

Writing Theme Statements

In literature, the central idea or the view of life that the selection reveals is the theme. Not all selections have a theme, though most do. To state a theme, keep the following principles in mind.

- 1. A theme must go beyond identifying the subject of the selection to make a complete statement about the subject.**

For example, "death" is a subject but "Facing death is, for many people, the most challenging experience which they encounter in a lifetime," could be a theme.

- 2. To be a theme, the statement must go beyond being appropriate to the selection to have application to situations in real life.**

For example, "George learned to care about others" is not a theme statement (it applies only to a character), while "Many people learn to care about others through their own experience and suffering," could be a theme.

- 3. The generalization should not go beyond the selection. Use words such as "all" or "always" carefully.**

For example, "Nature stirs in all people an appreciation for beauty" is an overstatement, whereas, "Sometimes people may be stirred to a new appreciation of beauty by their experience with nature," could be an appropriate theme.

- 4. Modern authors rarely moralize. They tend to show us what life is like, or what people are like. Consequently, we should not moralize in a theme statement (unless the selection moralized---told people how to behave). Avoid words such as "should" or "shouldn't"**

For example, "We should be kind to others" is likely less suitable than "Those who show interest and compassion to others are more likely to be helpful."

- 5. While sayings may appeal to us because they are familiar, there is a risk that they will only match a part of the selection. Therefore, theme statements should avoid clichés.**

For example, "Crime does not pay" could miss a significant element which might be included if the theme stated, "Most people who commit crimes suffer negative feelings which arise from such things as a guilty conscience or lowered self-esteem."

6. Since theme is the central concept of the selection, the statement must account for all MAJOR details and certainly it must not be contradicted by significant elements in the selection.

For example, in a selection that deals with war and truth, it might be inaccurate to state as the theme, "War brings hardship to innocent parties," but more accurate to state, "War can cause people to confront unpleasant truths about themselves and others."

7. There is no one right way to state a theme for a particular selection. However, the insight should be supported by the selection and there should be general agreement on the main idea

Theme may be explicit (stated directly in the selection) or implicit (implied in the selection)

Often, a change in the main character (protagonist) points to the theme. In such cases, theme can be identified by stating what the protagonist learns.

Sometimes we can identify theme by determining what the selection reveals about the central character, and sometimes we must consider the major conflict and how characters react to it.

Suggested outlines for theme statements:

When a person (community, family etc) of _____ background encounters _____ situation he may react in on of several ways. He may _____ because of _____ or he may _____ because of _____. The consequence of such choice may be _____ because of _____.

Or

Sometimes, when an individual is _____ they may be _____ because of _____ which results in _____.

Or

_____ can sometimes cause an individual to _____ leaving him or her feeling _____ and _____. In order to _____ an individual must _____.