



triumphlearning<sup>®</sup>  
**Common  
Core Coach**

for World Literature and  
Informational Texts **II**

*"...tolerance is a demanding virtue.  
It requires the involvement of both heart  
and mind. It requires something of us.  
Yet in no way must it be confused with  
arbitrariness and sitting on the fence."*



First Edition

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# Reading Fiction

A young woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a white quilted winter jacket, a grey fur-lined scarf, and black gloves, is looking down at a large, unfolded map she is holding. She is standing on a cobblestone city street with historic buildings and street lamps in the background. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

In fiction, authors explore the human condition through characters readers care about and to whom they can relate. Fiction examines important, age-old questions, such as: *Where is the line between right and wrong? What does it mean to be a good person? What is the importance of family?*

Two writers who tackled these and other fundamental questions in their works are Anton Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant. Both were nineteenth-century writers who specialized in short stories about the ambitions and failures of the upper and middle classes. Chekhov, who was Russian, and de Maupassant, who was French, excelled at depicting humanity's shortcomings in subtle and ironic ways.

What do Chekhov and de Maupassant think about humanity? Let's see how these two masters of the short story created imaginary worlds populated with flawed—or deeply human—characters.

## Whole Class

**Consider** ► Have you ever taken advantage of someone who cared for you?

What is the definition of a criminal?



**STRUCTURE** An author makes choices about how and when to reveal details to the reader. Chekhov begins this story with the narrator sharing details about a family's potential scandal. What effect does this choice have on readers?

**CENTRAL IDEA** The central idea of a story is what the story is mainly about. In paragraph 3, we learn details about Sasha's character and past actions. What significant idea about right and wrong might be at the center of this story?

# A PROBLEM

by *Anton Chekhov*

1 The strictest measures were taken that the Uskovs' family secret might not leak out and become generally known. Half of the servants were sent off to the theatre or the circus; the other half were sitting in the kitchen and not allowed to leave it. Orders were given that no one was to be admitted. The wife of the Colonel, her sister, and the governess, though they had been initiated into the secret, kept up a pretence of knowing nothing; they sat in the dining-room and did not show themselves in the drawing-room or the hall.

Sasha Uskov, the young man of twenty-five who was the cause of all the **commotion**, had arrived some time before, and by the advice of kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch, his uncle, who was taking his part, he sat meekly in the hall by the door leading to the study, and prepared himself to make an open, candid explanation.

The other side of the door, in the study, a family council was being held. The subject under discussion was an exceedingly disagreeable and delicate one. Sasha Uskov had cashed at one of the banks a false promissory note, and it had become due for payment three days before, and now his two paternal uncles and Ivan Markovitch, the brother of his dead mother, were deciding the question whether they should pay the money and save the family honour, or wash their hands of it and leave the case to go for trial.

To outsiders who have no personal interest in the matter such questions seem simple; for those who are so unfortunate as to have to decide them in earnest they are extremely difficult. The uncles had been talking for a long time, but the problem seemed no nearer decision.





- 5 “My friends!” said the uncle who was a Colonel, and there was a note of exhaustion and bitterness in his voice. “Who says that family honour is a mere convention? I don’t say that at all. I am only warning you against a false view; I am pointing out the possibility of an unpardonable mistake. How can you fail to see it? I am not speaking Chinese; I am speaking Russian!”

“My dear fellow, we do understand,” Ivan Markovitch protested mildly.

“How can you understand if you say that I don’t believe in family honour? I repeat once more: fa-mil-y ho-nour fal-sely under-stood is a prejudice! Falsely understood! That’s what I say: whatever may be the motives for screening a scoundrel, whoever he may be, and helping him to escape punishment, it is contrary to law and unworthy of a gentleman. It’s not saving the family honour; it’s civic cowardice! Take the army, for instance. . . . The honour of the army is more precious to us than any other honour, yet we don’t screen our guilty members, but condemn them. And does the honour of the army suffer in consequence? Quite the opposite!”

## Vocabulary Strategy

### Context Clues

Use the words, phrases, or sentences before or after an unfamiliar word to help you determine its meaning.

**commotion**

**benevolent**

**entreaty**

**inextricably**

**subdued**

**SUMMARY** When you summarize a portion of text, you restate the most important ideas in your own words. In paragraph 5, the Colonel states his opinion about the idea of family honor. Summarize his opinion in your own words.

