

Understanding Literary Theme

Analyzing Literature

Literary Theme in the TEKS

In the state of Texas All Elementary Students are expected to:

Analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding.

Literary Theme in the TEKS

At different grades, students are expected to:

Kindergarten – 6(B) discuss the big idea (theme) of a well-known folktale or fable and connect it to personal experience

1st Grade – 7(A) connect the meaning of a well-known story or fable to personal experiences

2nd Grade – 6(A) identify moral lessons as themes in well-known fables, legends, myths, or stories

3rd Grade – 5(A) paraphrase the themes and supporting details of fables, legends, myths, or stories

4th Grade – 3(A) summarize and explain the lesson or message of a work of fiction as its theme

5th Grade – 3(A) compare and contrast the themes or moral lessons of several works of fiction from various cultures

What is Theme in Literature?

When you are talking about literature, one of the most important things you need to discuss is the “Central Theme” of the text.

The Theme refers to the central idea or underlying message of the text. The Theme is rarely stated in the text – instead, the reader must usually consider the plot, characters, and setting to infer the theme.

What is Theme in Literature?

Theme is often confused with other literary elements such as Plot or Topic (or Subject)

However, the Theme of a piece of literature is a *message about people, life, and the world we live in that the author wants the reader to understand.*

The Topic, on the other hand, is the main idea or gist of the story.

What is Theme in Literature?

For example, think about the Topic and Theme of the classic story *Cinderella*.

If you are describing the TOPIC, you might say it is a story about a poor girl who marries a prince.

But if you are describing the THEME, it could be described as an example of karma or good things happening to good people.

What is Theme in Literature?

Charlotte's Web

Topic

**A talking spider
helps a pig.**

Theme(s)

**Self-Sacrifice
True Friendship
Perseverance**



What is Theme in Literature?

The Ugly Duckling

Topic

**An ugly duckling
grows up to become
a beautiful swan**

Theme(s)

**Patience
Self-Confidence
Individuality**



What is Theme in Literature?

The Wizard of Oz

Topic

**A girl goes on an
adventure in a magic
land.**



Theme(s)

**Friendship
Appreciate What You
Already have
Things You Seek Are
Already Inside You**

What is Theme in Literature?

Similarly, somebody might describe the “theme” of *Pink and Say* or *Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot* as stories about war.

But in these cases, war is the setting – it influences the theme, but it is not the theme.

Both of these books deal with themes of friendship and philanthropy in a time of war.

What is Theme in Literature?

The theme can also be described in terms of a moral, or message, or lesson that the reader can gain from the piece of literature.

The Tortoise and the Hare is a lesson in perseverance.



The Gingerbread Man is a lesson in arrogance and the folly of pride.

Identify the Theme

Now you try it.

Which of the following is the **THEME** of *The Midas Touch*?

- A. A king gains magic powers.
- B. Magic can cause problems.
- C. Greed never leads to happiness.



Identify the Theme

Now you try it.

Which of the following is the **THEME** of *City Mouse Country Mouse*?

- A. A country mouse visits his cousin in the city.
- B. A mouse discovers he does not like the city.
- C. Be grateful for what you already have.



Identify the Theme

Now you try it.

Which of the following is the **THEME** of *Horton Hears a Who*?

- A. An elephant struggles to save a community.
- B. Elephants have very good hearing.
- C. True friendship knows no boundaries.



Identify the Theme

Think about studying theme across different works of literature with your class.

How many stories can you think of that have a central theme of:

- Friendship?
- Generosity?
- Self-Sacrifice?
- Honesty?

Theme Instruction and Rigor

Notice that “Identifying” the Theme is a 2nd Grade expectation.

Students in 3rd and 4th grade should be able to Explain the theme by providing details from the text.

By 5th Grade, students should be able to synthesize and compare themes across multiple works of literature.

Try it with your students

As you read with your students, ask them to analyze the theme of the text. What message is the author trying to give them? What lesson are they learning?

Ask your students to make thematic connections across texts. How many stories do they know where good conquers evil? How many stories can they think of where people get what they deserve?

Try it with your students

By 5th Grade, students should be able to explain how the themes in the classic story *Pippi Longstocking*, for example, are reflected in contemporary stories like *Maniac McGee* or *The Lightning Thief*.

Similarly, they should be able to cite examples from the text to explain how the theme of “Perseverance” is revealed in stories like *The Cay*, *Hatchet*, and *The Carrot Seed*.

Try it with your students

Teaching theme also provides opportunities to teach common English idioms:

- *You Reap what you Sow*
- *It is always darkest just before the dawn*
- *The Grass is Greener on the other side of the fence.*
- *Pride Goeth Before the Fall*
- *Honesty is the Best Policy*

These idioms are often the moral for many classic children's stories, so students can use these common expressions when discussing the theme of books they are reading.

Try it with your students

When working with your students, be sure to teach at the **DEPTH** and **SOPHISTICATION** expected in the grade-level expectations in the **TEKS**.

Do not, for example, just ask 5th grade students to **IDENTIFY** the Theme – ask them to **ANALYZE**, **EXPLAIN**, and **COMPARE** the theme in multiple works of literature.