



MY Access! Writer's Workshop

Middle School Literary Analysis/Response to Literature

Prompt: Theme in Literature

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Theme in Literature

A theme is the main message a reader can learn about life or human nature from a literary piece. From a story you have read in class, identify a theme that the reader may learn from the story. In a well-organized essay, describe this theme. Use textual examples from the story to support your ideas and explain how they support the theme.

As you write, remember your essay will be scored based on how well you:

- develop a multi-paragraph response to the assigned topic that clearly communicates your thesis to the audience.
- support your thesis with meaningful examples and references from the text, carefully citing any direct quotes.
- organize your essay in a clear and logical manner, including an introduction, body, and conclusion.
- use well-structured sentences and language that are appropriate for your audience.
- edit your work to conform to the conventions of standard American English.

Theme:

The central idea or insight into life or human nature that a story presents.

Tips for identifying a theme:

- A writer doesn't usually directly state what the theme is. Theme emerges *from* the story—the reader uses clues to deduct (make an educated guess) what it is.
- Themes often reveal a truth about human behavior.
- When identifying themes, be specific. (Example: "*It is a mistake to marry only for love*" rather than simply "*love*").
- It is okay for the reader to challenge the writer's view of the world. You don't have to accept the theme as valid!

Teaching Ideas for MY Access! “Theme in Literature”

In order to write an effective essay, students need to:

1. Understand what “theme” is and how it is applied to literature.
2. Be able to understand and interpret the novel/story they are writing about.

Understanding Theme:

- Teach students what theme is and share tips for identifying a theme (page 1).
- Read “Yertle the Turtle” by Dr. Seuss as a whole class (it’s great to show the pictures if you have the book). Periodically stop and ask students to record their thoughts/reactions on the right side of the paper.
- After reading, discuss what the major issues are in “Yertle the Turtle” and the consequences of these issues. Fill out the T-Chart on page 7 as a whole class.
- Now, have students think about all the issues mentioned. What are the major themes or “life lessons” in “Yertle the Turtle?” You may need to help them form “theme-like” sentences (i.e. – Dictators are never satisfied by power”).
- Have them complete the “TQA” exercise on page 12. The quickwrite can be done at home if necessary.
- You may want to share that before becoming a children’s writer, Dr. Seuss was a political cartoonist. He was critical of the US during WWII—he did not think we got involved soon enough. It is not surprising nor is it accidental that these themes show up in his book. In fact, many of his political cartoons involved the use of turtles (see *Dr. Seuss Goes to War* by Richard H. Minear).

Understanding the Novel/Story

Use all of the strategies you ordinarily use to teach through a novel! Since you know students will end up writing about theme, you may want to choose several for students to discuss and focus on before beginning the novel. Two strategies for helping students “return to the text” are included here:

- “Dialogue With a Text” on page 10. If you have chosen a theme or themes for students to focus on, you may want to have them only choose passages that relate to that theme.
- “Evidence for a Theme” on page 9. This activity forces students to go back to the text and “prove” their theme is true. They can complete this handout while reading, or they can work in groups to complete it after finishing the novel.

Writing the Essay

- Teach the elements of a Literary Analysis Essay as outlined on page 11.
- Complete the T-Q-A for the novel. Make sure students use “looping” as described on page 13. After getting some preliminary thoughts on paper, have them write a thesis using the handout on page 14.
- Have them complete the “Organizing Your Essay” handout on page 15 before they log on to MY Access! to begin writing their essay!

- Look at the model essay that scored a 6 and the rubric and discuss why it is a strong essay (you may want to use the highlighting activity described on page 16).

Yertle the Turtle by Dr. Seuss

My thoughts & questions

On the far-away Island of Sala-ma-Sond, Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond. A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat. The water was warm. There was plenty to eat. The turtles had everything turtles might need. And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.

They *were*...until Yertle, the king of them all, decided the kingdom he ruled was too small. "I'm ruler," said Yertle, "of all that I see. But I don't see *enough*. That's the trouble with me. With this stone for a throne, I look down on my pond but I cannot look down on the places beyond. This throne that I sit on is too, too low down. It ought to be *higher!*" he said with a frown. "If I could sit high, how much greater I'd be! What a king! I'd be ruler of all I could see!"

So Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand and Yertle, the Turtle King, gave a command. He ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone and, using these turtles, he built a *new* throne. He made each turtle stand on another one's back and he piled them all up in a nine-turtle stack. And then Yertle climbed up. He sat down on the pile. What a wonderful view! He could see 'most a mile!"

"All mine!" Yertle cried. "Oh, the things I now rule! I'm kind of a cow! And I'm king of a mule! I'm king of a house! And, what's more, beyond that, I'm king of a blueberry bush and a cat "I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me! For I am the ruler of all that I see!"

And all through that morning, he sat there up high saying over and over, "A great king am I!" Until 'long about noon. Then he heard a faint sigh. "What's *that?*" snapped the king and he looked down the stack. And he saw, at the bottom, a turtle named Mack. Just a part of his throne. And this plain little turtle looked up and he said, "Beg your pardon, King Yertle. "I've pains in my back and my shoulders and knees. How long must we stand here, Your Majesty, please?"

