

Standard Guidance: RL.2 Grades 3-12

Determining a Theme

Ohio's Learning Standards for English Language Arts ask students to use key details in a text to determine the theme of the text.

According to Doug Lemov and Colleen Driggs of *Uncommon Schools* (2013) -

Theme is the message conveyed by a text that applies to multiple other texts. The theme is described in a phrase or clause, not in a single word, and it implies a conflict and/or an argument about the core idea.

Have students determine the theme of a text; then, ask the following questions:

- **Can this theme apply to multiple texts?**
 - Cannot name a character in the text (e.g., MacBeth's ambition).
 - Cannot refer to exact details in the story (e.g., New York in the spring).
- **Is it more than one word? A phrase or clause?**
 - Justice → *The fight for justice*
 - Love → *Love is temporary.*
- **Does it imply a conflict, argument, or both?**
 - In "The fight for justice," in this phrase, the word "fight" implies conflict.
 - In "Love is temporary," the clause asserts a claim or makes an argument.

Grant Wiggins (2014) pointed out that theme could be thought of as the moral of many stories.

- *All's fair in love and war.*
- *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*
- *The devil is in the details.*

This definition is not contradictory to Lemov and Driggs in that these are, in fact, clauses. The only difference is that these are ALL independent clauses.

BUT...do they still answer the three questions above?

- Can they apply to multiple texts? **Yes.**
- Are they more than one word? **Yes.**
- Do they imply a conflict, argument, or both? **Yes.**

Theme is commonly confused with **main idea**. See the difference in the table below related to the novel, *The Prince and the Pauper*, by Mark Twain.

Main Idea	Topic	Theme
Identical, but unrelated young boys, poor and abused Tom, and Edward, the son of Henry VIII, trade clothes and lives and discover the struggles of fitting into different social classes.	Social Class	Social class does not determine a person's worth.

Notice that the **main idea** contains specific details from the story, which can include names of characters, places, or events.

A **topic** is usually one or two words, contained in the main idea or one of the main ideas in the story. If a student offers a topic when asked for the **theme**, ask the student, "**What is the author trying to tell us about that topic?**"

For more on determining theme -

Guiding on the Side

This blog page offers a video lesson on how to teach theme in four simple steps. Note that the sentences the students create in step 3 will be more complex for this grade band. View the video under the heading, [Teaching Theme the Metacognitive Way](#).

Theme, Defined. At Last! At Least Almost.

The notes from Lemov, Driggs, and Wiggins above were adapted from this blog post on the *Teach Like a Champion* website. To review the full blog post, [click here](#).