

Determining Theme

CCSS

RL.8.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot. . . .

Theme: *Teamwork*

You may read fiction for pleasure or entertainment. But did you know that most stories also provide lessons about life? These lessons are expressed through the **themes**, or messages, at the heart of what the author writes. Even your childhood stories have themes. For example, the story “Pinocchio” may have taught you the important lesson about honesty.

To identify a theme, connect ideas conveyed through the story’s setting, plot, and characters.

Study the image and caption below. Think about the message being conveyed.



A blind runner and his guide approach the finish line during a paralympic event in Malaysia.

Now, suppose the people in the picture are characters in a story. Consider what they are doing. Circle any details in the picture and caption that suggest a message or life lesson.

Read the chart below to see how analyzing details can help you determine a theme.

| Character Details | Setting Details | Action Details | Theme |
|---|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one sighted runner, acting as a guide • one blind runner who wants to be in a race | a track and field event for people with disabilities | the two runners are approaching the finish line | No matter what obstacles they face, people can accomplish amazing things through teamwork. |

Whether you read for pleasure, entertainment, or a school assignment, you can learn valuable lessons from stories. Thinking carefully about a story’s characters, setting, and plot—and how they work together—will help you figure out, or infer, the story’s theme.



Read the beginning of a story about a boy named Holden and his grandfather.

Genre: Realistic Fiction

Holden and Pops *by Evan Gerlachen*

“When you’re at your grandfather’s after school, be sure to do something other than sit by yourself playing video games, Holden.”

“I know, Mom, but what else is there to do?” whined Holden, washing cereal bowls.

“Have you ever tried to show him one of your games? At least you’d be doing something together,” Mom suggested.

“Oh, Pops wouldn’t be interested,” Holden shrugged as they headed out to the car. “Plus he’d never catch on—you know how he is about big, scary technology.”

As Holden got out of the car, Mom tried once more. “You know, Pops might surprise you. Keep your options open. You might even ask him about ‘big, scary technology’ some time.” Holden puzzled over her words on the way into school.

(continued)

Explore how to answer this question: “What do the details in this part of the story suggest about how people sometimes judge others?”

In most stories, authors do not state a theme directly. To figure out an author’s message, you need to look for key details and see how they develop over the course of the text.

Identify key details about each character’s attitudes and opinions. Then complete the chart below.

| Character | Comments About Pops | Attitude Toward Pops |
|-----------|---|---|
| Holden | Says Pops wouldn’t be interested in games and thinks technology is scary | |
| Mom | Suggests that Pops might be interested in video games and know something about technology | Seems to feel Pops is more interesting than Holden thinks |

With a partner, read aloud and act out the story’s beginning paragraphs. Then take turns explaining a theme, or lesson, that the author may be starting to develop in this part of the story.



Close Reading

On page 70, Holden doesn't want to spend time with Pops. On this page, **circle** words that tell how Holden's feelings change. Noticing how a character changes can help you understand a story's theme.

Hint

Which choice helps explain why Holden's attitude toward Pops changes?

Continue reading about Holden and Pops. Use the Close Reading and the Hint to help you answer the question.

(continued from page 70)

That afternoon, Holden sat hunkered over his video game controller making vintage airplanes swoop across the screen.

"Whatcha doin', Son?" Pops asked.

"Just a game," Holden answered distractedly. Then, remembering Mom's advice, he made himself ask, "Wanna see?"

Pops settled next to Holden and immediately exclaimed, "Say, is that plane a Tomahawk? You know, she can go up to 20,000 feet to evade that enemy fighter."

Holden pivoted to gape in shock. Pops shrugged and said, "Didn't I ever tell you about the Tomahawk I flew in '41?"

Circle the correct answer.

Which statement best expresses the theme of the story?

- A** Strong family bonds can develop only through shared interests.
- B** People from different generations have little in common.
- C** Children should always listen to advice from their parents.
- D** Assuming things about people may stop us from really knowing them.



Show Your Thinking

Look at the answer that you chose. Explain how specific text details helped you choose that answer.



With a partner, list and discuss additional life lessons that this story teaches. Use text details about characters, setting, and plot to support your discussion.



Read the story. Use the Study Buddy and the Close Reading to guide your reading.



