

How to Write About Theme

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 that may be comic or profound or unsurprising.

What's the difference between a subject and a theme?

A piece of literature will have both a subject and a theme. The subject is a specific topic of the selection. The theme is the generalization about life at large that the specific selection leads you to see.

What theme is not

A theme cannot be expressed in a single word as a subject can. Theme is not the purpose of a work such as *entertainment* or *instruction*. *Man versus nature* is not a theme - it is a conflict. Unlike the moral of a fable or the lesson of a parable, the theme of a story is seldom if ever stated explicitly. Theme is almost always implicit.

How to identify a theme?

Sometimes the theme may be clearly stated. More often, the theme is implied or suggested through other elements. In fact, you can determine the theme by looking closely at other literary elements involved, such as, characterization, setting, events, point of view, tone, irony, imagery, etc. In other words, theme is illuminated through these literary elements.

First identify the subject in one word, then explain in one or two sentences what the author says about the subject. These sentences will contain the theme of the work. The theme stated in one or more complete sentences reveals to us what we have learned about a particular subject.

Ask the following questions:

- How has the main character changed?
- What lessons has he or she learned?
- What is the central conflict of the work?
- What is the subject of the work?
- What does the author say about the subject?
- Can this idea be supported entirely by evidence from the work itself?
- Are all the author's choices of plot, character, conflict, and tone controlled by this idea?

IDIL: How to Build a Thesis about Theme

Building a Thesis

Any good piece of analytical writing presents and develops a thesis about one or more literary texts -- poems, stories, novels, plays, etc. Building a thesis is really not a complex task. Use the following IDIL steps as a guide:

Step One: Identification (I)

Pick a word that adequately describes what the text is about, or if you are examining more than one text pick a word that those texts share. You are looking for a thematic word, not a descriptive one. In other words, "novel" or "tragedy" or "cartoon" won't get you very far. But "denial" or "delusion" or "trust" or "hope" or "faith" will, if only as a starting point.

Example: If we were to do this for Miller's *The Crucible*, we could identify several words, such as "betrayal" or "injustice" or "vengeance." We could easily build a thesis from any of these descriptive words.

Step Two: Definition (D)

In a sentence or two, define the word you have chosen as the text defines or uses it. You can start from a dictionary definition (denotation), but remember that many texts undertake the redefinition of words, or they rely on connotation. So pay attention to what the word means in the text. If you can find a place where the text explicitly does this (yes, an actual quotation), all the better.

Example: If we were to choose "vengeance" as our descriptive word, we might define it as "the act of taking revenge; harming someone in retaliation for something harmful that they have done or for some perceived wrongdoing."

Step Three: Implication (I)

In a few sentences, explain precisely how the term you have chosen enters into the text, how it develops or refines that term.

Example: The Salem Witch Trials provided an opportunity for neighbors to openly express long-held hatreds and take vengeance: "Old scores could be settled on a plane of heavenly combat behind between Lucifer and the Lord; suspicions and the envy of the miserable toward the happy could and did burst out in the general revenge" (7).

Step Four: Location (L)

Point precisely to those locations in the text where the issue you have defined emerges most directly and fully -- not necessarily most clearly. Now you are ready to write - your essay will demonstrate, through attention to specific words and images, how the theme you have defined governs the text you are analyzing. The essay will focus on those moments in the text you have pointed out in step four. What you have managed to do, already, is construct a sort of rough outline of your essay.

Example: Vengeance is motivated by and acted upon by Putnam's greed for land, Abigail Williams's lust, and Ann Putnam's envy of Rebecca Nurse's large family, etc.