

What is Theme?

- Theme is the central, controlling or dominating idea in a literary work. When you are young and reading children's stories, the theme is usually the moral of a story. As you get older, you will find that theme does not always promote a "moral" or "ethic."
- Theme is usually an abstract idea about human behaviour that is explored. The author makes the idea concrete by putting characters in situations that bring the theme to life.
- Theme statements can apply to you or anyone in the world. Theme statements do not mention details from literature. They do not use character names or plot events that might identify a particular story.
- Theme is often confused with topic, but for the study of theme in English literature, we want to use a more specific definition and remember that it is a sentence, with a subject and verb, not a one word topic.

Sample Theme Statements

Values rarely change unless stimulated by a dramatic event.

When torn between two separate ideas, individuals must work to find their own true beliefs.

A child's sense of identity comes from interacting with others. If no positive role model is available, the child may never reach his/her true potential.

How to Write Insightful Theme Statements

- A theme statement should be a complete sentence about the main idea of a work.
- An insightful theme statement tells readers clearly and concisely what they may learn from a careful reading of the literature. It is not a cliché that is too general.

Faulty Theme Statement #1:

The theme of Gore is sibling rivalry.

* sibling rivalry is a topic, not a theme statement

Faulty Theme Statement #2:

The theme of Gore is how Amy does not get along with her twin brother.

*using character names and events is plot, not theme

Revised and Corrected Theme Statement:

The theme of Gore is that words and imagination can sometimes be more successful than physical strength in overcoming an obstacle.

What is Theme?

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

Do...	Well-Written Statements
Do 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 future.</i>
Do express the theme in your own words.	<i>People who commit crimes may be punished in unexpected ways.</i>
Do express the theme as an insight into life.	<i>Gossip can cause serious damage to a person's reputation.</i>
Do 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>
Do draw a general insight from a character's behaviour.	<i>Friends are not always trustworthy.</i>

Do not...	Poorly-Written Statements
Do not express the theme as a subject or topic.	<i>The theme is goals for the future.</i>
Do not express the theme as an adage or familiar saying.	<i>Crime doesn't pay.</i>
Do not express the theme as a moral.	<i>It's wrong to gossip about people.</i>
Do not make a thematic statement too general. Avoid broad generalizations with words such as <i>everyone, always, never, and all.</i>	<i>Poverty always causes crime.</i>
Do not refer to specific characters in a thematic statement.	<i>The parents learned not to trust others around them.</i>