

# CRITICAL THINKING 1

## WHAT IS THE MAIN IDEA?

*When finding the main idea in a passage, you should organize the information given and then assess the most important concept to remember. The excerpt below, for example, is from the introduction to economist Robert Heilbroner's 1953 book *The Worldly Philosophers*.*

**Directions:** To determine the main idea, read the excerpt below and then answer the questions that follow.

By all rules of [the] history books, they were nonentities: they commanded no armies, sent no men to their deaths, ruled no empires, took little part in history-making decisions. . . . Yet what they did was more decisive for history than many acts of statesmen who basked in brighter glory, often more profoundly disturbing than the shuttling of armies back and forth across frontiers, more powerful for good and bad than the edicts of kings and legislatures. It was this: they shaped and swayed men's minds.

And because he who enlists a man's mind wields a power even greater than the sword or the scepter, these men shaped and swayed the world. Few of them ever lifted a finger in action. . . . But they left in their train shattered empires and exploded continents, they buttressed and undermined regimes, they set class against class and even nation against nation—not because they plotted mischief, but because of the extraordinary power of their ideas.

. . . A man who thinks that economics is only a matter for professors forgets that this is the science that has sent men to the barricades. . . . No, the great economists pursued an inquiry as exciting—and dangerous—as any the world has ever known. . . . The notions of the great economists were world-shaking, and their mistakes nothing short of calamitous.

1. Who wrote this excerpt?

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2. What is the purpose of the reading from which the excerpt is taken?

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3. What is the general subject of the excerpt?

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4. Underline the sentence that best sums up the main idea of the excerpt.

5. Restate at least three additional details from the excerpt that support the main idea.

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