

Theme: What It Is and Why You Need It

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Myth: Theme is for literary fiction, not commercial or genre fiction.

Fact: All fiction boils down to human experience. Theme is simply how we talk about translating the human condition into the art of fiction.

What is theme?

- The main idea or underlying meaning of a story.
- An aspect of a story that binds together various essential elements of narrative-- character, setting, plot, and other literary devices.
- A truth that exhibits universality, standing true for people of all cultures.
- An insight into how the world works or into the human condition.

What is the difference between theme and subject?

A subject is a topic, but the theme is the truth the author chooses to tell about that topic through the development of character and plot. Examples:

Subject: World War II

Possible Theme: Brotherhood

Possible Theme: Courage

Possible Theme: Love

Possible Theme: Honor

Possible Theme: Survival

Possible Theme: Hope

Possible Theme: Justice

Possible Theme: Sanity

Possible Theme: Recovery

Possible Theme: Heroism

Subject: Coming of Age

Possible Theme: Discovery

Possible Theme: Compassion

Possible Theme: Self Confidence

Possible Theme: Betrayal

Possible Theme: Fairness

Possible Theme: Nonconformity

Possible Theme: Loss of Innocence

Possible Theme: Compromise

Possible Theme: Abandonment

Possible Theme: Responsibility

Subject: An Unsolved Murder

Possible Theme: Cowardice

Possible Theme: Betrayal

Possible Theme: Anonymity
Possible Theme: Control
Possible Theme: Duality
Possible Theme: Childhood
Possible Theme: Grief
Possible Theme: Obsession
Possible Theme: Wisdom
Possible Theme: Perfection

Exercise: Look at the 30 examples above (10 possible themes for the subject World War II, 10 possible themes for the subject Coming of Age, and 10 possible themes for the subject An Unsolved Murder). Think of a movie you've seen or a book you've read that exemplifies one of the subject/theme pairs on the list.

The Sitcom Analogy

Another way to think about subject versus plot is to think about family-oriented sitcoms. The subject of the show is always the same: a family that is unique or special in some way and that is just trying to make it through life's challenges. (Think *The Brady Bunch* or *Family Ties*.) But in each episode, a character learns some universal lesson intended to (a) demonstrate character growth and (b) enlighten the audience. However, avoid letting your stories slip into didacticism.

The Fine Line: Theme vs. Didacticism

If your goal is to write commercial (salable) fiction, guard against writing novels that *teach* more than they *entertain*. This is especially important if you write for middle-grade or young-adult readers. Young readers can tell when they're being talked down to, and like adults, they appreciate authors who respect their intelligence.

A theme isn't a life lesson. It isn't Mr. Sitcom Dad sitting you down at the end of the story and saying, "So you see, Son..." Theme isn't a hammer. Don't hit your reader over the head with it.

A well-developed theme builds to a moment of brilliance for your reader. This moment can be anything from a subtle arrival at a new understanding about the world to a take-your-breath-away lightning strike of realization about the human condition. It's that thing that makes your heart ache a bit when you know you've just read a really good book.

100+ Thematic Pairs

The accompanying handout shows more than 100 thematic pairs. Why pairs? Because when you deal with any particular theme, you must also deal with *its opposite or its absence*.

In this regard, theme is a useful tool for assessing your work's arcs--both the story arc and the character arcs. (An arc is simply the trajectory of change or transformation from the beginning of a novel to the end.) Therefore:

- If a story is about heroism, it must also address cowardice or fear.

- If a story is about finding personal power or strength, it must also address weakness, lack of confidence, or lack of ability.
- If a story is about compassion, it must also address cruelty.
- If a story is about humility, it must also address pride.
- And so on.

Exercise: Use Thematic Pairs to identify story and character arcs

Look at the Thematic Pairs handout. Identify a movie you've seen or a novel you've read that exemplifies one of the thematic pairs listed. How does the story move from one theme to its opposite?

Exercise: Identify Thematic Pairs in your own works of fiction

Think about a novel you've written or one of your works in progress. Can you identify a thematic pair for the story as a whole? Can you identify a thematic pair for each of your main characters? Hint: Each character in a single story can represent a different thematic pair. Alternative exercise: Look at the thematic pairs and see if any of them spark a story idea or character for you.

Plot or Revise with Thematic Pairs

Once you've identified thematic pairs for your story and major characters, look at your list of scenes (whether already written or outlined). Make sure you have included scenes that show A-to-B (or A-to-B-to-A, or A-to-B-to-C) transformation.

- Do we see a character who struggles with an inflated ego learn that he'd be closer to achieving his goal if only he exercised some humility? If not, that should be a scene. **[Pride > Humility]**
- Do we see a character who believes in fairness suddenly thrust into situation that requires her to cheat? And do we see her learn something from the experience-- either that it's okay to cheat in certain situations, or that nothing is worth compromising her values and she will never cheat again? If not, those events should be shown in scenes. **[Fairness > Cheating]**
- Do we see a character who is ambivalent about nature, who cares only about playing video games and chatting with his friends online, suddenly become passionate about a nature-related cause? Why? Show us why in scene. **[Ambivalence > Passion]**
[Technology > Nature]
- Do we see a character who is a middling rank-and-file soldier, selfish in some regards, suddenly thrust into a situation where he must lead his fellow soldiers into battle? And do we see him learn something from the experience--maybe that he was born to lead, or that leadership is, in the end, about self sacrifice? If not, those events should be shown in scenes. **[Lack of Leadership Ability > Leadership]**
[Selfishness > Sacrifice]

How to talk about your work in relation to its theme

Let's say you're pitching your work to an agent or editor, or you're trying to hand-sell it to bookstores or readers. Knowing your story's theme(s) will help you talk about your work. After all, people think in themes.

