

Skill: Infer and Support the Main Idea

Plants and Food

6th Grade Nonfiction

Source: Public Domain, adapted by Center for Urban Education, may be used with citation.

The more you know about plants and foods, the healthier you will be. Some foods can provide you with essential vitamins to keep you healthy, but some foods can make you sick. It is very important to know how to distinguish between the two. You also need to learn how to keep foods safe and prevent them from spoiling. There's so much to learn.

There is a lot to learn about plants people eat, such as how to grow them and how to prepare them for eating. Scientists can learn how to keep them safe to eat. Sometimes people who don't know something can make a mistake. For example, some mushrooms are poisonous, and people need to know which those are so they don't eat them. People need to know about plants in order to stay healthy.

If you don't know about foods and plants, you can make a big mistake. You need to know which plants are safe to eat. At one time, people feared the tomato, because they believed it to be poisonous. They thought it was dangerous because it grows on a vine that looks like a poisonous plant called nightshade. Therefore, in the early 1800s, people in the United States were afraid to eat it. It took several years before the tomato was accepted as a food in the United States. Today, it is a big part of the American diet. It's found in things like soup and ketchup.

Any food can become a source of sickness if it's not stored safely. Tomatoes can be dangerous if they rot, and so can most other foods if they are not stored properly. One way to store food safely is to dry it. Before people invented cans, they used to dry food to store it for long periods of time. For example, they would dry tomatoes in the sun. Today, people still eat sun-dried tomatoes.

Some plants actually help keep people safe, for example, cloves. No one really knows how people figured that out, but it was most likely from someone trying to use cloves to flavor their food. Cloves have a nice, spicy taste.

The clove plant was first found on islands sometimes called the Spice Islands. A tree grows there; it's a tree that makes cloves. These cloves actually are buds from that tree. The people on the islands picked the buds; the buds were pink when people picked them, and then they dried and turned dark. When they were dried, people put them with food, and they made the food taste great. Probably, the people found that they also helped to preserve foods. Cloves help meat and other foods keep from spoiling.

Today we know why cloves help food stay safe. Scientists have studied cloves and have discovered that cloves contain a kind of oil in them called eugenol. That oil is an antiseptic. Antiseptic is a word with two important parts. The prefix anti means against, and the root sepsis means poisoning. In other words, eugenol helps prevent poisoning. It's a good thing we have scientists to help us stay safe.

Scientists are people who have careers learning about plants and food. They study the history of plants, and they observe them in order to learn how to make them grow better. They study how to keep them safe, which in turn helps people live healthier lives.

Directions: Choose the best answer for each question.

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

- a. People need to know about plants and food.
- b. Mushrooms are poisonous.
- c. People eat plants.
- d. People cook plants.

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

- a. People thought tomatoes were poison.
- b. Some people do not eat tomatoes.
- c. Tomatoes grow on vines.
- d. You need to know what foods to eat.

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

- a. You should study plants.
- b. Knowing about plants helps people.
- c. There are many plants you can eat.
- d. Scientists study plants.

4. What is another title for the whole passage?

- a. The Many Plants We Eat
- b. Learning about Tomatoes
- c. Staying Healthy with Plants
- d. How Scientists Work

5. *Write your own answer to this question.*
How do you figure out the main idea of a passage?

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	a	b	c

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

5. Answers should include looking at the title and the kind of information.

Skill: Infer and Support the Main Idea

A Great Digger – North American Fable

6th Grade Fiction

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This is an old American fable. It's not certain who first told it, but it teaches a lesson of importance.

Badger always had a good day—he never complained and always turned a problem into an opportunity. He liked living on the high, dry plains where he had many ground squirrels and prairie dogs as his neighbors. He probably enjoyed their company much more than they did his. If anyone had asked them, they would have said that they wished Badger were somewhere else. He was always disturbing their tranquil community with his daily digging.

Badger wanted to be helpful, and he was—he enabled his neighbors to construct safe homes. They lived in burrows, which are homes under the ground, and creating them is a challenge. Usually the soil is hard and difficult to move, especially below the topsoil. They made their tunnels where he had dug, they were able to dig easily because he had made the soil soft.

Badger was lonely because the other animals never stopped to be with him. They would run and stay inside their burrows shouting, "Watch out, boring Badger is coming." Badger would try to follow them into their homes for companionship, but the other animals just ignored him.

So Badger just dug and dug all day every day. "I'm designed for digging," he said to himself. He had a powerful body: short, stout legs, and big feet, which had long, strong claws. When he started to dig, he could make the dirt fly.

Badger enjoyed digging so much that he dug countless holes of his own, just for the fun it gave him and how it helped others. More than one fox and coyote had made his home in a hole dug by Badger. They never did take the trouble to thank him though. Instead, they often laughed about his odd way of having fun and commented that Badger must be a stupid fellow.

If they really thought that, they were wrong as well as ungrateful. He was slow and clumsy at everything except digging. He was too heavy and squat to be quick on his feet in order to chase and catch his faster neighbors. That was not because he was not smart. His wits were sharp, he knew he was designed to dig.

Usually, nobody saw Badger until night. He rarely left his den in the daytime, except to sun himself. Then not many noticed him because of camouflage. He did not hide when anyone surprised him while taking a sunbath, but he had a trick of lying flat in the grass without moving, and his striped body blended with the vegetation. So, it took a sharp eye to spy him when he lay low in that fashion.

Sleeping, with his long fur on end, he looked too comfortable to disturb. At least, that was what the ground squirrels thought. And if one of those busy little fellows ever paused to stare at Badger when he was napping in the sunshine, Badger just had to turn his head toward the onlooker. That was sure to make him run away.

One day there was a great wind, a tornado with tremendous force. It blew all the trees away and even removed bushes and grass. The animals all hid in their burrows. When it was calm again, they came out. They said to themselves, it's a good thing we have our holes to keep us safe. Then they said, "What a difference it makes to have holes for homes. We should thank Badger for doing all that digging."

He was glad the animals thanked him, they now realized that his help to build their homes had safeguarded them. He would keep digging so that every day was a good one and everyone would have a safe home.

Directions: Choose the best answer for each question.

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

- a. Badger liked to dig.
- b. The other animals did not like Badger.
- c. Many animals lived in Badger's home.
- d. Badger lived on a hill.

7. What is the main idea of the third paragraph?

- a. Badger wanted friends.
- b. The other animals did not like Badger.
- c. Badger had helped the other animals.
- d. The animals all lived in burrows.

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

- a. Badger digs for fun.
- b. The other animals don't like Badger.
- c. Badger helps the other animals.
- d. Many animals live underground.

9. What is another good title for the passage?

- a. Living Underground
- b. Digging is Fun
- c. Holes that Help
- d. Making Friends

10. *Write your own answer to this question.*
What is the main idea of the last paragraph?

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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	6	7	8	9
Answer	a	c	c	c

Question 10 is open-ended. Here is a suggested response.

10. Answers should include that Bennie had helped all the animals.