaking, about what, to whom? Then analyze.

"Dominican bodegas in upper Manhattan do more than sell groceries. They extend credit to families who cannot make it to the next paycheck. They hold keys for neighbors who are locked out. They translate documents for new arrivals. They sponsor youth basketball teams and host impromptu

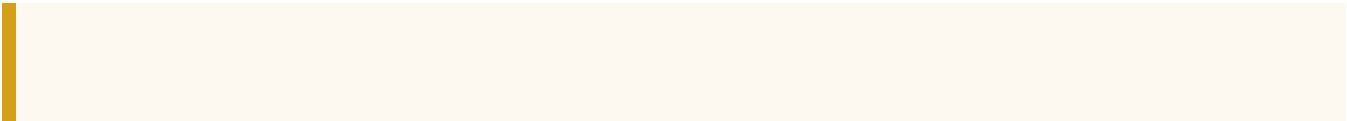
community meetings. When a bodega closes, a neighborhood does not just lose a store."

Notice how this asks the same thing as the WORKED EXAMPLE — what stayed the same? What changed?

The structure is identical: list the details, find what they have in common, write a main idea that names the topic and the author's claim. What changed is that the author never states the main idea in a single sentence — you have to build it from the accumulated details.

SHOW YOUR THINKING: After each step, write one sentence explaining why that move is valid.

A main idea is not a topic and it is not a summary. It is an argument — the author's central claim about a subject, built from all the details they chose to include. Every time you read a text and ask what all the details are working together to prove, you are doing what strong readers do: you are synthesizing, not just collecting. The passages in problems 2 and 3 both made you do this work — one gave you a more obvious path, and one asked you to build the claim entirely from accumulated evidence. Both required the same six-step process. Both produced a main idea that no single sentence in the text handed you. That is the real skill: reading everything the author gave you and constructing what they were building toward.



THE CORE IDEA

A main idea is not a topic and it is not a summary. It is an argument — the author's central claim about a subject, built from all the details they chose to include. Every time you read a text and ask what all the details are working together to prove, you are doing what strong readers do: you are synthesizing, not just collecting. The passages in problems 2 and 3 both made you do this work — one gave you a more obvious path, and one asked you to build the claim entirely from accumulated evidence. Both required the same six-step process. Both produced a main idea that no single sentence in the text handed you. That is the real skill: reading everything the author gave you and constructing what they were building toward.

You were built for this kind of thinking. Show your thinking, not just your answer. A wrong answer with real reasoning behind it is worth more than a right answer with nothing behind it. The struggle is how we learn and grow.

PUT IT TO WORK

4. Making the Claim Your Own

Read the following passage and write a main idea statement. Then identify two specific details from the passage that support it and explain how each one connects to your main idea statement.

"Jose has watched his block in the Bronx change over the last five years. New coffee shops have opened where corner stores used to be. Rents have doubled. Long-time residents, including his grandmother, have received notices to vacate. The new neighbors rarely speak to anyone on the stoop. Local churches report that their congregations have shrunk as members are pushed further and further from the neighborhood. The culture that made this block feel like home is being replaced by something that was not designed for the people who built it."

(What is the author's claim? Write your main idea statement first. Then name two details and show how each one supports your statement specifically — not just that they relate to the topic.)

5. Only Some of This Matters

Read this passage carefully. Not every detail supports the main idea. Your job is to identify the main idea, then identify which two pieces of evidence most strongly support it and explain why the other detail is not directly relevant to the main idea, even though it appears in the same passage.

"Tracy grew up in a West African immigrant household where two languages were spoken before she ever walked into a kindergarten classroom. Research consistently shows that students who grow up bilingual demonstrate stronger working memory, greater cognitive flexibility, and higher performance on tasks requiring mental switching. Tracy also enjoys cooking traditional Ghanaian food with her grandmother on weekends. Studies further indicate that bilingual students often develop stronger empathy and cross-cultural communication skills because they have regularly navigated between different linguistic and cultural frameworks from an early age."

SHOW YOUR THINKING: After you identify the main idea, write one sentence explaining why each piece of evidence you chose supports it. Then write one sentence explaining why the detail you set aside is not directly relevant — even if it is interesting.

(Which evidence actually proves the author's point about bilingualism? Which detail appears in the

passage but does not do the work of supporting the central argument?)

6. [Q6 TYPE: ADVOCACY]

Read both passages below. Then write a short argument — three to five sentences — addressed to your school board, using specific evidence from both passages to argue that schools should actively support students who come from multilingual households. Name the school board as your audience. Use at least one piece of specific evidence from each passage.

Passage A: "Students who grow up speaking more than one language consistently outperform monolingual peers on assessments measuring working memory and cognitive flexibility. These cognitive advantages are not limited to language tasks — they appear in mathematics, problem-solving, and social reasoning as well."

