**Writing Thematic Statements**

**AP English Literature and Composition**

**Theme and Thematic Statements**

Themeis the central message—usually implicit—of a literary work. It differs from the subject of a work, which, generally speaking, one can state in a word or two: betrayal, power, rebirth, war, justice. The theme is the knowledge the author desires to convey about that subject. One expresses it as an observation or general statement about human behavior. A literary work can have multiple themes, requiring a reader to consider all elements of the work and use them to make inferences about what the author is implying.

For example, if *power* is a topic/subject of two novels, a major theme in one of the novels could be “Power, if abused, can prove harmful,” while in the other novel, the theme might be “Power allows individuals to fight adversity.” In other words, the topic/subject is the same, but the messages about that topic/subject are different in different works.

**Writing Thematic Statements**

* Start by determining several abstract words to express the primary ideas of the work (topics that the work is really about). Abstract words describe concepts or ideas that exist only in our minds like disillusionment, survival, oppression, cruelty, sacrifice, hubris, identity.
* Combine those abstract ideas with comments that reflect the author’s observations about human nature, the human condition, or human motivation. In other words, what is the author’s message about theabstract idea? Is he/she, for example, saying something about the qualities of people and/or commentingon society?

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| **What do good thematic statements do?** | **Good Examples** |
| state the theme as an insight into life | *As one develops morally and psychologically, he learns his duty to his family and community.* |
| state the theme as a general comment on a subject | *Insanity, given prolonged exposure to the isolation of the wilderness, seems an inevitable extension of disorder.* |
| draw a general insight from a character’s behavior | *Conrad, primarily through the example of the Company’s chief clerk, shows how people can maintain order with the most mundane details of their lives while all around them disorder reigns.* |
| use qualifying words, such as *sometimes, can, may,* and *often* | *Conrad explores the question of what the alienation and loneliness of extended periods of time in a remote and hostile environment can do to men’s minds.* |

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| **What do bad thematic statements do?** | **Bad Examples** |
| state the theme as a subject | *The theme is coming of age.* |
| state the theme as a maxim | *Love conquers all.* |
| state the theme as a moral or lesson | *You should not discriminate against anyone.* |
| use sweeping generalizations with words like “everyone,” “always,” “never,” and “all” | *Alienation makes everyone go insane.* |

**Choose three of the following thematic topics on the back of this page. Using the framework provided below, write thematic statements for each topic you choose.**

(Thematic idea) (statement about thematic idea).

Examples:

* (Courage) (allows people to attempt difficult tasks in their lives even when there is a chance of failing.)
* (Independence) (is necessary to grow up though it can be frightening.)

Alienation/Loneliness

Ambiguity

Atonement/Redemption/Forgiveness

Avarice/Greed

Betrayal/Secrets

Beauty—destruction of, fading

Change versus tradition

Chaos versus order

Character—destruction, building up

Circle of life

Class struggle

Coming of age

Communication—verbal and nonverbal

Convention versus rebellion

Courage/Resilience

Cruelty/Violence

Darkness

Death—inevitable or tragedy

Discrimination

Disillusionment versus dreams

Displacement

Empowerment

Everlasting love

Evils of racism

Facing reality

Faith versus doubt

Fate versus free will

Fear of failure

Female roles

Friendship/Loyalty/Trust

Fulfillment

Good versus bad

Growth/Development

Guilt/Remorse/Shame

Heroism—real and perceived

Home/Family—blessing or curse

Honor

Identity crisis

Immortality

Impact of the past

Individual versus society

Inner versus outer strength

Innocence versus experience

Isolation

Justice versus injustice

Knowledge versus ignorance

Light

Loneliness

Love/Passion

Man versus nature

Manipulation

Materialism

Motherhood

Names—power and significance

Nature

Oppression of women

Optimism—power or folly

Parents and children

Power and corruption

Pride/Vanity

Progress—real or illusion

Quest for discovery

Quest for power

Rebirth

Responsibility

Reunion

Role of men

Role of religion—virtue or hypocrisy

Role of women

Sacrifice

Self—inner and outer

Self-awareness

Self-preservation

Self-reliance

Simplicity—beauty of

Social mobility

Survival

Technology in society—good or bad

War—glory, necessity, pain, tragedy

Youth and age