**TEXT EVIDENCE** Text evidence refers to details or clues in a story that readers use to support their own ideas about the text. From your reading of the Colonel’s remarks in paragraph 7, what does he think should be done with Sasha? Circle clues on this page that hint at the Colonel’s solution to the problem.



**SUSPENSE** An author carefully establishes the characters, setting, and order of events to create tension, an uneasy conflict between characters, and suspense, a feeling of uncertainty about the outcome of the plot. In this story, the main characters are a young man in trouble and his three uncles who have different opinions on how their nephew should pay for his crime. How does the tension among these characters create suspense in the story?

**INFERENCE** In fiction, the author does not always provide all the information a reader needs. Readers often need to make an inference, or educated guess about the characters, based on what is said and left unsaid in the text. Based on the details you have learned about Sasha in paragraph 9 and earlier in the story, what can you infer about the kind of person he is?

The other paternal uncle, an official in the Treasury, a taciturn, dull-witted, and rheumatic man, sat silent, or spoke only of the fact that the Uskovs' name would get into the newspapers if the case went for trial. His opinion was that the case ought to be hushed up from the first and not become public property; but, apart from publicity in the newspapers, he advanced no other argument in support of this opinion.

**CHECK IN** Make sure you understand what you have read so far by answering the following questions: What is the main conflict? What do the Colonel and the other paternal uncle think about how the situation with Sasha should be handled?

The maternal uncle, kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch, spoke smoothly, softly, and with a tremor in his voice. He began with saying that youth has its rights and its peculiar temptations. Which of us has not been young, and who has not been led astray? To say nothing of ordinary mortals, even great men have not escaped errors and mistakes in their youth. Take, for instance, the biography of great writers. Did not every one of them gamble, drink, and draw down upon himself the anger of right-thinking people in his young days? If Sasha's error bordered upon crime, they must remember that Sasha had received practically no education; he had been expelled from the high school in the fifth class; he had lost his parents in early childhood, and so had been left at the tenderest age without guidance and good, **benevolent** influences. He was nervous, excitable, had no firm ground under his feet, and, above all, he had been unlucky. Even if he were guilty, anyway he deserved indulgence and the sympathy of all compassionate souls. He ought, of course, to be punished, but he was punished as it was by his conscience and the agonies he was enduring now while awaiting the sentence of his relations. The comparison with the army made by the Colonel was delightful, and did credit to his lofty intelligence; his appeal to their feeling of public duty spoke for the chivalry of his soul, but they must not forget that in each individual the citizen is closely linked with the Christian. . . .

10 "Shall we be false to civic duty," Ivan Markovitch exclaimed passionately, "if instead of punishing an erring boy we hold out to him a helping hand?"

Ivan Markovitch talked further of family honour. He had not the honour to belong to the Uskov family himself, but he knew their distinguished family went back to the thirteenth century; he did not forget for a minute, either, that his precious, beloved sister had been the wife of one of the representatives of that name. In short, the family was dear to him for many reasons, and he refused

to admit the idea that, for the sake of a paltry fifteen hundred roubles<sup>1</sup>, a blot should be cast on the escutcheon<sup>2</sup> that was beyond all price. If all the motives he had brought forward were not sufficiently convincing, he, Ivan Markovitch, in conclusion, begged his listeners to ask themselves what was meant by crime? Crime is an immoral act founded upon ill-will. But is the will of man free? Philosophy has not yet given a positive answer to that question. Different views were held by the learned. The latest school of Lombroso<sup>3</sup>, for instance, denies the freedom of the will, and considers every crime as the product of the purely anatomical peculiarities of the individual.

“Ivan Markovitch,” said the Colonel, in a voice of **entreaty**, “we are talking seriously about an important matter, and you bring in Lombroso, you clever fellow. Think a little, what are you saying all this for? Can you imagine that all your thunderings and rhetoric will furnish an answer to the question?”

<sup>1</sup>**roubles** the currency of Russia

<sup>2</sup>**escutcheon** family coat of arms, family symbol

<sup>3</sup>**Lombroso** Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), an Italian criminologist and physician



**SUMMARY** A good way to check your understanding of a text is to summarize it as you read. In paragraph 11, Ivan Markovitch discusses family honor and the nature of crime. Briefly summarize his remarks.





**PLOT** Authors structure a text in specific ways to develop their plot, or the actions and events of the story. In paragraphs 13–15, the narrator turns from the uncles’ discussion to Sasha’s interior monologue—his thoughts about his situation and his life. How does Sasha feel? How does revealing Sasha’s thoughts at this point in the story help move the plot forward?

