

Identifying Theme

The theme is the big idea that stretches across a story.

Some examples of themes are:

**Love
Death
Prejudice
Guilt
People versus nature
Growing up**

The same themes can be found in many texts and genres. In order to identify the theme, we should:

- **Examine the beginning and end of the text**
- **Think about the dialogue**
- **Look for evidence of internal monologue**
- **Think about how the title relates to the story**
- **Consider the author's message**

Helping Students Understand Theme

“Using specific details in a book about character, time, conflict, or relationships and creating general statements that express a theme is difficult . . . Start with experiences from their lives, and together . . . create themes from these. Share these with students as well as others you collect from your experiences. . .”

Detail: Several students consistently arrive at school out of dress code. Though parents have come to school with a change of clothing and many students have repeatedly been sent home, a group persists in dressing inappropriately.

Theme: One way to protest rules is to repeatedly break them.

Detail: At a party, Sue, an outstanding citizen and student, is urged to drink. She refuses, saying that she has a headache and doesn't want any. Her peers insist she's a wus and afraid of what her parents will say. Sue gives in.

Theme: Peer pressure can make people do things they don't want to do.

“First, I explain how I generalize the theme from the detail, pointing out that I don't use names or specific situations, but try to arrive at a statement that could apply to similar situations. Once students understand, through discussion, the differences between the theme and details, I invite them to use this thinking with the books they are reading.

“Next, I encourage students to use details to discover themes from a read-aloud I've completed. I invite pairs of students to select details from *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson, then generalize to the theme, for I want students to see that a book contains many themes. What follows is the thinking of two pairs of sixth graders:

Detail: Brend and Ellie whine about going to Millsburg for school shopping. When Mama says there's no money, they insist they want to just look around. They end up getting \$5.00 by insisting their daddy promised it to them.

Theme: Some children can easily manipulate parents and get their way.

Detail: Jess denies Leslie drowned when his father tells him. He gets angry and insists it's a lie. Then he thinks about things Leslie said and things they did together.

Theme: When you love someone, accepting an unexpected death is tough. First there's denial, then anger.

Questions about Theme

Use the following questions to help students learn about the theme of a selection:

- How does the title relate to the story?
- Discuss some points that the author is making about family, friends, feelings, nature, life experiences, or an historical period. Use details from the story that back up a point you're making
- Discuss what the author might have been saying about family relationships and offer support from the story to back up your position.