

Course: SAT ACT Prep
Subject: Reading
Topic: Main Idea Questions Based on Literary Passages
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There are eight categories of questions in the critical reading section of the SAT and ACT Exams:

- Main Idea/Author's Purpose
- Specific Details
- Inferences
- Vocabulary
- Organization/Technique
- Tone and Attitude
- Graphics (SAT only)
- Command-of-Evidence (SAT only)

In this lesson, we are going to concentrate on main idea questions based on literary passages. Main idea questions on the SAT and ACT exams test your ability to synthesize the content of the passage into an overall meaning. They may also ask you to evaluate that central meaning in the context of a specific portion of the passage. In other words, main idea questions challenge you to take a broad, macroscopic view of the subject matter. The following list gives some examples of common phrases used in main idea questions on the SAT and ACT:

- "The main idea of the passage is to ..."
- "The narrator can best be described as ..."
- "The author's primary purpose is to ..."
- "The overall purpose of the passage is to ..."
- "The overall theme of the passage is to ..."

When answering main idea questions based on a literary passage, take your time reading the italicized introduction and introductory paragraphs. Oftentimes, the passages are excised from larger pieces of literature and require additional information that the test may provide in the italicized introduction. The beginning paragraph(s) will usually provide essential background information regarding setting, character development, tone, internal/external conflicts, theme, etc. However, topic sentences in literary passages are often implied, rather than stated directly, so read carefully—don't rush—even in the body paragraphs.

In the following excerpt, Benjamin Franklin retells of his childhood experience. Read the passage twice—once to push for speed, and a second to annotate. During the second reading, summarize each paragraph's main idea or character development in the margins.

FROM a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books. Pleased with the Pilgrim's Progress, my first collection was of John Bunyan's works in separate little volumes. I afterward sold them to enable me to buy R. Burton's Historical Collections; they were [5]small chapmen's books, and cheap, 40 or 50 in all. My father's little library consisted chiefly of books in polemic divinity, most of which I read, and have since often regretted that, at a time when I had such a thirst for knowledge, more proper books had not fallen in my way, since it was now resolved I should not be a clergyman. Plutarch's Lives there was in which I read [10]abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great advantage. There was also a book of DeFoe's, called an Essay on Projects, and another of Dr. Mather's, called Essays to do Good, which perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life.

This bookish inclination at length determined my father to make me a [15]printer, though he had already one son (James) of that profession. In 1717 my brother James returned from England with a press and letters to set up his business in Boston. I liked it much better than that of my father, but still had a hankering for the sea. To prevent the apprehended effect of such an inclination, my father was impatient to have me bound to my brother. I stood out some [20]time, but at last was persuaded, and signed the indentures when I was yet but twelve years old. I was to serve as an apprentice till I was twenty-one years of age, only I was to be allowed journeyman's wages during the last year. In a little time I made great proficiency in the business, and became a useful hand to my brother. I now had access to better books. An acquaintance [25]with the apprentices of booksellers enabled me sometimes to borrow a small one, which I was careful to return soon and clean. Often I sat up in my room reading the greatest part of the night, when the book was borrowed in the evening and to be returned early in the morning, lest it should be missed or wanted.

[30]And after some time an ingenious tradesman, Mr. Matthew Adams, who had a pretty collection of books, and who frequented our printing-house, took notice of me, invited me to his library, and very kindly lent me such books as I chose to read. I now took a fancy to poetry, and made some little pieces; my brother, thinking it might turn to account, encouraged me, and put me on [35]composing occasional ballads. One was called The Lighthouse Tragedy, and contained an account of the drowning of Captain Worthilake, with his two daughters: the other was a sailor's song, on the taking of Teach (or Blackbeard) the pirate. They were wretched stuff, in the Grub-street-ballad style;^[17] and when they were printed he sent me about the town to sell them. The first sold

[40]wonderfully, the event being recent, having made a great noise. This flattered my vanity; but my father discouraged me by ridiculing my performances, and telling me verse-makers were generally beggars. So I escaped being a poet, most probably a very bad one; but as prose writing has been of great use to me in the course of my life, and was a principal means [45]of my advancement, I shall tell you how, in such a situation, I acquired what little ability I have in that way.