**TEXT EVIDENCE** By making inferences based on evidence in the text, you can gain insight into a character or event. In paragraph 16, Sasha identifies the one thing that bothers him about his situation. Circle it in the text. Compare this observation with other details you know about Sasha. Does his outrage seem justified or deluded? Why?

**THEME** The theme of a story is a question about human existence the author explores or the message he or she wants to share with the reader. One theme Chekhov has introduced is the meaning of family honor. What other theme is suggested in paragraph 18?

Sasha Uskov sat at the door and listened. He felt neither terror, shame, nor depression, but only weariness and inward emptiness. It seemed to him that it made absolutely no difference to him whether they forgave him or not; he had come here to hear his sentence and to explain himself simply because kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch had begged him to do so. He was not afraid of the future. It made no difference to him where he was: here in the hall, in prison, or in Siberia.

“If Siberia, then let it be Siberia, damn it all!”

15 He was sick of life and found it insufferably hard. He was **inextricably** involved in debt; he had not a farthing in his pocket; his family had become detestable to him; he would have to part from his friends and his women sooner or later, as they had begun to be too contemptuous of his sponging on them. The future looked black.

Sasha was indifferent, and was only disturbed by one circumstance; [on] the other side of the door they were calling him a scoundrel and a criminal. Every minute he was on the point of jumping up, bursting into the study and shouting in answer to the detestable metallic voice of the Colonel:

“You are lying!”

“Criminal” is a dreadful word—that is what murderers, thieves, robbers are; in fact, wicked and morally hopeless people. And Sasha was very far from being all that. . . . It was true he owed a great deal and did not pay his debts. But debt is not a crime, and it is unusual for a man not to be in debt. The Colonel and Ivan Markovitch were both in debt. . . .

“What have I done wrong besides?” Sasha wondered.






20 He had discounted a forged note. But all the young men he knew did the same. Handrikov and Von Burst always forged IOU's from their parents or friends when their allowances were not paid at the regular time, and then when they got their money from home they redeemed them before they became due. Sasha had done the same, but had not redeemed the IOU because he had not got the money which Handrikov had promised to lend him. He was not to blame; it was the fault of circumstances. It was true that the use of another person's signature was considered reprehensible; but, still, it was not a crime but a generally accepted dodge, an ugly formality which injured no one and was quite harmless, for in forging the Colonel's signature Sasha had had no intention of causing anybody damage or loss.

"No, it doesn't mean that I am a criminal . . ." thought Sasha. "And it's not in my character to bring myself to commit a crime. I am soft, emotional. . . . When I have the money I help the poor. . . ."


Sasha was musing after this fashion while they went on talking the other side of the door.

"But, my friends, this is endless," the Colonel declared, getting excited. "Suppose we were to forgive him and pay the money. You know he would not give up leading a dissipated life, squandering money, making debts, going to our tailors and ordering suits in our names! Can you guarantee that this will be his last prank? As far as I am concerned, I have no faith whatever in his reforming!"

The official of the Treasury muttered something in reply; after him Ivan Markovitch began talking blandly and suavely again. The Colonel moved his chair impatiently and drowned the other's



**CHARACTER** The way an author chooses to reveal information about a character can influence how a reader feels about, or relates to, that character. In paragraph 20, Sasha considers his crime from his own point of view. Considering this and other details you have learned, do you believe he is a criminal? Why or why not?



**STRUCTURE** An author can structure his or her story so that key details are not revealed until late in the story. This technique can lead readers to change their minds about a character. In paragraph 23, the Colonel lists Sasha's bad behaviors over the years. How do these new details affect your opinion of Sasha?



words with his detestable metallic voice. At last the door opened and Ivan Markovitch came out of the study; there were patches of red on his lean shaven face.

25 “Come along,” he said, taking Sasha by the hand. “Come and speak frankly from your heart. Without pride, my dear boy, humbly and from your heart.”

Sasha went into the study. The official of the Treasury was sitting down; the Colonel was standing before the table with one hand in his pocket and one knee on a chair. It was smoky and stifling in the study. Sasha did not look at the official or the Colonel; he felt suddenly ashamed and uncomfortable. He looked uneasily at Ivan Markovitch and muttered:

“I’ll pay it . . . I’ll give it back. . . .”

“What did you expect when you discounted the IOU?” he heard a metallic voice.

“I . . . Handrikov promised to lend me the money before now.”

