Pompeii and Vesuvius

What’s the Connection?

You’ve just read “The Dog of Pompeii,” a story that takes place on the day that Mount Vesuvius erupts and buries Pompeii in ash. Now you will learn more about this historical event and what the future may hold for those currently living in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius.

Standards Focus: Author’s Purpose and Main Idea

In nonfiction, the most important idea that a writer communicates is the main idea. The main idea can be stated directly in the form of a topic sentence, which is sometimes the first sentence in a paragraph. Usually, though, you have to determine the main idea of a selection by noting the smaller ideas developed in sections of the selection.

To really understand the central idea a nonfiction writer wants to communicate, you need to determine the author’s purpose, or the reason the author is writing. The author’s purpose is often not stated directly. Instead, it is implied, or suggested by evidence in the text that you must find and analyze. You should ask yourself questions so you can make inferences and draw conclusions about the author’s purpose: Why is the writer telling me this? What does the writer want me to think about this topic?

Different writers will likely have different purposes and main ideas, even when they are writing about the same topic. You will read two nonfiction selections about Pompeii and identify a central idea for each selection. You will also discover evidence that identifies the author’s purpose for writing about each topic. Later, you will compare and contrast the main ideas and authors’ purposes of the selections.

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Much of our knowledge of Roman life comes from the evidence uncovered at Pompeii. Splendid houses, beautiful paintings, sculptures of bronze and marble, fine glass, metal, and pottery bear witness not only to a city that perished in one day, but also to a long-vanished civilization.

A visit to Pompeii is like entering a time machine: you can see wide streets still with the ruts cut in the paving stones by the wheels of chariots, the entrance to a shop with graffiti on the wall beside it, the baths and grand houses with their wall paintings and colonnaded gardens. But, above all, there are the people of Pompeii, overwhelmed as they tried to escape the horror that overtook their city. Across nearly 2,000 years, their twisted bodies are vivid witnesses of what happened on August 24, a.d. 79.
FORUM BATHS
Much of Pompeii had running water, carried in by lead pipes under the streets. Public bath complexes used central furnaces to heat the water.

FORUM
The Forum was Pompeii’s main public space. Crowds gathered to shop in the marketplace, worship at the temples, listen to speeches, or visit government offices and courthouses.

TEMPLE OF ISIS
Ancient Pompeians participated in a variety of religions. This temple was dedicated to an Egyptian goddess.

COMMON CORE RI7
INFORMATIONAL TEXT
Writers of informational texts often support their main ideas with visual information in the form of charts, photographs, timelines, illustrations, diagrams, maps, tables, and graphs. These visuals can present information more effectively than text alone. This diagram shows the layout of Pompeii. What do you learn about Pompeii by studying this diagram? What do you think is the author’s purpose in presenting these details in visual form? Explain what this information adds to your understanding of the text.
Uncovering Pompeii

In December 1860, Victor Emmanuel II, king of the newly united Italy, appointed Giuseppe Fiorelli Director of the Excavations at Pompeii. The era of scientific excavation had begun.

Fiorelli divided the city into quarters, or regions, and gave every block and building a number—a system which is still used today. Archaeologists from all over the world came to see Fiorelli’s work at Pompeii.

Slowly and carefully, soil and volcanic debris were removed. The position of every fragment of plaster and brickwork was recorded and then restored to its original place. Charred wood was replaced by fresh timber.

Main Idea
The topic of this second section is the excavation of Pompeii. Look at the topic sentence in the last paragraph to help you identify the main idea about the excavation. Record this information in your chart.

AMPHITHEATER
The amphitheater was where thousands of Pompeians gathered to see gladiators, athletic competitions, and other forms of entertainment.
A Tragic Day

When the volcano Vesuvius erupted on August 24, A.D. 79, it destroyed a rich and thickly populated part of southern Italy. We know this from the archaeological discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii. But, more remarkably, we know what the disaster was actually like for the people who lived in the region.

The young Roman nobleman Pliny the Younger witnessed the eruption and wrote a letter that is the earliest known account of such a tragedy. As people screamed and struggled to escape the horror, Pliny described the eruption as looking like “a pine tree, for it shot up to a great height in the form of a trunk, which extended itself at the top into several branches.”

