

Writing About Theme

FIRST decide what the main *subject*, or *topic*, of the story is. This is the broad *category* under which you can place the story. There are often multiple possible opinions about the topic. Examples:

- What it means to be loyal to your friends
- Learning to survive
- Overcoming pain, tragedy, and violence
- What it means to be a family
- People who are rejected by society



SECOND decide—in *one sentence*—what does the story say about the topic? **The opinion about the topic is the theme!** Examples:

TOPIC	THEME
What it means to be loyal to your friends	Friendship can only be maintained through strict loyalty to your friends above everyone else.
Learning to survive	To survive, a person needs trust and courage.
Overcoming pain, tragedy, and violence	The death of a loved one is painful, but it can lead to a greater appreciation of life.
What it means to be a family	A family should be a person's main support.
People who are rejected by society	Outcasts are either creative thinkers or sociopaths.

Remember...

- Theme is the *perception about life or human nature* that the writer shares with the reader, rather than a point that dwells on the specifics of the written piece
- The theme is usually not stated directly, but is an opinion to be *inferred*
- A good thematic statement will not sound too preachy or clichéd
- Theme is the author's *main message*—the story is simply the entertaining way of teaching it to you!
- There may be more than one theme in a story, but one will be dominant and often acts as an umbrella over the others

Good and bad examples of thematic statements

 No	 Yes
You should not steal signs. (too preachy)	The theme of the novel is that impulsive actions are often regretted.
The painting shows the mother doesn't understand the daughter's feelings. (too specific to the story)	Often parents and children have difficulty understanding each other.
The theme of the poem is animals. (too vague—"animals" is the topic, not the theme)	The poem reveals that pets can be as important to people as family members.

4 Common Topics About the Human Experience

A) People

- Are people generally good or bad?
- If they are good, what good things do they do? What causes this goodness?
- If people are flawed, what causes those flaws, and what results from them?
- Are flawed people capable of goodness or being redeemed?
- How can flawed people be made well?
- How do people grow up? What rites, passages, demands or problems come with growing up?

B) Society / Community

- What should we expect a community to be like? Who should decide?
- Is society flawed? If so, how is it flawed? How can it be fixed?
- Does society enhance life or make it more difficult? For whom?
- Are the characters we care about in conflict with their society? What causes this?
- How do the characters deal with it? Do they want to escape society, or fix it?
- Do they finally secure a place in society without sacrificing their dignity or values? How?

C) People and their world: The Big Picture

- Is the universe a friendly place? A beautiful place? What does it require of us?
- Do characters have control over their lives?
- Do they make choices in complete freedom or are they driven by forces beyond their control? What controls them? Are they aware of these forces?
- Does fate or some grand scheme govern history, or is history simply random and arbitrary? Do people create their own fate?
- What is the lesson of life?

D) Morality

- Are beliefs of right and wrong clearly laid out in the story?
- Does the reader come to care for someone who breaks the law? Why?
- Is there a conflict between two value systems?
- Does "right" triumph in the end? Whose "right" wins?
- How much are the characters to blame for their actions?
- Can people who are driven by forces beyond their control be blamed for their actions?
- In what ways are people responsible for each other?