# Reading Purpose: According to the author of this text, what attributes make a hero?

# Directions:

# Mark the text by numbering paragraphs, circling keywords and underlining claims.

# In the boxes, write notes about the chunk of text above each box. Consider:

# What claims were made?

# What new information did you get that helps you to identify the topic, central idea, or purpose?

# How does it help you to address the reading purpose?

# What Makes A Hero

Published on September 19, 2010 by [Alex Lickerman, M.D.](http://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/alex-lickerman-md) in [Happiness in this World](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happiness-in-world)

1. I saw a patient of mine recently whose appearance in my office always makes me smile. He's challenging—not because he's a difficult person but because he has so many serious medical problems about which I can do so little. Why, then, does seeing him so consistently lighten my mood? Because it reminds me that for all the terrible things that go on—the abuse, the [discrimination](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias), the injustice, the downright nastiness—good still exists in the world. Because, you see, he's a hero.
2. What makes him a hero isn't the consistent good cheer with which he faces the discomfort his illnesses cause him on a daily basis. What makes him a hero is that fifteen years ago, before he got sick, he donated one of his kidneys to his brother who had AIDS. He told me about it the first day we met when he came to see me, reporting it the same way he did that he lived alone and worked at a large retail chain—in a tone that attached to it no particular significance. Whatever ego boost he may or may not have ever felt from doing it had long since faded. I paused in my history taking, looked up at him from the notes I was making with eyebrows raised as I, at least, thought this remarkable. But in response, he only smiled self-consciously and nodded once to confirm it.

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1. Bottom of Form
2. Around the same time, a professional football player (whose name I can't recall now) was being promoted by the media as a hero, and I remember thinking how strange it was that the entire nation was celebrating him when only a handful of people knew about my patient.
3. **A HERO DEFINED**
4. Not to take away from that football player's accomplishments in any way—I'm a great admirer of excellence in any form—but I found nothing about him even remotely heroic. I wondered if he was ever introduced to my patient if he wouldn't find the label a bit embarrassing himself.
5. What actually makes a hero? I'd argue it's the willingness to make a personal sacrifice for the benefit of others. If you don't find yourself having to resist a voice inside your head urging you to save yourself instead of whatever action you're contemplating, my heart, at least, will refuse to recognize your actions—however legitimately compassionate or courageous they may be—as heroic. Serving others while simultaneously serving oneself can be noble, certainly, but a special kind of nobility attaches itself to those who serve others at a cost to themselves. *That's* the nobility that tugs at my heart. *That's* the kind of behavior I find heroic.

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1. **WHO QUALIFIES?**
2. This definition implies the number of genuine heroes we have is at once smaller and larger than we all think. Smaller, because many of those people held up by the media as heroes, while undoubtedly wonderful in many ways, don't qualify as heroes. Certainly not famous [sports](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sport-and-competition) figures—even those who quietly provide free game tickets to underprivileged children as Michael Jordan did or volunteer their time and money to charity as numerous pro football players do.
3. In fact, what sparked my thinking about this topic was a [Facebook](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-networking) posting by a friend of mine who wrote, "...on a plane talking to an interesting passenger before take off about his job...will be an interesting flight sitting next to American hero Captain Sullivan..." I found myself reflecting that while Sully does indeed for me represent the epitome excellence, commitment, humility, and grace under pressure, the actions he took in the particular circumstance that made him famous weren't, in my view, heroic. Strictly speaking, he risked losing nothing personal in what he did on that day he and his crew (let's not forget his crew) saved the lives of all the passengers of Flight 1549. He may have been thinking more about his passengers' safety than his own—a characteristic of heroes to be sure—and, in fact, I strongly suspect that had circumstances been different and he'd needed to put himself in personal jeopardy to save those passengers, he would have had done so without hesitation. But those circumstances didn't exist the day he glided that plane safely into the Hudson. He had to make many choices but none that put him in more jeopardy than anyone else. While it seems to me likely that he does, in fact, possess the character of a hero, on that particular day no opportunity presented itself for him to display it. [Leadership](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/leadership), courage, decisiveness, and technical expertise—yes. But heroism—no.

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1. And I think he'd agree. Few people consider themselves heroes when doing something they have no choice about doing. This includes, I've discovered, most patients who find themselves facing potentially terminal diseases like cancer. Most such patients, in fact, bristle at the notion that "fighting" their disease makes them heroic. They certainly don't feel like heroes, they tell me. How they feel is tired, discouraged, and sick. They do what they need to do to survive. What's heroic, they want to know, about that? There's no other person whom they hope to save by fighting, no personal sacrifice they're making that another may live. They "fight" to save themselves—a worthy and noble goal certainly, one that requires enormous courage in the face of the painful treatments they must often endure—but not a goal, most of them seem to feel, that in any way deserves to be called heroic. Most of them even refuse to see the keeping of a stiff upper lip in the face of their [fear](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/fear) as heroic, even when it's done—as it so often is—in an attempt to ease the burden their loved ones feel in watching them go through their illness.

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1. So how, then, using this definition, are there *more* heroes around than we think? To find the answer, look at your neighbors and friends. You'll often find, if you bother to ask, that they're making sacrifices for others—sometimes enormous ones—all around you. Single mothers who deny themselves vacations, clothes, and even food to send their children to college. Couples who come to their doctors with forms to be filled out to qualify them to become foster [parents](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting). Children who put their careers on hold or even abandon them altogether to care for their sick parents, or to keep them out of nursing homes.
2. And my patient, who donated a kidney to save his brother. A brother who unfortunately died anyway (this was back when most AIDS patients died no matter what we did—a fact my patient knew himself when he gave him his kidney).
3. "That's how it goes sometimes," was all he said to me when I asked him about his brother's death during that first visit we had all those years ago.
4. He'd come to see me, by the way, because his one remaining kidney had started to fail. I subsequently diagnosed him with [sarcoidosis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarcoidosis) and was able to save it, only to flounder at sparing him from further complications of the disease later, complications that have since forced him to go on disability and significantly compromised the quality of his life.
5. I'm sure he feels bitter about it on some days and rails against his fate on others. He never complains to me about it, though.
6. He's one of my heroes. Who are some of yours?

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