Being aware of a character's feelings and how they change may help me figure out the theme of this story. So I'm going to underline words at the beginning and end of the story that reveal Angie's feelings.

Close Reading

Like many characters, Angie changes from the beginning to the end of the story. **Circle** text at the end of the story that reveals how she is different.

Look at the text you've underlined and circled. **Draw an X** next to the point in the story where it's clear that Angie has changed.

Genre: Realistic Fiction

One Word of Advice *by Charles Mills*

- 1 Angie was worn out preparing for the school career fair, which was her brainchild and her responsibility. She'd spent hours researching companies, contacting executives, and making sure the school had the technological capability to handle state-of-the-art presentations. With three days to go, she whisked into the media center and greeted her friend with, "Karim, I've been multitasking like crazy, and I still can't imagine how I'll get everything done."
- 2 Karim leaned over and said, "Delegate. Plenty of friends have offered their help, and you need to take them up on it."
- 3 Angie winced and clutched her clipboard more tightly. Deep down she was certain she was the only person who could get everything right. But Karim grabbed Angie's clipboard from her and flipped through the pages. "So. What seems most overwhelming to you?"
- 4 Angie groaned and sighed. Then she responded, "I'm not really sure how to evaluate the server's capabilities or the sound system's amplitude, and I don't know when I'm going to put together the introductory video."
- 5 Karim nodded, pulled a few pages out of the stack, and penciled names on each one. Then he handed them to Angie, and said, "I know people. Now delegate."
- 6 On the day of the fair, Angie looked as if she were having the time of her life when Karim saw her.
- 7 "Oh, Karim, did you see Danny's introductory video? Wasn't it fantastic? I could never have come up with that myself," she gushed. Angie realized that she needed to give credit where credit was due.
- 8 "From now on, call me Angie the Delegator; the best thing I ever did was hand that clipboard to you!"



Hints

Which sentence matches the author's description of Angie's actions and attitudes?

Which sentence describes Angie's attitude at the end of the story?

Which details best support the important theme of the story?

Use the Hints on this page to help you answer the questions.

- 1** At the beginning of the story, what is Angie's attitude?

 - A** She is frustrated by the lack of help she gets from her friends.
 - B** She trusts only Karim for reliable help and advice.
 - C** She thinks she's the only one competent to organize the event.
 - D** She is glad to be part of a team working on a project.

- 2** Which of the following sentences best describes an important theme about responsibility as described in "One Word of Advice"?

 - A** A strong leader bravely faces all challenges.
 - B** Good leaders trust others to do good work.
 - C** Seeking help is the last resort of a real leader.
 - D** People would rather give advice than lend a hand.

- 3** Select two pieces of evidence from "One Word of Advice" that support the correct answer to question 2. Check the boxes of your two choices.

 - "which was her brain child and her responsibility"
 - "'I've been multitasking like crazy'"
 - "the only person who could get everything right"
 - "'I could never have come up with that myself'"
 - "'how to evaluate the server's capability or the sound system's amplitude'"
 - "'the best thing I ever did was hand that clipboard to you'"



Read the story. Then answer the questions that follow.

from “The Canoe Breaker”

by Margaret Bemister

1 Once in a certain tribe there was a young man who had no name. For it was the law in that tribe that every youth had to do some deed that would give to him his name. This young man had tried in many ways to do something that would make the chief tell him that he was a great warrior. Several times he had tried to kill a bear, but had failed. He had gone forth in battle, hoping to kill some powerful enemy, but no one had fallen under his tomahawk. He had gone on long hunting trips, hoping to bring home the skin of some wild animal, but had always returned empty-handed. So his brave, young heart felt very sad, for the young men of the tribe laughed at him for not having won a name for himself.

2 One summer day, the tribe left their camp on the lake shore and went back among the hills on a hunting trip. After they had gone some distance, the young man left the others and wandered off by himself, hoping that this time he would kill some animal, and so be no longer scorned by his companions. He tramped for many hours through the forest and over the hills, without catching sight of anything. At length, he climbed one hill which was higher than the others, and from here he could see the small creek which flowed through the hills down to the lake. As he was looking at it, he thought he saw some dark objects along the shore of the creek. They seemed about the size of canoes. He scanned the hills anxiously, and at length could see a band of Indians making their way along the trail made by the hunters in the morning.

