Critical Thinking Activity

An Invitation to Sociology

Identifying the Main Idea

The main idea answers the question, “What is this material about?” The main idea is typically given in a topic sentence, which can occur anywhere in the selection. Individual selections are built around a main idea; the rest of the sentences explain, give details about, or support the main idea. Identifying the main idea can help clarify an author’s goal, especially when it is unclear.

Directions: Read the following introduction and excerpt from William Graham Sumner’s essay, “The Concentration of Wealth: Its Economic Justification.” Then answer the questions that follow.

William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) held the first professorship in political and social science at Yale. Heavily influenced by Herbert Spencer, Sumner taught the first course in sociology ever given in an American university.

What matters it then that some millionaires are idle, or silly, or vulgar; that their ideas are sometimes futile and their plans grotesque, when they turn aside from money-making? How do they differ in this from any other class? The millionaires are a product of natural selection, acting on the whole body of men to pick out those who can meet the requirement of certain work to be done. In this respect they are just like the great statesmen, or scientific men, or military men. It is because they are thus selected that wealth—both their own and that intrusted [sic] to them—aggregates [accumulates] under their hands. Let one of them make a mistake and see how quickly the concentration gives way to dispersion. They may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. There is the intensest [sic] competition for their place and occupation. This assures us that all who are competent for this function will be employed in it, so that the cost of it will be reduced to the lowest terms; and furthermore that the competitors will study the proper conduct to be observed in their occupation. This will bring discipline and the correction of arrogance and masterfulness.

1. Stating What is Sumner’s purpose in this excerpt?

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2. Summarizing Summarize the main idea of the excerpt in your own words.

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3. Identifying What is the topic sentence of this excerpt? Identify two other sentences that support the main idea.

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