COMPOSITE VOLCANO

A composite volcano is a cone-shaped volcano built up of layers of lava and layers of rock fragments. Composite volcanoes have violent eruptions for two reasons. First, expanding gases trapped in rising magma tend to cause explosions. Second, hardened lava from earlier eruptions often plugs openings in these volcanoes. This rock must be blown out of the way before any more magma can escape.

During an eruption, volcanic gases can mix with rock fragments and stay near the ground. The mixture forms a pyroclastic flow, which is a dense cloud of superhot gases and rock fragments that races downhill.

AUTHOR’S PURPOSE

According to this caption, what are the two reasons that composite volcanoes have such violent eruptions? What is the author’s purpose in presenting this information in the form of a diagram and an illustration with a caption instead of as part of the regular text?
A Survivor’s Letter

“Ashes now fall upon us, though as yet not in great quantity. I looked behind me; gross darkness pressed upon our rear, and came rolling over the land after us like a torrent . . . darkness overspread us, not like that of a moonless or cloudy night, but of a room when it is shut up, and the lamp is put out. You could hear the shrieks of women, the crying of children, and the shouts of men; some were seeking their children, others their parents, others their wives or husbands . . . one lamenting his own fate, another that of his family . . . many lifting their hands to the gods; but the greater part imagining that there were no gods left and that the last and eternal night was come upon the world.”

This description from Pliny the Younger’s letter to Tacitus is as vivid now as when he wrote it almost 2,000 years ago.

Why does the author include this ancient letter from Pliny the Younger? What do you learn from the letter that you can’t learn from other sources?
SAN SEBASTIANO AL VESUVIO, Italy — Concerned that too many people now crowd the sides of the active volcano, authorities here have launched a bold plan to prevent a repeat of the catastrophic explosion that wiped out Pompeii and smothered thousands of its residents nearly 2,000 years ago.

Authorities hope to thin the ranks of residents so they can be evacuated when Mount Vesuvius erupts again. They are doing this by offering cash incentives to move, demolishing the illegal buildings that have sprouted on its flanks, and establishing a national park at its top.

It’s only a matter of time before the volcano does erupt, scientists say. “It won’t be tomorrow, it won’t be next month, and maybe it won’t be next year. But it is overdue,” says Giovanni Macedonio, director of Vesuvius Observatory, the institute responsible for monitoring the volcano. When it blows, Macedonio warns, it could be with the power of “tens of hundreds of atomic bombs.”

Vesuvius last erupted in 1944. Lava destroyed some orchards and homes and 26 people were killed. . . . Residents put pots on their heads to protect against rocks shooting through the air, but the rumblings soon stilled. Vesuvius has been quiet since. . . .

During the volcano’s 60-year slumber, however, sprawl from nearby Naples has spilled out; nearly 600,000 people now live in the 18 towns in the shadow of the volcano.
Comprehension

1. **Recall**  According to the online article, how many people could be affected by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius today?

2. **Clarify**  Reread page 343. Describe the system Fiorelli used for labeling Pompeii during its excavation.

3. **Summarize**  Write a brief summary of the events Pliny the Younger describes in his letter on page 345.

Text Analysis

4. **Make Inferences**  Reread the description of composite volcanoes on page 344. What part of the volcano’s eruption might Pliny have been describing in his letter? Explain, using details from the text.

5. **Compare Texts**  Think about the cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts of “The Dog of Pompeii,” *In Search of Pompeii*, and “Italians Trying to Prevent a Modern Pompeii.” Then explain why these three texts appear together.

Read for Information: Author’s Purpose and Main Idea

**WRITING PROMPT**
Write a paragraph that explains the connection between the main ideas of the two selections you just read. Then, explain how each author’s purpose for writing is similar or different.

To answer this prompt, take the information you wrote in your chart from page 340 and use it to create two Venn diagrams: one showing similarities and differences in main idea, and the other showing similarities and differences in author’s purpose. Follow this example.