

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 and **why this matters**
- how people should behave, react in certain situations, treat others or live their lives and the **consequences** if they do not or **how** this leads to a more fulfilling life
- our ethical responsibilities as humans and the **implications** to us as individuals and / or society when we meet or ignore these responsibilities
- 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	determination	inaction	power
abuse / neglect	discrimination	indifference	responsibility
adversity	education	injustice	sacrifice
anarchy	equality	innocence	safety/security
authority	evil	insight	sanctuaries
belonging	faith	inter-dependence	savagery
brutality	failure	isolation	segregation
bullying	family	laws/ rules	self-control
catharsis / rebirth	father/son relationships	leadership	silence
civilization	fear	loss	starting over
compassion	female experience	love	success
cooperation	freedom	memory	suffering
courage	grief / loss	morality	suicide
cruelty	growing up	motherhood	survival
deception	handicaps / obstacles	new beginnings	temptation
delusion	hope / hopelessness	oppression	transformation
democracy	human rights	order	unity
depression	identity	parent/child relationships	war
despair	ignorance	peace	will power
destruction	immigration	prejudice	

Examples

Toolkit # G-4 Back

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

Avoid Over Generalizations *what NOT to do	Improved
People will <i>always</i> have friends to support us through difficult times.	Having strong relationships in times of crisis can better help us through difficult challenges and without this support, we are more likely to fall into hopelessness and despair which further adds to the difficulties we face.
We can <i>always</i> recover from our mistakes.	Some mistakes are irreparable and leave life long consequences and emotional scars, but being honest with ourselves about our mistakes can help us learn from them and possibly move on in our lives so that we don't make them again.

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