

Understanding and Finding Themes Within Literature

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.

A theme is the central idea of the story that is inferred by the reader from details in the story.

The theme of a story is what the main idea or plot of the story. The 'theme' is often used to describe a topical issue that runs through the story, for example, fatherhood, unrequited love, racism. It can also be more subtle which colors the plot, sets the tone, and gives the story context. For example; water, the sky, sex, and can often be found in the story's imagery and metaphors.

Finding the Theme

Here are some ways to uncover the theme in a story: Check out the title. Sometimes it tells you a lot about the theme. Notice repeating patterns and symbols. Sometimes these lead you to the theme.

What allusions are made throughout the story? When you were young, your parents may have read you stories that ended with “the moral of this story is...” That moral was a **message** that you could glean from the overall story. For instance, from *The Three Little Pigs* we learned about the importance of planning a project well. We know this, because we learned that building a brick house works, while building a straw house is short-sighted. In a paper, you could state that one theme for *The Three Little Pigs* is that good planning can lead to success. But we could also say the theme was about making smart choices.

As you can see, a theme isn't something that's stated outright; it often appears as a lesson or **message** that the reader understands by reading between the lines. A book of fiction can have many themes. Why? Because different people can find different meanings in books. You may find a lesson that others don't see.

Finding a Theme in Two Steps

1. When you finish reading a book, ask yourself to sum up the book in a single word. For example, a single word for the book *Little Red Riding Hood* could be *deception*. Deception is the subject of the book.

2. Next, stretch that single word into a message: innocence can lead to deception. This is a theme for *The Three Little Pigs*.

Symbols Can Be Clues to Your Themes

Literature is an art, and the beauty of art is that everyone can interpret it differently. The message of a fiction book is much like the message of a beautiful painting. It is not something that is stated in a particular sentence and easily located; it is something that is comprehended upon reflection.

Sometimes an object such as a bridge or a large body of water will appear over and over in a book. The object could actually be a symbol or motif that represents or sheds light on the theme.

If you notice that an object does seem to be a strong and meaningful symbol in a book, try to determine any possible deeper meaning of that object. A bridge represents a crossover or change, doesn't it? If you notice a few bridges, and you notice that your main character is going through a big change, you can be sure that the bridge is being used as a symbol. When you decide upon a theme, make sure to use examples and quotations from the book as you write your paper, to prove that the theme is important. Remember, as long as you have evidence to back up your theme idea, you're on the right track.

A theme is the central idea of the story that is inferred by the reader from details in the story.

The theme of a story is what the main idea or plot of the story. The 'theme' is often used to describe a topical issue that runs through the story, for example, fatherhood, unrequited love, racism. It can also be more subtle which colors the plot, sets the tone, and gives the story context. For example; water, the sky, sex, and can often be found in the story's imagery and metaphors.