

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 or the life lesson it exposes. It is **not** a one word idea; rather, it is a complete statement or sentence.

Finding the Theme

Here are some ways to uncover the theme in a story:

- 1) Check out the title. Sometimes it tells you a lot about the theme.
- 2) Notice repeating patterns and symbols. Sometimes these lead you to the theme.
- 3) What allusions are made throughout the story?
- 4) What are the details and particulars in the story? What greater meaning may they have?

Remember that theme, plot, and structure are inseparable, all helping to inform and reflect back on each other. Also, be aware that a theme we determine from a story never completely explains the story. It is simply one of the elements that make up the whole.

Writing the Theme statement

1. A theme should be stated in a SINGLE SENTENCE, much like the thesis statement of an essay.
2. The theme should be stated as a GENERALIZATION.
3. The theme should express what the author is saying about a theme topic (power, guilt, dissent, individual vs. society, etc.) through the story.

Example of a theme relating to the individual in society:

In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck shows that social influences help determine a person's final destiny.”

The following is not a good theme statement:

“Never limit your goals because of other’s opinions of you.”

- It promotes a course of action rather than providing an insight.
- It uses the term “never.”
- It doesn’t mention the work or author.
- It uses second person “you”.

[Watch this video on theme.](#)