

Characteristics of a Theme

"What is theme?"

The theme of a literary work is its underlying central idea or the generalization it communicates about life. The theme expresses the author's opinion or raises a question about human nature or the meaning of human experience. At times the author's theme may not confirm or agree with your own beliefs. Even then, if skillfully written, the work will still have a theme that illuminates some aspects of true human experience.

"What's the difference between a subject/topic and a theme?"

A piece of literature may have both a subject and a theme. The subject is a specific topic of the selection. The theme is the generalization about life at large that the specific selection leads you to see.

Characteristics of an Effective Theme Statement

A successful theme statement must be general enough to capture the overall meaning of the work, but specific enough so that it conveys your unique interpretation.

1. In a sense, every literary work makes a statement or has a point. When you create a theme statement, you're substituting your single sentence for the entire photo essay, or expository essay or poem. That means that you have to simplify the meaning somewhat to get it into a single sentence, but nevertheless, your theme statement itself should make a point. The theme statement should be a complete sentence. "Love and death" (for example) is not a theme statement. It's just an announcement of the topic of the work. What in particular is the author saying about love and death? A sentence like "The theme of the poem is love and death" is grammatically speaking a complete sentence, but if you remove the beginning of the sentence ("The theme of the poem is"), then you don't have a complete sentence, just a wordy announcement of the topic.
2. The theme statement should describe the general meaning of the work, not the specific events, actions, or characters. The statement "Luke defeats Darth Vader" is not a theme statement but a plot summary. Instead of describing what the characters do, discuss what they represent ("Good defeats evil"). Often the theme statement takes the form of a moral or a judgment ("We cannot defeat an external evil until we acknowledge our own dark side"). Of course, this overall theme results from what the characters do (or from the literal meaning of words in a poem), and in supporting your general interpretation, you should cite some of these specific details.
3. The theme statement should reflect the values of the entire work, not just one or two episodes or lines. In particular, look at the end of the work to make sure that the story's outcome matches what you think its general meaning is.

Which of the following is a valid theme statement according to the above guidelines?

1. The true meaning of love.
2. Mrs. Farquaad learns that British people can't dance.
3. Because the main character commits suicide, the theme is that we should all commit suicide.
4. It is better to have loved and lost than never to have lost at all.

Crafting a Theme Statement (continued)

When crafting a thematic statement, follow these guidelines:

1. A good thematic statement typically **avoids** superlatives such as *all*, *every*, and *completely* because life is rarely absolute. Instead, it uses more moderate language, such as *often*, *some*, *sometimes*, or *most*.
 - a. Ex: "A person with a dark, troubled past will **never** be able to overcome it and achieve lasting happiness." TOO ABSOLUTE
 - b. Ex: "People with dark, troubled pasts are **often unable** to overcome them and achieve lasting happiness." MODERATE
2. A good thematic statement is a **complete sentence** rather than a single word or phrase.
 - a. Ex: "Love" (not a theme but rather a topic; what the text says about love is the theme)
 - b. Ex: "People may love the idea of someone more than the true person." THEMATIC STATEMENT
3. A good thematic statement **does not take the form of an instruction nor is it preachy**—it avoids words such as *ought* and *should*.
 - a. Ex: "Don't become too obsessed with any single thing because it will ruin your life." INSTRUCTION
 - b. Ex: "People should not obsess over a single thing because the obsession may destroy them." PREACHY
 - c. Ex: "Obsession over a single thing may destroy a person." GOOD THEMATIC STATEMENT

Examples of Thematic Statements:

1. When a person values self-respect first, ultimately she may be able to enjoy lifelong happiness and love with another person. (Jane Eyre)
2. If people strive to overcome prejudice and see others as they are, they may learn to appreciate each other and coexist peacefully. (To Kill a Mockingbird)

Theme Statements: Topics & Themes

Theme versus Topic

- **Topic:** what a piece of literature is about. It can usually be expressed in one word. For example, "Power" is a **topic** of *Macbeth*, "Identity" is a **topic** in "The Blue Camaro"
- **Theme:** What does the piece of literature *say* about the topic? It should be expressed in a complete sentence or two. A theme statement is something that is universal and can be true in more places than just the literature you are reading.

Romeo and Juliet

Ineffective Theme Statements

- love (too vague)
- teenage love is usually doomed (too short and not specific)
- a boy and girl from warring families try to be happy, but end up dead from a set of mistakes (this is just a plot summary and doesn't convey any message at all)

Effective Theme Statements

- The bad blood of feuding families may eventually bring doom, not only to those who create the feud but to the next generation.
- Young people in love against all odds can be so passionate and unrealistic that tragedy results from their dramatic actions.