Passage B: "Despite the documented cognitive and social benefits of multilingualism, many schools across the country continue to place bilingual students in remedial tracks based solely on English proficiency scores, ignoring the intellectual strengths these students bring into the classroom."

(What specific argument would move a school board? Name what is being lost when schools misplace

bilingual students, and name what research says about what those students actually bring. Be precise.)

Before I started, I thought or assumed:	Now I understand or can do:
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HOW AM I DOING? Circle one:	☐ I can explain my reasoning clearly	☐ I need one more example	☐ I'm in the struggle — this is exactly where growth happens
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THE MODEL · Nu Teacher Reference

VOCABULARY · Write each definition in your own words.**BUILD THE FOUNDATION**

In my own words: _____

THE MODEL*Read this passage:*

"In the 1950s and 1960s, cities across the United States bulldozed thousands of homes in Black and Latino neighborhoods, claiming the land was blighted and in need of renewal. New highways, stadiums, and government buildings replaced the houses, barbershops, churches, and small businesses that had made those communities run. Residents were relocated to housing projects far from their original neighborhoods. Entire networks of economic and social life were erased in a matter of years."

A student named Marcus is going to work through this using the six-step method. Watch how he does it and notice every move.

Step 1: Read the full passage once.

Marcus reads the whole thing without stopping to annotate. He gets the full picture first. This is valid because you cannot identify what is most important until you know what is in the passage.

Step 2: Name the topic in two to three words.

Marcus writes: urban renewal programs. That is the subject that keeps repeating — the idea of cities taking land and rebuilding it. This move is valid because the topic is not an argument yet, just the subject.

Step 3: List the key details.

Marcus writes:

Cities claimed land was blighted.

Highways, stadiums, and government buildings replaced homes.

Residents were moved to housing projects far away.

Barbershops, churches, and businesses were destroyed.

Economic and social networks were erased.

This move is valid because listing forces him to see all the evidence the author gave before he decides what it adds up to.

Step 4: Ask

what do all of these details have in common?

Marcus notices: every detail is about something being taken away from these communities — not just buildings, but the relationships and networks that kept people connected. The author keeps describing loss. Not accident. Not natural change. Deliberate removal.

This move is valid because synthesis requires finding the pattern across details, not just listing them separately.

Step 5: Write the main idea statement.

Marcus writes: Urban renewal programs in mid-century American cities did not improve communities — they systematically destroyed the economic and social structures that Black and Latino neighborhoods had built.

This is valid because it names both the topic (urban renewal programs) and the author's claim (they destroyed rather than improved communities).

Step 6: Test the statement.

Marcus checks: Does every detail support this? The bulldozed homes — yes. The displaced residents — yes. The erased businesses and churches — yes. The claim holds. Every detail is evidence of destruction, not improvement.

What this tells us: The author is not just describing what happened. The author is making an argument that what cities called renewal was actually a form of organized community destruction.

Now you try it — problems 2 and 3 use the same structure.

ANSWER KEY

Worked Example

Main idea — Urban renewal programs in mid-century American cities did not improve communities; they systematically destroyed the economic and social structures that Black and Latino neighborhoods had built.

Reasoning: The example models the full six-step process: reading without annotating first, naming the topic separately from the claim, listing details before synthesizing them, writing a complete main idea statement that contains both topic and assertion, and testing the statement against the evidence. Every step is labeled and explained. Students can see the thinking, not just the product

TEACHER NOTE

When students attempt problems 2 and 3, watch for main idea statements that only name the topic — "this is about urban renewal" — without naming the author's claim. That is the most common incomplete response. Also watch for students who write the main idea before completing the detail list. Step 3 before Step 5 is not optional — the list is what makes the synthesis possible.

Problem 1**RECOMMENDED**

A fact is something that can be proven or verified — for example, "The Bronx is a borough in New York City." An opinion is what someone believes or feels about a topic — for example, "The Bronx has the most creative culture in New York City."

Reasoning: This retrieval question activates prior knowledge about the distinction between objective and subjective claims, which is foundational to the main idea work students are doing today. Students who blur facts and opinions will also blur supporting details and author opinion

when identifying main ideas.

TEACHER NOTE

Watch for students who define fact as "something true" — that answer is incomplete because opinions can feel true. Push toward the idea of verifiability. Also watch for students who cannot generate any example independently — they may need the vocabulary reactivated before they can engage with the passage work.

Problem 2

RECOMMENDED

Topic — test-prep replacing arts and music classes. Main idea — When the school removed art and music to add test-prep time, students became less engaged, more anxious, and less likely to attend, suggesting that eliminating creative classes harmed students rather than helping them. Supporting details — attendance dropped 12 percent; counselors reported increased anxiety; teachers noted less engagement.

Reasoning: All three details point in the same direction — negative consequences following the school's decision to prioritize test preparation over arts programming. The main idea statement must name the topic and the author's implicit argument: this policy caused harm.