There was another bookish lad in the town, John Collins by name, with whom I was intimately acquainted. We sometimes disputed, and very fond we were of argument, and very desirous of confuting one another, which disputatious [50]turn, by the way, is apt to become a very bad habit, making people often extremely disagreeable in company by the contradiction that is necessary to bring it into practice; and thence, besides souring and spoiling the conversation, is productive of disgusts and, perhaps enmities where you may have occasion for friendship. I had caught it by reading my father's books [55]of dispute about religion. Persons of good sense, I have since observed, seldom fall into it, except lawyers, university men, and men of all sorts that have been bred at Edinborough.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. J. Parson's Publishing Co., 1791. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20203/20203-h/20203-h.htm>

In one coherent sentence, what is the main idea/central character development in this passage?

Use the chart below to document three specific lines in the passage that support the main idea you listed above:

Line #	Central Idea	Notes, explanations, and connections in support of the central idea

Answer the following questions based on what is stated in the passage:

1. The main purpose of the passage is to ... [MAIN IDEA]
 - a) Confer a personal history
 - b) Provide a counterargument to conventional thought
 - c) Entertain the public masses
 - d) Influence domestic policy of the government

2. As used in line 12, “turn” most nearly means ... [VOCABULARY]
 - a) A particular aim at a direct goal
 - b) An improvement in personal development
 - c) A circumlocution in writing
 - d) A change in physical direction of movement

3. It can be inferred from the passage that Benjamin Franklin’s Father thinks poetry is ... [INFERENCE]
 - a) Rudimentary
 - b) Uplifting
 - c) Refined
 - d) Non-lucrative

4. Which of the following lines best support the answer to the previous question? [COMMAND OF EVIDENCE]
 - a) Lines 14-15, “This bookish ... that profession.”
 - b) Lines 23-24, “In a little ... my brother.”
 - c) Lines 40-42, “This flattered ... beggars.”
 - d) Lines 54-55, “I caught ... about religion.”

5. The author’s tone in lines 48-54, “We sometimes disputed ... occasion for friendship.” [TONE]
 - a) Scornful
 - b) Optimistic
 - c) Realistic
 - d) Hopeful

6. The overall progression of Benjamin Franklin’s argument can be best characterized as ... [ORGANIZATION/TECHNIQUE]
 - a) Linear
 - b) Rising action
 - c) Staggered
 - d) Increasingly dramatic

In the following excerpt, the narrator describes his grandfather's cold and cruel treatment of his mother and father during the weeks leading up to and the days following his own birth. Read the passage twice—once to push for speed, and a second to annotate. During the second reading, summarize each paragraph's main idea or character development in the margins.

She found means to deceive the servants, and get introduced as an unfortunate lady, who wanted to complain of some matrimonial grievances, it being my grandfather's particular province to decide in all cases of scandal. She was accordingly admitted into his presence, where, discovering herself, she fell [5]at his feet, and in the most affecting manner implored his forgiveness; at the same the same time representing the danger that threatened not only her life, but that of his own grandchild, which was about to see the light. He told her he was sorry that the indiscretion of her and his son had compelled him to make a vow, which put it out of his power to give them any assistance; that he had [10]already imparted his thoughts on that subject to her husband, and was surprised that they should disturb his peace with any farther importunity. This said, he retired.