However, keep the focus of your pitch on *story*, or your listener's eyes might glass over. It's better to work a few words into your pitch that hint at theme or story/character arcs. For example, which of the following pitches does a better job at piquing your interest?

1. "My story is about a **shy, quiet** tax attorney named Tim who enlists in the Intergalactic Army to defend Earth from aliens. But when his commanding officer is among those killed in the first conflict, Tim must **lead** the surviving members of his unit to a **victory** that will require him to make the ultimate **sacrifice**."
2. "My story is about the nature of leadership, heroism, and sacrifice in the face of terror and violence. It's packed full of universal truths so readers of all ages, backgrounds, and interests will love it."

The first one, right? Words like "shy" and "quiet" hint at the type of person Tim is at the beginning of the story (i.e., the beginning of his character arc), while words like "lead" and "victory" hint at where Tim ends up (i.e., the end of his character arc), and "sacrifice" hints at how he ends up there.

Now, if you deliver pitch #1 to an agent or editor, and she invites you to tell her more, that might be your cue to expand a bit on your more thematic elements. However, remember to keep the focus on Tim. Tell Ms. Agent *what Tim learns* about leadership and heroism, *not what the reader will learn*. Avoid didacticism! Good stories, first and foremost, *entertain* more than they *teach*.

Thematic Pairs

Acceptance	Discrimination, Judgment, Alienation, Rejection
Accomplishment, Success	Failure
Accountability, Consequences	Lack of Accountability, Lack of Consequences
Accuracy	Inaccuracy
Action	Inaction, Overreaction
Affirmation	Denial
Appreciation	Ingratitude
Attraction	Revulsion
Authority, Leadership	Lack of Authority, Lack of Leadership
Balance, Stability	Imbalance, Instability
Birth	Death
Bravery, Courage	Cowardice, Fear
Brotherhood, Cooperation, Solidarity, Teamwork, Unity	Competition, Disunity, Manipulation, Rivalry
Calm	Agitation
Caring, Nurturing	Neglect
Celebrity, Heroism, Recognition, Reward	Anonymity, Obscurity
Change, Discovery, Improvement, Innovation, Moving On, Progress, Rebirth, Transformation	Stagnation, Stasis
Character, Ethics, Integrity, Morality, Values, Virtue	Immorality, Amorality
Charity, Sacrifice, Selflessness	Selfishness
Childhood	Adulthood
Childlessness	Parenthood
Chivalry	Rudeness
Choice	Fate, Destiny
Commercialism, Consumerism	Austerity, Frugality
Commitment, Faithfulness	Adultery
Communication	Miscommunication
Compassion, Kindness	Ambivalence, Cruelty, Turning Away
Compromise	Intransigence
Confidence, Self Esteem	Embarrassment, Fear, Regret, Repression, Self Loathing
Conformity	Nonconformity
Control	Lack of Control, Freedom from Control
Creativity	Lack of Imagination, Lack of Vision
Dating	Marriage
Discipline, Duty	Laziness
Diversity	Uniformity
Duality	Singularity
Education	Lack of Education
Empowerment	Prohibition, Oppression, Repression
Encouragement	Discouragement
Equality	Inequality
Experience	Inexperience
Fairness, Sportsmanship	Cheating
Faith	Disillusionment
Forgiveness, Mercy	Unforgiveness, Revenge, Vengeance
Fortune, Wealth	Poverty
Freedom	Imprisonment
Fulfillment	Searching
Gain, Growth	Loss, Diminishment
Generosity	Greed, Jealousy
Good	Bad, Evil
Happiness, Joy	Anger, Depression, Grief

Thematic Pairs

Health	Illness
Honesty	Dishonesty, Manipulation
Honor	Dishonor
Hope	Despair
Hospitality	Inhospitality
Humility	Pride
Humor	Lack of Humor
Independence, Individualism	Group Think
Ingenuity	Stupidity
Innocence	Guilt, Cynicism
Justice, Karma	Injustice
Live, Living	Death, Merely Existing
Love	Ambivalence, Hatred, Lust, Obsession
Loyalty	Betrayal, Disloyalty
Motivation	Lethagy
Nature	Industry, Technology
Obedience	Defiance
Passion	Ambivalence
Patriotism	Rebellion
Peace, Nonviolence	Adversity, Aggression, Conflict, Violence, War
Perfection	Imperfection, Flaws, Mistakes
Perseverance, Persistence, Practice, Dedication, Determination	Apathy, Giving Up, Not Tying, Quitting
Positive Attitude	Negative Attitude
Power, Strength	Weakness
Pride	Shame
Reconciliation	Abandonment, Separation
Recovery	Addiction
Redemption	Damnation
Respect	Disrespect
Responsibility	Negligence
Restraint, Self Control	Impulsiveness, Spontaneity
Romance, Family, Friendship	Heartbreak, Isolation, Loneliness
Safety, Security	Risk
Sanity	Madness
Satisfaction	Disappointment, Frustraion
Sensuality	Frigidity
Sincerity	Hypocrisy
Survival	Annihilation, Death
Temperance	Excess
Tradition	Innovation
Triumph, Victory	Defeat
Trust	Distrust
Truth	Deception
Wisdom, Understanding	Ignorance
Youth	Age, Aging