30 Sasha could say no more. He went out of the study and sat down again on the chair near the door.

He would have been glad to go away altogether at once, but he was choking with hatred and he awfully wanted to remain, to tear the Colonel to pieces, to say something rude to him. He sat trying to think of something violent and effective to say to his hated uncle, and at that moment a woman’s figure, shrouded in the twilight, appeared at the drawing-room door. It was the Colonel’s wife. She beckoned Sasha to her, and, wringing her hands, said, weeping:

**CHARACTER** Readers often have to infer how characters feel based on the author’s descriptions and the characters’ dialogue or thoughts. Consider Sasha’s remarks to the uncles in paragraphs 27 and 29. Does Sasha take responsibility for his actions? Explain.

“Alexandre, I know you don’t like me, but . . . listen to me; listen, I beg you. . . . But, my dear, how can this have happened? Why, it’s awful, awful! For goodness’ sake, beg them, defend yourself, entreat them.”

**CHECK IN** Make sure you understand what you have read so far by answering the following questions: How would you summarize the plot so far? How have the events and characters’ actions developed the central idea?

Sasha looked at her quivering shoulders, at the big tears that were rolling down her cheeks, heard behind his back the hollow, nervous voices of worried and exhausted people, and shrugged his shoulders. He had not in the least expected that his aristocratic relations would raise such a tempest over a paltry fifteen hundred roubles! He could not understand her tears nor the quiver of their voices.

An hour later he heard that the Colonel was getting the best of it; the uncles were finally inclining to let the case go for trial.

35 “The matter’s settled,” said the Colonel, sighing. “Enough.”

After this decision all the uncles, even the emphatic Colonel, became noticeably depressed. A silence followed.

“Merciful Heavens!” sighed Ivan Markovitch. “My poor sister!”


And he began saying in a **subdued** voice that most likely his sister, Sasha’s mother, was present unseen in the study at that moment. He felt in his soul how the unhappy, saintly woman was



**INFERENCE** Inferences can help you understand why characters act as they do. Sasha’s aunt cries and pleads for him to do the right thing, but he cannot understand why she is so upset. What does his reaction tell you about his character?

**THEME** An author uses details, characters’ words and thoughts, and plot events to convey the theme of a short story. Consider Sasha’s problem, his feelings about it, and his family members’ reactions to it. What theme is the author expressing about the importance of family honor or of doing the right thing?



An illustration of a wooden balcony with a railing. Two people, a man in a green coat and a woman in a blue coat, are standing on the balcony. Several coins are falling from the top left corner of the page, appearing to be scattered around the balcony. The background is a light blue sky with some clouds.

**CLIMAX** The climax occurs when the characters address the main conflict. It often happens near the end of the story and is the most exciting or tension-filled part. In paragraphs 39–40, the tension builds. What details signal that the conflict is about to be resolved? What do you predict will happen?

40

weeping, grieving, and begging for her boy. For the sake of her peace beyond the grave, they ought to spare Sasha.

The sound of a muffled sob was heard. Ivan Markovitch was weeping and muttering something which it was impossible to catch through the door. The Colonel got up and paced from corner to corner. The long conversation began over again.

But then the clock in the drawing-room struck two. The family council was over. To avoid seeing the person who had moved him to such wrath, the Colonel went from the study, not into the hall, but into the vestibule. . . . Ivan Markovitch came out into the hall. . . . He was agitated and rubbing his hands joyfully. His tear-stained eyes looked good-humoured and his mouth was twisted into a smile.

“Capital,” he said to Sasha. “Thank God! You can go home, my dear, and sleep tranquilly. We have decided to pay the sum, but on condition that you repent and come with me tomorrow into the country and set to work.”

A minute later Ivan Markovitch and Sasha in their great-coats and caps were going down the stairs. The uncle was muttering something edifying. Sasha did not listen, but felt as though some uneasy weight were gradually slipping off his shoulders. They had forgiven him; he was free! A gust of joy sprang up within him and sent a sweet chill to his heart. He longed to breathe, to move swiftly, to live! Glancing at the street lamps and the black sky, he remembered that Von Burst was celebrating his name-day that evening at the “Bear,” and again a rush of joy flooded his soul. . . .

“I am going!” he decided.

But then he remembered he had not a farthing<sup>4</sup>, that the companions he was going to would despise him at once for his empty pockets. He must get hold of some money, come what may!

45 “Uncle, lend me a hundred roubles,” he said to Ivan Markovitch.

His uncle, surprised, looked into his face and backed against a lamp-post.