TEACHER NOTE

Students may write "the school cut art classes" as the main idea. That is the topic, not the claim. Push them to the next question: and what does the author think about that? Also watch for students who include the attendance percentage in the main idea statement rather than treating it as a supporting detail — numbers belong in the detail list, not the claim.

Problem 3

RECOMMENDED

Topic — bodegas in Dominican communities in upper Manhattan. Main idea — Dominican bodegas serve as essential social and economic institutions in their communities, providing far more than commercial goods — and when they disappear, the loss extends far beyond access to groceries. Supporting details — they extend credit, translate documents, hold keys, sponsor youth sports, host community meetings.

Reasoning: The author never states the main idea in a single sentence — the argument is built entirely from accumulated examples. Students must synthesize the examples to produce the claim. The final line, "When a bodega closes, a neighborhood does not just lose a store," is the author's closest gesture toward a main idea but still requires the student to complete the inferential work.

TEACHER NOTE

Students who write "bodegas are important" have found the right direction but not the specific claim. Ask them: important in what specific way? What exactly do these details prove? Also watch for students who skip the plain-language paraphrase step and jump straight to analysis — the paraphrase is the comprehension check that makes the analysis possible.

Problem 4

RECOMMENDED

Main idea — Gentrification in the Bronx is displacing long-term residents and erasing the cultural and social life that existing communities built, replacing it with spaces that were not designed for or by those communities. Supporting detail 1 — rents have doubled and long-time residents including the narrator's grandmother have received notices to vacate; this directly supports the claim about displacement. Supporting detail 2 — local churches report shrinking congregations as members are pushed out; this directly supports the claim about the cultural and social life being dismantled.

Reasoning: The passage contains multiple details but the two most directly tied to the main idea are the ones that show both the economic displacement and the community erosion. Students should connect each detail back to the specific language in their main idea statement.

TEACHER NOTE

Students may identify the new coffee shops or the silent new neighbors as their strongest details. Those are valid observations but less directly tied to the claim about erasure than the eviction notices and the shrinking congregations. If students choose those, ask them: does this detail show what was built, or does it show what is replacing it? Push toward precision.

Problem 5

RECOMMENDED

Main idea — Students who grow up bilingual develop significant cognitive and social advantages that benefit them across academic tasks. Relevant evidence 1 — research shows bilingual students have stronger working memory, greater cognitive flexibility, and higher performance on mental switching tasks. Relevant evidence 2 — studies show bilingual students develop stronger empathy and cross-cultural communication skills from navigating multiple linguistic and cultural frameworks. Irrelevant detail — Tracy enjoys cooking traditional Ghanaian food with her grandmother on weekends. Explanation — this detail tells us something about Tracy's personal life and cultural practices but it does not provide evidence for the author's claim about the cognitive or social advantages of bilingualism specifically.

Reasoning: The cooking detail is culturally warm and humanizing, which is exactly why it is effective as a distractor — students who are not close-reading for argument will feel like it belongs because it is about a bilingual person. But proximity to the subject is not the same as supporting the claim.

TEACHER NOTE

Students who keep the cooking detail often explain that it shows Tracy is connected to her culture. That is true — but it does not prove the claim about cognitive benefits of bilingualism.

Ask those students: if you were trying to prove that bilingual students have stronger working memory, would you use this as evidence? That question usually produces the revision.

Problem 6

RECOMMENDED

A strong response addresses the school board by name, names the specific harm being done — bilingual students placed in remedial tracks based only on English proficiency — and names the specific benefit being ignored — stronger working memory, cognitive flexibility, and social reasoning. A complete response might read: Dear Members of the School Board — research consistently shows that students from multilingual households outperform monolingual peers in working memory, cognitive flexibility, and social reasoning. Despite this evidence, many schools continue to place bilingual students in remedial tracks based solely on English proficiency scores, actively denying these students access to courses that match their actual intellectual capabilities. This is not a gap in the students — it is a gap in how schools choose to see them. We are asking the school board to align its placement policies with what the research actually demonstrates about what bilingual students bring into the classroom.

Reasoning: A strong advocacy argument names a specific problem, names specific evidence from both passages, and makes a direct request to a named decision-maker. The school board as audience requires a more formal register and a concrete ask, not just a statement of concern.

TEACHER NOTE

Students who write generally about why bilingualism is good have not yet made the rhetorical move from observation to advocacy. Ask them: what specifically are you asking the school board to do? What is the problem you are naming? If they cannot answer that, they are writing an informational response, not an advocacy argument. Also watch for students who use evidence from only one passage — the task explicitly requires both.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS NOTE: Strong answers hold two things at once: genuine acknowledgment of the

structural reality students are naming, AND evidence-based counter-argument. Honor the critique. Don't rush to resolution.

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