The violence of my mother's affliction had such an effect on her constitution that she was immediately seized with the pains of childbed; and had not an old [15]maidservant, to whom she was very dear, afforded her pity and assistance, at the hazard of incurring my grandfather's displeasure, she and the innocent fruit of her womb must have fallen miserable victims to his rigour and inhumanity. By the friendship of this poor woman she was carried up to a garret, and immediately delivered of a man child, the story of whose [20]unfortunate birth he himself now relates. My father, being informed of what had happened, flew to the embraces of his darling spouse, and while he loaded his offspring with paternal embraces, could not forbear shedding a flood of tears on beholding the dear partner of his heart (for whose ease he would have sacrificed the treasures of the east) stretched upon a flock bed, in a [25]miserable apartment, unable to protect her from the inclemencies of the weather. It is not to be supposed that the old gentleman was ignorant of what passed, though he affected to know nothing of the matter, and pretended to be very much surprised, when one of his grandchildren, by his eldest son deceased, who lived with him as his heir apparent, acquainted him with the [30]affair; he determined therefore to observe no medium, but immediately (on the third day after her delivery) sent her a peremptory order to be gone, and turned off the servant who had preserved her life. This behaviour so exasperated my father that he had recourse to the most dreadful imprecations; and on his bare knees implored that Heaven would renounce him if ever he [35]should forget or forgive the barbarity of his sire.

The injuries which this unhappy mother received from her removal in such circumstances, and the want of necessaries where she lodged, together with her grief and anxiety of mind, soon threw her into a languishing disorder, which put an end to her life. My father, who loved her tenderly, was so [40]affected with her death that he remained six weeks deprived of his senses; during which time, the people where he lodged carried the infant to the old man who relented so far, on hearing the melancholy story of his daughter-in-law's death, and the deplorable condition of his son, as to send the child to nurse, and he ordered my father to be carried home to his house, where he soon [45]recovered the use of his reason.

Whether this hardhearted judge felt any remorse for his cruel treatment of his son and daughter, or (which is more probable) was afraid his character would suffer in the neighbourhood, he professed great sorrow for his conduct to my father, whose delirium was succeeded by a profound melancholy and reserve. [50]At length he disappeared, and, notwithstanding all imaginable inquiry, could not be heard of; a circumstance which confirmed most people in the opinion of his having made away with himself in a fit of despair. How I understood the particulars of my birth will appear in the course of these memoirs.

Smollett, Tobias. *The Adventures of Roderick Random*. 1748.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4085/4085-h/4085-h.htm#link2HCH0001>

In one coherent sentence, what is the main idea/central character development in this passage?

Use the chart below to document three specific lines in the passage that support the main idea you listed above:

Line #	Central Idea	Notes, explanations, and connections in support of the central idea

Answer the following questions based on what is stated in the passage:

1. The main purpose of the passage is to ... [MAIN IDEA]
 - a) Describe an ordeal
 - b) Petition for equal rights
 - c) Criticize societal norms
 - d) Buttress a preexisting argument

2. As used in line 7, “to see the light” most nearly means ... [VOCABULARY]
 - a) To come to a reckoning
 - b) To develop a greater degree of understanding
 - c) To be born
 - d) A shift in personal beliefs

3. It can be inferred from the passage that the apartment mentioned in the third paragraph ... [INFERENCE]
 - a) Has no roof
 - b) Is under new ownership
 - c) Is being sold
 - d) Has no floor

4. Which of the following lines best support the answer to the previous question? [COMMAND OF EVIDENCE]
 - a) Lines 7-11, “He told her ... farther importunity.”
 - b) Lines 20-26, “My father, ... the weather.”
 - c) Lines 26-32, “It is not ... preserved her life.”
 - d) Lines 39-45, “My father, ... of his reason.”

5. In the context of the third paragraph, what effect did the death of the narrator’s mother have on the narrator’s father? [SPECIFIC DETAIL]
 - a) He was physically handicapped by the experience
 - b) He was left indigent and homeless
 - c) He was unable to find gainful employment
 - d) His personage was greatly diminished

6. In the context of the passage overall, the narrator makes use of ... [ORGANIZATION/TECHNIQUE]
 - a) Flashback
 - b) Metaphor
 - c) Foreshadowing
 - d) Simile