

## Finding Themes and Writing Thematic Statements

### What is a theme?

A theme is a central message of a literary work. Themes are the general ideas or insights that a story reveals.

### What is the difference between a subject and a theme?

Many students get these confused. A subject can be expressed in a word or two: courage, survival, war, pride, love, etc. A theme is the idea the author wished to convey about the subject. It is expressed in a sentence and is a general statement about life or human nature.

Subject: Pride

Thematic statement: Pride can be the downfall of the greatest people.

OR

Pride when not taken to extremes is necessary for people to be successful.

### Discovering the themes in your story

#### 1) Subjects in your story

In the space below, brainstorm a list of all the subjects the story explores.

#### 2) Questions that help reveal themes.

Directions: answer all the following questions. These questions may help you discover the major themes in your story.

a) What is the title of the story and why is it named this?

b) Does the main character change in the story and if so, how?

c) Does the character come to a realization or understanding? What is this?

d) Does the author make any general observations about life or human nature? If so, what are these?

e) Do the characters make any general observations about life or human nature? If so, what are these?

f) Does the story contain any curious objects, mysterious characters, significant animals, repeated names, song title, or whatever, that hint toward meanings larger than such things ordinarily have? If so, what could be these objects say about life or human nature?

### 3) Writing Thematic Statements

Directions: now select 4 of your subjects/themes listed in 1) and/or some ideas you gathered from 2) above and write a thematic statement about each subject. In other words, what does the novel say ABOUT the subject? Use the tips provided below for how to create thematic statements.

a) Subject/Theme:  
Thematic statement:

b) Subject/Theme:  
Thematic statement:

c) Subject/Theme:  
Thematic statement:

d) Subject/Theme:  
Thematic statement:

### Tips for writing thematic statements

1) Begin by using several abstract words to state the principal ideas of the work (subjects 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.

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?

### 2) Avoiding the common mistakes in writing a thematic statement

a) 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."

b) 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."

c) 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.

d) 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.

