

★ **Chapter Skills Activity 17**

Identifying the Main Idea

Identifying main ideas as you read will help you understand and remember historical events. To identify the main idea of a passage, figure out the purpose of the passage. What picture is the author presenting? Look for important details and try to determine how they are related to each other.

DIRECTIONS: Radical Reconstructionist Thaddeus Stevens made this proposal to Congress in 1867. Read the passage. Then answer the questions on a separate sheet of paper.

Four million persons have just been freed from a condition of dependence. These are people, who, through no fault of their own, have no knowledge of business and do not even have the simplest elements of education. Few of them are mechanics and none of them are skilled manufacturers. They must necessarily, then, become the servants and victims of others unless they are, in some way, made independent of their neighbors. Should we keep them in a position where they have neither skills nor property, then it seems probable that their condition will become so desperate that the war of the races which so many fear, may well take place.

However, by giving them the land and the money with which to build a dwelling, we will make them independent of their old masters"

SOURCE: *The Congressional Globe*, 70th Congress, First Session, March 19, 1867.

1. What is the subject of Thaddeus Stevens's address to Congress?
2. According to Stevens, what obstacles make it difficult or impossible for formerly enslaved African Americans to achieve real independence? What details does Thaddeus Stevens give to describe the conditions of freed African Americans?
3. What does Stevens warn might happen if the situation of formerly enslaved African Americans does not improve?
4. What is the main idea of Stevens's address to Congress?
5. **CRITICAL THINKING Identifying Central Issues** You participated in Reconstruction efforts to help newly freed African Americans become independent. Now you are planning to write an editorial on the subject. What would your main idea be? What are some important details you could use to support your main idea?