

How to Write a Theme Statement

Although many people read for enjoyment and entertainment, most good fiction does more than entertain. A well-written story usually causes us think about life, increasing our understanding of the world, and giving us insight into how people think, feel and behave. The central insight into life or human nature in a story is called the theme. The theme is the main idea in the story. The theme may be directly stated by the author of the story. When it is, we say the theme is **explicit**. Usually, however the reader must discover the theme through a careful reading of the story. When the theme must be inferred from the story we say the theme is **implicit**. Be careful not to confuse plot with theme. Plot is what happens in the story. Theme is an idea revealed by the events of the plot. “James Bond defuses a nuclear bomb and saves the world from destruction” is a plot summary, not a theme statement. Instead of describing what characters do describe what their actions represent. (Human beings have the will and the means to defeat evil forces).

How to Determine the Theme

1. To discover the theme of a story, the reader must try to discover the author’s central purpose. Ask yourself, “Why did the author write this story” and, “What comment is the author making about life or human nature.”
2. In order to understand the theme you must have a good grasp of the plot and characters, especially the central conflict. The theme usually concerns the main character and the changes he or she undergoes as a result of engaging in conflict with an opposing force. What the protagonist learns, suffers or experiences is key to the theme.
3. Examine the story’s title. Titles often provide clues as to the author’s focus and intent.

Characteristics of a Good Theme Statement

1. Theme must be expressed in a complete sentence. “Love and rejection” is not a theme statement. It is just an indication of the topic of the story. What in particular is the author saying about love and rejection?
2. Theme should describe the general meaning of a story, not specific events, actions or characters. Do not use the names of characters in the story when stating the theme. You should make specific references to the story, however, when providing relevant details and examples to support your theme statement.
3. The theme must hold true for the story as a whole, not just part of it. Pay particular attention to the story’s conclusion to make sure that the outcome matches what you think the theme is.
4. Avoid using familiar statements, or cliches, such as, ‘honesty is the best policy’ to express the theme. The theme should be a generalization about life stated in your own words.

Student Writing

Theme Statement for “The Bet”

1. Anton Chekhov’s story “The Bet” is about a banker who bets a lawyer two million rubles he cannot stay imprisoned for fifteen years. The lawyer spends his time in prison reading a lot of books about different things. Five minutes before the fifteen years are up he walks out of the prison and loses the bet and the money. (Doesn’t meet expectations)
2. Anton Chekov’s story “The Bet” is about a lawyer who gives up two million rubles because he thinks money can’t buy happiness. In prison he reads a lots of books and decides it’s better to be smart than rich. (Meets minimal expectations)
3. The central theme of Anton Chekhov’s story “The Bet” is that spiritual values are more important than material things. Although most people think they will be happy if they have a lot of money, Chekhov argues that money cannot buy wisdom, so spending one’s life in the pursuit of money is misguided. The protagonist in “The Bet” gives up two million rubles, because after fifteen years in prison studying is what is valuable in life, he comes to the conclusion that most people wrongly “workship things, not ideas” and “take falsehood for truth and ugliness for beauty.” (exceeds expectations)

Quick Scale: Grade 8 Writing About Theme

Writing is usually required to be carefully revised, edited, and proofread.

Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
<i>SNAPSHOT</i>	<i>The writing features problems with style, form, and mechanics that make it difficult to determine the purpose and meaning. Reflects little knowledge of theme and writing conventions and techniques.</i>	<i>The writing is generally clear, with a beginning, middle, and end. Development may seem uneven. The writer has difficulty controlling the form and style. Tends to talk about theme rather than identify it.</i>	<i>The writing is clear and carefully developed, with some sense of audience and purpose. Some variety and engaging features. May overexplain in places, telling rather than showing” what the theme is.</i>	<i>The writing creates an impact, with a sense of vitality, economy, and finesse. Features some complex, engaging ideas, language, structures, and techniques. Well-written theme statement.</i>
MEANING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sense of audience understanding of the topic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> theme development support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> little sense of audience or purpose (unfocussed) may be too short with few examples and details no clear theme statement inadequate material and understanding of theme details, examples, or quotes not clearly linked to support theme statement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> some sense of audience; little impact includes basic understanding of theme easy-to-follow development with a simple understanding of theme simple details, examples, or quotes sometimes linked to support theme statement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sense of audience; some impact clear, focused theme statement clearly and logically developed demonstrating good understanding of theme relevant details and examples support theme statement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strong sense of audience; engaging clear if not provocative theme; strong sense of direction efficiently developed around relatively mature understanding of elements of theme; attempts to interpret well-chosen details, examples, and quotations
STYLE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> voice and tone syntax word choice techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> little awareness of audience simple sentences and coordination; limited range basic vocabulary; may make errors; repetitive as well as colloquial immature style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> voice and tone may be inconsistent some sentence variety; often problems with subordination some variety in word choice; not concise direct, conversational; difficulty expressing abstract ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> appropriate voice and tone varies sentences varied word choice; some complex vocabulary some risk-taking to create effects; uses a variety of stylistic or rhetorical techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> creates and sustains effective voice and tone; may use humour or irony syntactic maturity effective, economical word choice takes risks, often showing originality and inventiveness
FORM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> beginning structure and sequence transitions ending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> beginning unclear sequencing is often confusing few transitions; may seem disjointed weak ending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> organization adequate but ineffective connections among ideas often unclear transitions awkward; paragraph not well developed conclusions often short or formulaic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> organization carefully and logically structure transitions make connections clear competently developed paragraphing explicit, logical conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> structure appears natural and spontaneous well-chosen transitions create unity effective paragraphing creates continuity ending has some “punch”
CONVENTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> spelling sentence structure and punctuation usage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> frequent noticeable errors in basic sentence structure, spelling, and usage that distract the reader and may interfere with meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> noticeable errors that may cause the reader to pause or reread; often surface errors could be fixed by careful proofreading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> few errors; these do not affect meaning; appears to have been carefully edited and proofread 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> few errors; these do not distract the reader (may only be noticeable when the reader looks for them)