

Infer and Support the Main Idea

The Gulls of Salt Lake

8th Grade Historical Fiction

Source: Public Domain, adapted by Center for Urban Education, may be used with citation.
This is a story about Pioneer life.

At last. They were safe. A brave little company of pioneers from the Atlantic coast crossed the Mississippi River. They finally succeeded in climbing to the top of the great Rockies and down again into a valley in the very midst of the mountains. It was a valley of brown, bare, desert soil, in a climate where almost no rain falls. But the snow on the mountain-tops sent down little streams of pure water; the winds were gentle. Like a blue jewel at the foot of the western hills was a marvelous lake of salt water, an inland sea. Some wanted to keep going, but most said, this is where we should live—the journey is accomplished. So the pioneers settled there and built themselves huts and cabins so they could survive the first winter.

They were used to challenges. It had taken them many months to make the terrible trip. Many had died of illness on the way; then many died of hardship during the winter. The supplies they had brought in their wagons were so nearly gone that, by spring, they were living partly on roots, dug from the ground. All their lives now depended on the crops they could raise in the valley. They made the barren land fertile bringing mud from the river to the dry land, and creating irrigation channels. They planted corn and grain and vegetables, and everyone collaborated. Then it was an anxious time as they watched for the plants to grow, with hopes, and prayers, and careful eyes.

In good time the brown earth was covered with a carpet of tender, green, growing things. No farmer's garden could have looked better than the great garden of the desert valley. And from day to day the little plants grew and flourished till they were all well above the ground—they had succeeded. James, who was the head of the group, said, "We finally will have all the food we need. We have achieved our goal."

Then a terrible thing happened. One day, the men who were watering the crops saw a great number of crickets swarming over the ground at the edge of the gardens nearest the mountains. They were hopping from the barren places into the young, green crops, and as they settled down they ate the tiny shoots and leaves to the ground. More came, and more, and ever more, and as they came they spread out till they covered a big corner of the grain field. Yet still more and more, till it was like an army of black, hopping, crawling crickets, streaming down the side of the mountain. James said, "Watch out, they're going to eat our food. We will be ruined."

Everyone tried to kill the crickets by beating them down, but the numbers were so great that it was like beating at the sea. Suddenly, from far off in the air toward the Great Salt Lake, there was the sound of flapping wings. It grew louder. It looked like a white cloud rising from the lake, a flock of sea gulls flying toward them. Hundreds of gulls rose and circled and came on. "The gulls! The gulls!" James cried. "They will rescue us. It is a miracle." The gulls flew overhead, with a shrill chorus of whimpering cries, and then, in a marvelous white cloud of outspread wings and hovering breasts, they settled down over the field. "Look, look," James said. "See! They are eating the crickets! They are saving our crop. We are restored."

It was true. The gulls ate the crickets, and when at last they finished, they had stripped the fields of that pest. The pioneers had moved to the right place after all. It had taken a lot of work, great determination, and courage. They had met and overcome obstacles, solved problems, and would survive. Without the gulls, what might have happened is not certain, but the future was secure, the pioneers were confident.

Directions: Choose the best answer for each question.

1. What is the main idea of the first paragraph?

- a. The pioneers got to their destination.
- b. It was a difficult journey.
- c. It would be a challenging winter.
- d. The lake would be important.

2. What is the main idea of the second paragraph?

- a. They had a challenging trip.
- b. They were glad to live near the lake.
- c. They needed food.
- d. They were farmers.

3. What is the main idea of the whole passage?

- a. The pioneers overcame challenges.
- b. It is hard to live with nature.
- c. Food is important to survival.
- d. Pioneers helped each other.

4. What is another good title for the passage?

- a. A Difficult Journey
- b. Choosing a Place to Live
- c. Pioneer Problem Solvers
- d. Helpful Gulls

5. *Write your own answer to this question.*

How do you find the main idea when you read a story?

TEACHER NOTES: Develop Students' Skills: Exercise Thinking

These questions have not been validated, so decisions about student's achievement should not be made based on their responses. They are intended to exercise skills. Recommended activities include: students work in pairs to choose the best response; give students the questions without the responses so they generate their own answers; students make up additional questions; students make up questions like these for another passage.

Answers: *You can remove this answer key and then give it to students and ask them to figure out the basis for the correct response.*

Item	1	2	3	4
Answer	a	c	a	c

Question 5 is open-ended. Here is a suggested response.

5. Answers should include, look at the title, think about the events and characters.