

Writing Thematic Statements

or

What IS a Theme Anyway?

“**Theme** is the central message of a literary work. It is not the same as a subject, which can be expressed in a word or two: courage, survival, war, pride, etc. The theme is the idea the author wishes to convey about that subject. It is expressed as a sentence or general statement about life or human nature. A literary work can have more than one theme, and most themes are not directly stated but are implied. The reader must think about all the elements of the work and use them to make inferences, or reasonable guesses, as to which themes seem to be implied.” (from *Laying the Foundation* series of books published by AP Strategies in Dallas)

For example, if *love* is a topic/subject of two novels, a major theme in one of the novels could be “Love, if taken to extremes, can be negative rather than positive,” while in the other novel, the theme might be “Love can conquer even the greatest evil.” Notice that the topic/subject is the same, but the messages about that topic/subject are different in different works.

Consider this:

- A theme is *a meaning of a work*. (Yes, there can be more than one “meaning.”) Can the meaning of a work be love? hate? greed? No—that makes no sense! Those are just topics, not themes. The theme is the statement an author is making about a topic.

Stating the theme of a work of literature

- *Begin by using several abstract words to state the principal ideas of the work (topics that the piece is really about)*. Abstract words describe concepts or ideas that exist only in our minds like *alienation, prejudice, ambition, freedom, love, loyalty, passion*, etc.
For this assignment, you will
- *Combine those abstract ideas with comments that reflect the author’s observations about human nature, the human condition, or human motivation*. In other words, what is the author saying about the abstract idea? Is he/she, for example, saying something about the qualities of people and/or commenting on society?

Avoiding the common mistakes in writing a thematic statement

- *A theme is NOT a moral, a directive, or an order*. A moral/directive/order tells us how to behave or what to do. A theme observes, weighs, and considers actions and ideas, but it avoids judging what people should or should not do; therefore, words like “should” and “ought” are not appropriate in a thematic statement. Also not appropriate is an order/directive such as “Be nice to elderly people” or “Love like there’s no tomorrow.”
- *Themes are NOT trite sayings (clichés, maxims, or aphorisms) such as “Actions speak louder than words,” “Love hurts,” or “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”*
- *Themes do NOT refer to the specific names or events of a particular literary piece*. A theme does not summarize a work, but it does reflect what happens in the work. A theme drops character names and uses more general terms like “parents,” “leaders,” “society,” or “young people” in a general observation about the human experience.
- *Themes avoid absolute terms such as “all,” “none,” “everything,” or “always” because they indicate sloppy thinking; they are categorical, no exceptions*. Terms like “we,” “sometimes,” or “often” suggest a more realistic view of the variety of human experiences.

A theme is NOT ☹️

A moral or a command

It doesn't tell us how to behave by using words like "should", or by commanding.

A common saying

It isn't trite, it's not a cliché, or a maxim, or an aphorism like, "Actions speak louder than words," or "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Specific to the text

It doesn't refer to the specific characters and plot in the text.

Absolute

- 45 It doesn't use words like "all," "none," "everything," or "always," because that kind of statement is rarely true, and usually impossible to prove.

Instead, a theme IS 😊

An observation!

It makes a comment about the way things appear to be in reality.

Original and thoughtful

- 45 It should be something that you find interesting, something a bit philosophical whose wording you have come up with by yourself.

General, about reality

- 45 It translates the characters and plot into *generalizations* such as "people" or "parents" or "raising a child," etc.

Reasonable

It uses terms like "sometimes," or "often," or refers to limited circumstances, to suggest a more realistic view of the variety in life.

What is Theme?

Theme is what a text implies about life or human nature.

A text can have more than one theme.

Theme is the "main" idea of a work; in other words, everything in the text should work together to help communicate that idea. Nothing in the work should logically contradict the theme.

How do I write a thematic statement?

Start by listing some of the topics of the text; for example, *alienation, prejudice, ambition, freedom, love, loyalty, passion, etc.*). The topic can also be a longer phrase, however, such as *the relationship between love and hate*.

Combine those topics with comments that reflect the author's observations about human nature. What is the author saying about those topics? What does the author believe to be true about those topics?

How to avoid common mistakes:

Sample Theme Statements

Notice that the following thematic statements can apply to you or anyone in the world. Theme statements do not mention details from literature.

<i>People rarely change their values and beliefs unless influenced by a traumatic event.</i>
<i>People create their own beliefs in reaction to personal experience.</i>

Sample Theme Statements

The following chart has some helpful hints for writing statements of theme.

Note: These may not have "qualifying clauses." (See the next page for formatting.)

Do...	Well-written Statements
...draw a general insight from a character's behaviour	<i>Friends are not always trustworthy.</i>
...use qualifying words in a thematic statement, such as <i>sometimes, can, may, and often</i>	<i>Poverty may transform honest people into criminals.</i>
...express the theme as an insight into life	<i>Gossip can cause serious damage to a person's reputation.</i>
...express the theme in your own words	<i>People who commit crimes may be punished in unexpected ways.</i>
...express the theme as a general comment on a subject	<i>People with realistic goals tend to be more successful than those who put little thought into their futures.</i>
Do Not...	Poorly Written Statements
...express the theme as a subject or topic	<i>The theme is goals for the future.</i>

...express the theme as an adage or familiar saying (cliché)	<i>Crime doesn't pay</i>
...express the theme as a moral	<i>It's wrong to gossip about people.</i>
...make a thematic statement too general. ...Avoid broad generalizations with words such as <i>everyone, always, never, and all</i>	<i>Poverty causes crime.</i>
...refer to specific characters in a thematic statement	<i>Montag learned not to trust others around him.</i>

