

Theme vs. Topic

Theme - a message an author is trying to make about life or human existence that applies to most people outside of the text.

A theme or message may suggest ...

- An insightful, universal truth about the world, life or people in general
- how people should behave, react in certain situations, treat others or live their lives and the consequences if they do not.
- our ethical responsibilities as humans.
- a criticism about fashionable or popular customs, ideas or values and the consequences not just for the individual but for society as a whole who demonstrate such attitudes

Common Mistakes

- Theme is NOT an obvious or simple statement (ie. Don't steal. It is wrong to kill.)
- Theme does not mention specific characters and events in a story.
- Many confuse topic and theme, but theme cannot be expressed in a single word (ie. love).
- A theme is NOT a cliché – an over-used saying such as “Money can't buy happiness,” “Love conquers all,” or “It's better to give than receive.”



Topics

Topic - a word or phrase describing the main subject of a text (ie. what the text is mostly about).

abandonment
 abuse / neglect
 adversity
 belonging
 bullying
 catharsis / rebirth
 compassion
 courage
 cruelty
 deception
 delusion
 depression
 despair

determination
 discrimination
 education
 equality
 evil
 faith
 failure
 family
 fear
 female experience
 freedom
 grief / loss
 growing up
 handicaps / obstacles

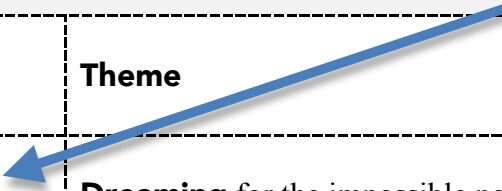
hope
 human rights
 identity
 immigration
 inaction
 indifference
 injustice
 innocence
 inter-dependence
 love
 marriage
 memory
 motherhood
 new beginnings
 oppression

parent/child relationships
 peace
 prejudice
 power
 responsibility
 sacrifice
 sanctuaries
 segregation
 silence
 starting over
 success
 survival
 transformation
 unity

Examples

from <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	
Topics	Theme
Tradition	Accepting any tradition, even if it has been long established, is wrong when that behavior hurts another human being.
Prejudice	Personal human connections can break down prejudice.
Innocence of childhood, Evil	While a time of innocence and exploration, childhood is also the time when many people discover the presence of evil in society.
from <i>Of Mice and Men</i>	
Topics	Theme
Dreams, disappointment	Dreaming for the impossible not only leads to disappointment , but one's downfall.
The weak & vulnerable	Society often casts out those who are weak and vulnerable perceiving them as having no use.
Companionship	Humans need companionship and without it, become emotionally sick.

TIP: Identifying the major topics of a text can help you to figure out the theme (author's message).



Sentence Frames for Describing Theme

- Last name of author suggests that when people behave / believe then explain result or consequences.
- The author implies that people must _____ so that _____.
- The author suggests that the affects of _____ result in _____.