“A Quiet Snow”

Ineffective Theme Statements

- Guilt over losing a child
- A family has a bad car accident because the dad drank too much and people shouldn’t drink and drive

Effective Theme Statement

- In the face of disaster, we hold on to the simplest objects and memories to help us through the pain and ease the burden of our guilt.

“Rocking Horse Winner”

Ineffective Theme Statements

- Materialism
- Gambling is not a healthy hobby for anyone

Effective Theme Statement

- Despite the belief that money and material items can buy happiness, often the accumulation of wealth and material goods has the opposite effect: it destroys relationships and brings great sadness.

Determining Theme through Conflict – A Fill-in Template

Text Title: _____

1. First, you need to decide what you believe is the *main conflict* of the story. Remember, that the key words of the conflict should be reflected in your theme statement.

Example: If you say that the conflict is Human vs. Nature, the key word(s) “nature” or “natural world” should be included in the theme statement.

Conflict = _____ VS _____

2. Narrowing the *topic*. Here, you must pick a key word(s) to describe the general topic of the story. Think about what the author was trying to send a message about.

Topic = _____

3. *Attitudes expressed towards the topic.* Here, examine how the characters felt with regards to this topic. There may be more than one view expressed (this is where the conflict of the story usually come from).

Attitude 1

Attitude 2

4. Define the author's attitude towards the topic. It may be the case that the author feels the same way or differently as one of his/her characters. It is necessary to single out how you believe the author feels about the topic so that you are able to be clear about what message the author is trying to send overall.

Author's attitude towards topic:

5. Composing your *theme statement*. Now it is time to put all your information together and come up with a statement (one sentence) that includes all elements of the above information. The point here is to write the *overall message* you believe the author was trying to give to his/her readers with this story.

Thematic Statement:

Review your work

1. Ensure that your theme statement includes ideas/key words from each step of theme statement writing process.
2. Ensure that your statement is one clear, concise sentence or two.

How to Write a Theme Statement

The _____ by _____
(genre) (title) (author)

is about _____ and reveals that _____.
(topic / abstract concept) (assertion about humanity)

Blanks Key

- **Genre:** What kind of writing is it? Novel? Article? Short story? Poem?
- **Title:** What is the title?
- **Author:** Who is the author?
- **Topic/Abstract Concept:** An abstract noun that describes a general topic of the text.
- **Assertion About Humanity:** What does this text tell us about the general topic and how it applies to the experiences of humanity?

Helpful Hints

- Avoid the word "you" and its derivatives in the theme statement. It is about how the text reflects humanity, not about the reader.
- Format the title in your theme statement properly. Novels, plays, and films should be underlined (if handwritten) or in italics (if typed). Short stories, poems, essays, and articles should be in quotation marks.
- If you don't know the author of a text, leave out that section of the theme statement.
- Your topic/abstract concept should focus on one idea. This means it is usually one word. Compound words may work if they refer to a single idea, such as "self-discovery," "sibling-rivalry," or "pyrrhic victory."
- Your assertion about humanity CANNOT be a restatement of the plot or actions in the work you are examining.
- When writing your assertion about humanity, focus on the lesson or message the work shares regarding the topic. So, if your text is about "self-discovery," what lesson about self-discovery does it portray?

Examples

1. The film *The Lion King* by the Disney Company is about responsibility, and reveals that the true mark of maturity is accepting our duties and the consequences for our mistakes.
2. The novel "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe is about tradition, and reveals how custom and ceremony bring a community together.
3. The play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare is about fate, and reveals that a person's choices can lead to consequences that are completely beyond his control.
4. The novel "Life of Pi" by Yann Martel is about imagination, and reveals its power to help individuals deal with traumatic events.
5. The play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams is about denial, and reveals how dreams and desires can push a person to ignore reality.
6. *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy is about fellowship, and reveals the power of brotherhood and community to overcome terrible trials.
7. The novel "All Quiet on the Western Front" by Erich Maria Remarque is about isolation, and reveals the alienating effects of warfare on man.