3 At once the young man knew there was great danger ahead, for these Indians, the Shuswaps, were the enemies of his tribe and now were following their trail, and when they found them, they would kill them. Quickly the young man made his way down the hill, and through the forest to the spot where the hunters had camped for their evening meal. Running up to them, he cried, “Return at once to your lodges. Our enemies are now on our trail. They are in the forest on the other side of this hill. I shall return and delay them while you reach your lodges in safety.”

4 Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned and ran back in the direction from which he had come. By short cuts through the hills, he made his way to the creek and found, as he expected, that the Indians had left their canoes tied at its mouth. Seizing his tomahawk, he began to break the canoes, and soon had a hole made in all of them except one. Leaving the creek, he mounted the hill and from there could see the Shuswaps. He began to wave his arms and call wildly to attract their chief. At last they noticed him and began to make their way towards him. The young man was delighted, for now he knew that his tribe could escape in safety, while their enemies were returning towards the creek. Soon the Shuswaps neared the top of the hill, and he knew he must think of some plan to delay them here. Suddenly he dropped to the ground and lay there as though insensible. With a run the Shuswaps gained the summit and surrounded him. He lay face downwards with his arms stretched out. They turned him over on his back and peered into his face. Not a muscle moved; not even his eyelids quivered. Then the chief bent over him and felt his heart. “He [is not dead], he said, “but the Great Spirit has called his spirit to go on a long journey. . . . Let us place his body under the pine-trees, there to await the return of the spirit.”



5 The Indians lifted the body of the young man, carried it to a clump of pine-trees and laid it down. Then they walked some yards away and held a council.

6 As soon as they were a safe distance away, the young man jumped up. He ran down the hill, and reaching the canoes, jumped into the unbroken one and began to paddle down the creek.

7 The Shuswaps turned and saw him. With fierce cries, they began to race down the hillside, and when they arrived at the spot where they had left their canoes, and saw what had happened, they filled the air with their angry yells. The young man was now out on the lake in the canoe, and they were unable to follow him, as all the other canoes were wrecked. They ran angrily along the lake shore, thinking he would land on their side, but instead, he made his way across the lake to the other side.

8 When the young man reached the shore, he again seized his tomahawk, and this time broke the canoe with which he had saved his life. The defeated Shuswaps, standing on the shore, saw him do this, and again they filled the air with their angry yells. There was nothing for them to do but to return to their camp, while the young man made his way along the lake shore to the village of his tribe. When he reached there, he found that he was no longer a man without a name. His brave deed had won for him the name of Kasamoldin—the canoe breaker—and ever afterwards in his tribe, and to others, he was known by this name.

Answer the questions. Mark your answers to questions 1–3 on the Answer Form to the right.

Answer Form

1 (A) (B) (C) (D)

2 (A) (B) (C) (D)

3 (A) (B) (C) (D)

**Number
Correct**

3

- 1** A central theme of this story is that great deeds arise from seeing how to best use our unique strengths and abilities. Which sentence from the story **best** illustrates this theme?
- A** “He had gone forth in battle, hoping to kill some powerful enemy, but no one had fallen under his tomahawk.”
- B** “Seizing his tomahawk, he began to break the canoes, and soon had a hole made in all of them except one.”
- C** “The Indians lifted the body of the young man, carried it to a clump of pine-trees and laid it down.”
- D** “There was nothing for them to do but to return to their camp, while the young man made his way along the lake shore to the village of his tribe.”



2 In what way does the plot contribute to the theme?

- A The young man must decide on a name that reveals his special skills.
- B The chief of the Shuswaps appreciates the young man for what he is.
- C The young man doesn't give up until he proves he is a great warrior.
- D The young man finally achieves success in a nontraditional way.

3 Which of the young man's character traits **best** helps to convey the theme?

- A the courage he shows in a dangerous situation
- B his physical strength in breaking the canoes
- C his determination to earn a name for himself
- D his fear when confronted by the Shuswaps

4 Explain how the author develops the theme over the course of "The Canoe Breaker." In your answer, include at least **two** details from different parts of the story.

 **Self Check** Go back and see what you can check off on the Self Check on page 51.