

Learning Targets

- Identify and evaluate an author’s argument, claims, evidence, and call to action.
- Identify aspects of a definition of “The American Dream.”

Before Reading

1. Skim the title and first paragraph of the following article. How would you characterized the way this writer is approaching the material he is about to present? How does he attempt to grab the reader’s attention?

During Reading

2. In the first paragraph of the article, the author begins by defining the American Dream. How does it compare to your definition?
3. As you read the article, underline the author’s main arguments and the evidence the writer uses to support his thinking. Annotate the text in the margins by asking questions to clarify your understanding and by challenging the author’s position or evidence.

Article

Is the American Dream Still Possible?

[from *Parade*, October 2010]
by David Wallechinsky

To be “middle class” in America once meant living well and having financial security. But today that comfortable and contented lifestyle is harder to achieve and maintain. PARADE commissioned Mark Clements Research Inc. to survey Americans nationwide about their finances and outlook for the future. Contributing Editor David Wallechinsky—author of recent articles on where your tax dollars go and on pork-barrel spending—interprets the results.

The traditional American Dream is based on the belief that hardworking citizens can better their lives, pay their monthly bills without worry, give their children a start to an even better life and still save enough to live comfortably after they retire. But many average Americans are struggling—squeezed by rising costs, declining wages, credit-card debt and diminished benefits, with little left over to save for retirement. (See statistics below.)

Does the dream survive? Do most Americans still believe they can forge better lives for themselves?

LEARNING STRATEGIES:
Marking the Text,
Quickwrite, Paraphrasing

My Notes

Annotating an Argumentative Text

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Why does the author spend time in the opening paragraphs detailing the extent of the study?

My Notes

PARADE surveyed more than 2,200 Americans, of whom fully 84% described themselves as belonging to the middle class, regardless of where they live (living costs are higher in some regions) or the size of their household.

For this report, we focused on U.S. households earning between \$30,000 and \$99,000 a year. Most of those surveyed describe themselves as married and having a family. More than 64% say they are employed full-time or part-time. Most say they are in reasonably good health and have a satisfying religious or spiritual life. They own a home and at least two cars, and they are able to take vacations. By international standards, they live a life of prosperity.

Yet behind this prosperity is a growing unease. Half of the employed respondents say that they've experienced either increased health-care costs or a cut in health benefits over the last three years, and 39% have had cuts in their overtime, raises or bonuses. Almost two-thirds say they live from paycheck to paycheck, and 47% say that no matter how hard they work, they cannot get ahead. More than a third worry about job loss.

Richard Oden of Conyers, Ga.—married, with five children—worked in the beer industry for 23 years. Last year, he developed pneumonia and required major surgery. When he was unable to return to work by a given date, he says, his company terminated him at age 54—even though he had a perfect attendance record and no performance problems.

To help support his family, Oden had to dip into his 401(k) fund, paying a penalty for premature withdrawal. “This was very stressful,” he says. “Everything had gone up—except wages.”

Oden has since started his own business, a “leadership and personal development” consulting firm. His wife, Josett, works as a representative in the health-care field. “I do believe I will recover financially,” Oden says, “and that I will realize a decent retirement. But the traditional American Dream? For most Americans, it’s still a dream—a pipe dream.”

Having drawn on his own retirement fund, Oden knows that saving can be a big problem. In the survey, nearly 83% say that there is not much left to save after they’ve paid their bills. Statistics from the Commerce Department bear this out: The savings rate for Americans is the lowest it has been in 73 years.

Self-reliance and sacrifice. Most of those interviewed display qualities common to American success stories: determination, flexibility, pragmatism, willingness to work hard and especially self-reliance. Almost three-quarters of the middle-class respondents surveyed say they take responsibility for their own financial destiny and believe that they will succeed or fail based on their own efforts. Still, many are downsizing their dreams.

Shelly Comer, 43, of Dos Palos, Calif., is a divorced mother of three who also takes care of a friend of her oldest child, Michelle. She is going into debt so that Michelle can go to college. Shelly has worked her whole life—as a receptionist, janitor, preschool teacher and activities director at a hospital. Recently, she became a registered nurse and now works the night shift in obstetrics at another hospital. Her annual income is \$70,377.

Annotating an Argumentative Text

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Explain how the author appeals to pathos or the emotions of the audience to strengthen his argument.

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

How does Wallechinsky organize or structure his discussion? Why is this structure effective?

My Notes

“The American Dream is a bygone thing,” she adds. “It’s not the way life is anymore. I used to believe I was responsible for my own destiny. But it’s not that simple. Now it’s faith and fortitude.”

What Can You Do?

In this (and every) election year, many politicians rev up emotions that keep voters from focusing on the pocketbook and daily-life issues that truly matter. You know what really touches your family and life: The cost of milk, gas and prescription drugs. The quality of schools. The hope that the government will step in fully prepared to keep you safe and secure if a disaster hits your neighborhood.

Don’t leave decision-making and priority-setting to zealots who have an ax to grind—or to the blindly ambitious people who emerge in every generation. For more than 200 years, our system of government has encouraged power to the people. Be an active citizen.

After Reading

4. How does Wallechinsky’s “call to action” show another basic tenet of “the American Dream?”

Language and Writer’s Craft: Transitions

Transition words and phrases are important for argumentative writing. As in other writing, transitions help the reader navigate through the text. Transitions like *however*, *still*, *despite*, and *yet* can signal that the writer is refuting opposing arguments.

Check Your Understanding

Review your responses to the questions in which you discussed the concept of the American Dream. Imagine presenting your position to David Wallechinsky. Create an imaginary conversation between you and the author discussing the following questions, and record your thinking:

- At the beginning, Wallechinsky summarizes the traditional idea of the American Dream. To what extent do you agree with his definition? What assumptions or beliefs are either spoken or unspoken in the author’s writing?
- To what extent is Wallechinsky’s call to action a reasonable and effective idea in light of the problems he highlights about the promise of the American Dream?