

How to Identify Theme

Good stories teach us something about ourselves or our world because they make us think about what we would do if we were in the story. The statement that a story makes about a big idea is called a **theme**. We'll look at some ways to identify themes in a story.

What is Theme?



A theme is the statement a work of literature makes about a big idea, such as love or society. There are two parts to a good theme: the **big idea** and the **statement** the story makes about the big idea.

Many different stories can teach us something about the same big idea, but they might have different lessons about that idea. For example, you might have seen or read lots of stories about kids growing up, but those stories may not always have the same statement about growing up. This is why we need both parts when we're talking about themes.

Step 1: Finding the Big Idea

The first thing we want to do is find the big idea. This won't be the same as the **plot**, which is the events in the story; instead, the big idea will be something that many stories could talk about. These are often emotions, stages of life, or sources of **conflict**, or tension in people's lives. The picture to the right has some examples of big ideas to help you get started.



Here are some things to think about to help you find the big idea:

- It will be **abstract**, meaning it is something that cannot be experienced with the five senses (touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell).
- There will be examples throughout the beginning, middle, and end of the story.

Step 1 Example: Finding the Big Idea in “Little Red Riding Hood”

Let’s say we were looking for the theme in “Little Red Riding Hood.” If you’ve not read the story, you can read it by clicking on this link: [Little Red Riding Hood \(americanliterature.com\)](http://americanliterature.com)

One big idea we could focus on is “**trust**.” We know this is a good choice because it’s abstract, and Red shows trust differently with each of the characters she meets.



Step 2: Figuring Out the Statement

Once you’ve figured out the big idea, the next step is to figure out what the story is teaching us about it. In most cases, the author won’t directly say the theme; it’s something you, as a reader, have to figure out. Here are some tips for figuring out what the author is teaching us about the big idea:

- Ask yourself, “What is the author teaching us about ____?”. If you put the big idea you got in the first step in the blank, the answer to that question will be the statement.
- Focus on the **protagonist**, or the main character of the story. One way to tell the protagonist from other characters is that they are normally the character who changes the most. How they change and what makes them change is closely related to what the story is teaching about the big idea.
- In all stories, there is a **climax**, which is the moment of greatest tension in the story when the protagonist must make a big decision or experiences something that changes them. What happens at the climax of the story and the way the protagonist reacts often gives us a clue about the statement on the big idea for that story.

Step 2 Example: Figuring Out the Statement in “Little Red Riding Hood”

To find the statement, we want to figure out what the author is teaching us about **trust**.

Red trusts the wolf, and that leads to the climax of the story when she talks with the wolf before he eats her. Red trusts that the wolf is her grandmother, but the wolf is lying to her.

What does this teach us about trust? One thing we can learn is to **be careful who we choose to trust**. This is a statement the author is making about the big idea. We’ve identified our theme!