“Give it to me,” said Sasha, shifting impatiently from one foot to the other and beginning to pant. “Uncle, I entreat you, give me a hundred roubles.”

His face worked; he trembled, and seemed on the point of attacking his uncle. . . .

“Won’t you?” he kept asking, seeing that his uncle was still amazed and did not understand. “Listen. If you don’t, I’ll give myself up tomorrow! I won’t let you pay the IOU! I’ll present another false note tomorrow!”

50 Petrified, muttering something incoherent in his horror, Ivan Markovitch took a hundred-rouble note out of his pocket-book and gave it to Sasha. The young man took it and walked rapidly away from him. . . .

Taking a sledge, Sasha grew calmer, and felt a rush of joy within him again. The “rights of youth” of which kind-hearted Ivan Markovitch had spoken at the family council woke up and asserted themselves. Sasha pictured the drinking-party before him, and, among the bottles, the women, and his friends, the thought flashed through his mind:

“Now I see that I am a criminal; yes, I am a criminal.”

<sup>4</sup>**farthing** a coin formerly used in Britain that was worth one fourth of a penny



**CHARACTER** Experienced readers know to recognize if characters have changed over the course of a story. Now that Sasha’s family has forgiven him and agreed to keep him out of jail, what does Sasha do? What do his thoughts and actions reveal about him?

**STRUCTURE** The way an author chooses to end a story can affect the reader’s experience. Reread paragraphs 47–49. How does the ending affect your feelings about Sasha and your understanding of the story’s theme? Are you surprised by the ending?

**THEME** Some themes are recurring, which means they are found in a variety of literature from authors with diverse backgrounds and time periods. How might the theme of this story be an example of a recurring theme? Keep your ideas in mind as you read “The Umbrella” by Guy de Maupassant.

**AUTHOR’S BACKGROUND** Authors’ backgrounds, such as their nationality, experiences, ideals, and values, can influence their perspective, or the way they look at and write about certain subjects. How might Chekhov’s background have influenced his perspective on society, morality, and wealth?



## Author's Craft

### What Is Stated vs. What Is Implied

Part of the enjoyment of reading fiction is figuring out what is really happening in the story. Characters and narrators do not always tell the truth or tell the readers everything they need to know. When the narrator or characters use sarcasm, irony, or understatement, readers have to distinguish what is directly stated from what is really meant. Readers must make inferences based on clues in the story and on their own understanding of the world to determine how the narrator or characters really feel. Consider the implied meaning of the excerpt below.

“The comparison with the army made by the Colonel was delightful, and did credit to his lofty intelligence; his appeal to their feeling of public duty spoke for the chivalry of his soul, but they must not forget that in each individual the citizen is closely linked with the Christian. . . .”

Ivan Markovitch compliments the Colonel’s “lofty intelligence” and “chivalry.” However, he notes that the Colonel should not forget the “Christian,” or moral, aspect of Sasha’s problem, which Ivan believes to be the correct approach. Therefore, the favorable language he uses to describe the Colonel is actually a sarcastic critique of the Colonel’s strict attitude toward Sasha.

### Try It

Find examples of sarcasm, irony, or understatement in “A Problem.” Write the example, or what is stated, in the first column. Circle words that provide clues about the implied meaning. Then, write your inference about the implied meaning in the second column.

What Is Stated (Example from the Text)	What Is Implied (My Inference)

## Vocabulary Strategy

### Context Clues

Consider how restatements, synonyms, antonyms, and examples can help you determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. Circle the context clues that help you determine the meaning of each vocabulary word in bold. Then write a definition for the word.

1. When the mayor didn't arrive in time, there was a sudden **commotion** as everyone tried to figure out who would give the speech instead.

---

2. I wish I could find a way to thank the **benevolent** stranger who was compassionate enough to help me.

---

3. I made an **entreaty** to my grandfather to turn the volume down on the TV, but he ignored my request.

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4. Although some people may dispute the connection between high cholesterol and heart disease, it has been proven that they are **inextricably** linked.

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5. The quiet conversations in the concert hall became even more **subdued** when the conductor walked onto the stage.

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## Comprehension Check

Answer these questions about the selection you have just read. Use details from the selection to support your responses.

1. Compare how Sasha wants the conflict resolved with how his family wants it resolved. What does this help you understand about the characters?
2. How important is family honor to the characters of Sasha, the Colonel, and Ivan Markovitch? What do their words and actions regarding family honor suggest about the theme of the story?
3. How does Sasha feel about himself at the end of the story? How does his admission help you understand the central idea and theme?