Abstract Concepts for Theme Statements

absence	defiance	hope	need	separation
abundance	democracy	humiliation	neglect	service sexism
adoration	depravity	humility	obedience	slavery
adventure	depression	humor	obsession	solitude
aggression	deprivation	hurt	omens	sophistication
anarchy	despair	imitation	opinions	sorrow
anger	determination	immortality	oppression	speculation
anxiety	dictatorship	improvement	pain	strength
apathy	disappointment	indulgence	pride	submission
art	disbelief	industrialization	patience	success survival
awe	discrimination	infatuation	patriotism	sympathy
beauty	disgust	insanity	peace	talent
belief	dreams	insecurity	perseverance	temptation
bigotry	education	integrity	potential	terror
bravery	ego	intelligence	poverty	tolerance
brutality	envy	jealousy	power	trust
chaos	equality	joy	privilege	truth
charisma	evil	justice	progress	uncertainty
charity	failure	kindness	racism	victory
childhood	faith	knowledge	reality	want
chivalry	fascination	law	rebellion	war
choice	favoritism	leadership	redemption	wariness
comfort	fear	liberty	regret	weakness
communication	feminism	limitation	religion	wealth
communism	foolishness	loss	resilience	weariness
compassion	forgiveness	love	resistance	wisdom
competition	frailty	loyalty	revenge	wit
confidence	freedom	luck	righteousness	wonder
consumerism	friendship	lust	rivalry	worry
contentment	generosity	maturity	romance	
control	goodness	memory	rumor	
courage	grace	mercy	sacrifice	
crime	greed	misconception	sadness	
criticism	grief	misery	sanity	
cruelty	guidance	modesty	seclusion	
curiosity	happiness	monarchy	security	
death	hate	morality	seduction	
deceit	helplessness	mortality	segregation	
deception	holiness	motivation	self	
dedication	honesty	narcissism	selfishness	
defeat	honor	necessity	sensitivity	

Literary Thesis Statements

An essay or written literary analysis needs a strong thesis statement so that it can make a strong argument. Weak thesis statements result in essays with no clear direction or purpose, or essays that rely on plot summary and personal opinions to fill their pages.

A good thesis statement is specific; it predicts, limits, and organizes the content of the essay. It notifies the reader about the scope of the essay, telling him/her exactly what your essay will argue and prove.

A thesis statement is the controlling idea of your essay. It should be a new idea or opinion that you will argue throughout the essay, based on facts or evidence taken from the literary text itself. The thesis is **not** a restatement of facts, a summary of events, or a personal unsupportable opinion.

Sometimes it is easier to know how to write a strong thesis by examining non-examples:

Your thesis should **NOT** be...

1. **A summary of what happens:**
 - In "The Circle Game" Joni Mitchell describes a young boy growing up.
 - In Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's Keeper*, the main character must decide if she will sacrifice her freedom for her sister's life.
2. **Vague:**
 - Melville and Dostoevsky both use symbols to represent their views of modern man.
 - Both McCarthy's *The Road* and Garland's *The Beach* examine evil in mankind.
3. **A personal opinion:**
 - I think that Walt Whitman is a great poet and he did a good job using trees as symbols.
 - Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is just a great American novel.
4. **A cliché:**
 - E.E. Cummings proves the old saying that it is better to have loved and lost than never loved at all.
 - In his novels, Gregory Maguire teaches readers that beauty is only skin-deep.
5. **An announcement:**
 - I'm going to describe Shakespeare's love life.
 - This essay will examine the life of a politician.

Strong thesis statements:

- Are very specific and narrow in focus
- Are concise (1-2 sentences)
- State an argument that others could disagree with or refute
- Share a literary insight in the argument
- Structure how the argument will be proved true through the essay

Usually literary thesis statements contain:

- Author(s) first and last names
- Full title of the literary text(s)
- One central arguable idea
- Sometimes the argument into broken down into the sub-points for the body paragraphs

Fill-In the Blank Thesis Statements

The _____ by _____
(genre) (title) (author)

is about _____ and reveals that _____.
(topic / abstract concept) (assertion about humanity)

The _____ by _____
(genre) (title) (author)

examines _____ and reveals that _____.
verb (1-3 claim(s)) (assertion / argument)

_____ _____ _____
(author's) (genre) (title)

_____ and reveals that _____.
verb (1-3 claim(s)) (assertion / argument)

_____ _____ _____
(author's) (genre) (title)

explores _____ as shown by _____.
verb (assertion / argument) (1-3 claim(s))

_____ _____ _____
(author's) (genre) (title)

_____ through its use of _____.
verb (topic) (type of conflict)