

How To Write a Theme Statement

Write a theme statement for “The Flowers” in the box below.

Write a theme statement for “Raymond’s Run” in the box below.

What is Theme?

“**Theme** is the central message of a literary work. It is not the same as a subject, which can be expressed in a word or two: courage, survival, war, pride, etc. The theme is the idea the author wishes to convey about that subject. It is expressed as a sentence or general statement about life or human nature. A literary work can have more than one theme, and most themes are not directly stated but are implied. The reader must think about all the elements of the work and use them to make inferences, or reasonable guesses, as to which themes seem to be implied.” (from Laying the Foundation series of books published by AP Strategies in Dallas)

Theme is what a text implies about life or human nature. A text can have more than one theme. Theme is the “main” idea of a work; in other words, everything in the text should work together to help communicate that idea. Nothing in the work should logically contradict the theme.

Note that subject/topic and theme are different. For example, if love is a topic/subject of two novels, a major theme in one of the novels could be “Love, if taken to extremes, can be negative rather than positive,” while in the other novel, the theme might be “Love can conquer even the greatest evil.” Notice that the topic/subject is the same, but the messages about that topic/subject are different in different works.

How do I write a thematic statement?

When you write a **theme statement**, start by listing some of the topics of the text; for example, alienation, prejudice, ambition, freedom, love, loyalty, passion, etc.). The topic can also be a longer phrase, such as the relationship between love and hate. Can the meaning of a work be love? hate? greed? No—that makes no sense! Those are just topics, not themes. The theme is the statement an author is making about a topic. Combine those topics with comments that reflect the author’s observations about human nature. What is the author saying about those topics? What does the author believe to be true about those topics?

Where do I start?

- Begin by using several **topics or subjects** to state the principal ideas of the work (topics that the piece is really about).
- Examples of Theme Topics:

Universal Theme Categories: (This is not a complete list! These are just a few ideas.)

• Adolescence – discovery, pain, loneliness • Alienation – destruction of soul • Ambition – persistence or corruption • Appearances – deception and reality • Beauty of diversity • Beauty of simplicity • Capitalism – effect on the individual • Change of power – necessity • Change versus tradition • Chaos and order • Character – destruction, building up • Circle of life • Coming of age • Communication – verbal and nonverbal • Companionship as salvation • Convention and rebellion • Dangers of ignorance • Darkness and light • Death – inevitable or tragedy • Desire to escape • Destruction of beauty • Disillusionment and dreams • Displacement • Empowerment • Emptiness of attaining false dream • Everlasting love • Evils of racism • Facing darkness • Facing reality • Fading beauty • Faith versus doubt • Family – blessing or curse • Fate and free will • Fear of failure • Female roles • Fulfillment • Good versus bad • Greed as downfall • Growing up – pain or pleasure • Hazards of passing judgment • Heartbreak of betrayal • Heroism – real and perceived • Hierarchy in nature • Identity crisis • Illusion of power • Immortality • Individual versus society • Inner versus outer strength • Injustice • Isolation • Isolationism – hazards • Knowledge versus ignorance • Loneliness as destructive force • Losing hope • Loss of innocence • Lost honor • Lost love • Love and sacrifice • Man against nature • Manipulation • Materialism as downfall • Motherhood • Names – power and significance • Nationalism – complications • Nature as beauty • Necessity of work • Oppression of women • Optimism – power or folly • Overcoming – fear, weakness, vice • Patriotism – positive side or complications • Power and corruption • Power of silence • Power of tradition • Power of wealth • Power of words • Pride and downfall • Progress – real or illusion • Quest for discovery • Quest for power • Rebirth • Reunion • Role of men • Role of Religion – virtue or hypocrisy • Role of women • Self – inner and outer • Self-awareness • Self-preservation • Self-reliance • Social mobility • Technology in society – good or bad • Temporary nature of physical beauty • Temptation and destruction • Totalitarianism • Vanity as downfall • Vulnerability of the meek • Vulnerability of the strong • War – glory, necessity, pain, tragedy • Will to survive • Wisdom of experience • Working class struggles • Youth and beauty

- Combine one or two of these theme topics 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?

Avoiding the common mistakes in writing a thematic statement ·

- 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.”
- 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.” ·
- 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. ·
- 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.

A Theme is NOT	A Theme IS
A moral or a command	An observation It doesn't tell us how to behave by using words like “should”, or by commanding. It makes a comment about the way things appear to be in reality.
A common saying	Original and thoughtful It isn't trite, it's not a cliché, or a maxim, or an aphorism like, “Actions speak louder than words,” or “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” It should be something that you find interesting, something a bit philosophical whose wording you have come up with by yourself.
Specific to the text	General, about reality It doesn't refer to the specific characters and plot in the text. It translates the characters and plot into generalizations such as “people” or “parents” or “raising a child,”
Absolute	Reasonable

	It doesn't use words like "all," "none," "everything," or "always," because that kind of statement is rarely true, and usually impossible to prove.
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Sample Theme Statements

1. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Christopher Nolan presents the theme that true heroism requires complete and utter selflessness.
2. The central theme of *Finding Nemo* is that fear is sometimes more dangerous than danger itself.
3. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare presents the idea that love can be destructive.

Work Cited

Laying the Foundation. Advanced Placement Strategies, Inc. 2004. 1932987142.