"SILENCE!" the King of the Turtles barked back. "I'm king, and you're only a turtle named Mack. You stay in your place while I sit here and rule. I'm kind of a cow! And I'm king of a mule! I'm king of a house! And a bush! And a cat! But that isn't all. I'll do better than *that!* My throne shall be *higher!*" his royal voice thundered, "So pile up more turtles! I want 'bout two hundred!"

"Turtles! More turtles!" he bellowed and brayed. And more turtles 'way down in the pond were afraid. They trembled. They shook. But they came. They obeyed. From all over the pond, they came swimming by dozens. Whole families of turtles, with uncles and cousins. And all of them stepped on the head of poor Mack. One after another, they climbed up the stack.

THEN Yertle the Turtle was perched up so high, he could see forty miles from his throne in the sky! "Hooray!" shouted Yertle. "I'm king of the trees! I'm

king of the birds! And I'm king of the bees! I'm king of the butterflies! King of the air! Ah, me! What a throne! What a wonderful chair! I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh marvelous me! For I am the ruler of all that I see!"

Then again, from below, in the great heavy stack, came a groan from that plain little turtle named Mack. "Your Majesty, please...I don't like to complain, but down here below, we're feeling great pain. I know up on top you are seeing great sights, but down at the bottom we, too, should have rights. We turtles can't stand it. Our shells will all crack! Besides, we need food. We are starving!" groaned Mack.

"You hush up your mouth!" howled the mighty King Yertle. "You've no right to talk to the world's highest turtle. I rule from the clouds! Over land! Over sea! There's nothing, no, NOTHING, that's higher than me!"

But, while he was shouting, he saw with surprise that the moon of the evening was starting to rise up over his head in the darkening skies. "What's THAT?" snorted Yertle, "Say, what IS that thing that dares to be higher than Yertle the King? I shall not allow it! I'll go higher still! I'll build my throne higher! I can and I will! I'll call some more turtles. I'll stack 'em to heaven! I need 'bout five thousand, six hundred and seven!"

But, as Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand and started to order and give the command, that plain little turtle below in the stack, that plain little turtle whose name was just Mack, decided he'd taken enough. And he had. And that plain little lad got a little bit mad and that plain little Mack did a plain little thing. *He burped!* And his burp shook the throne of the king!

And Yertle the Turtle, the king of the trees, the king of the air and the birds and the bees, the king of a house and a cow and a mule...well, *that* was the end of the Turtle King's rule! For Yertle, the king of all Sala-ma-Sond, fell of his high throne and fell *Plunk!* In the pond!

And today the great Yertle, that Marvelous he, is king of the Mud. That is all he can see. And the turtles, of course...all the turtles are free as turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be.

Issues in "Yertle the Turtle"	Consequences of These Issues

Evidence for a Theme

Text: _____

Theme _____

Examples of Theme

My thoughts, opinions, reactions, questions

Dialogue With a Text Reading Response Log

“To me a book is like a friend that can entertain you for hours, making you laugh and cry, and molding your soul. I always thought that a book was a conversation between two people. The first person being the author, and the second being you.”

--9th Grade Student in Long Beach, CA

As we are reading the novel, you will be asked to keep a Reading Response Log. In this Response Log you will first copy down specific passages from the book that strike you as important or meaningful. Then you will write down your own thoughts, feelings, opinions, and questions about each passage. The purpose of this activity is to think about what the text means to you—there are no right or wrong answers.

If you have trouble starting, try beginning your response with one of these prompts. These will also keep you from simply SUMMARIZING the passage (that’s not what I’m looking for).

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. I wonder... | 11. I thought... |
| 2. I began to think of... | 12. I can't believe... |
| 3. I suppose... | 13. If I had been... |
| 4. I don't see... | 14. I was reminded of... |
| 5. I like the idea... | 15. Why did... |
| 6. I know the feeling... | 16. Maybe... |
| 7. I noticed... | 17. I wish... |
| 8. I love/hate the way... | 18. Something that bothers me is... |
| 9. I was surprised... | 19. I predict... |
| 10. I can't really understand... | 20. Now I can see why... |

Make sure you write down the PAGE NUMBER each passage is on. You don't have to write down the entire passage; you can use ellipsis (...) to indicate that the passage continues. It may be helpful to draw a small picture of where the passage falls on the page.

Example:

Passage	My Response
. “Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion...”(6).	I like the way that the writer compares aging to an onion—we grow older in layers. It’s not like our past experiences just disappear when we get older, they are inside of us always, one layer on top of another.

Argument Writing

Purpose:

- To convince
- To state a problem and propose a solution
- To analyze cause/effect relationships
- To discuss controversial issues

Characteristics:

- Logically supports a clear position or perspective with relevant evidence
- Provides convincing arguments and counterarguments
- Reflects analytical thinking and/or evaluation
- 1st or 3rd person point-of-view

Examples:

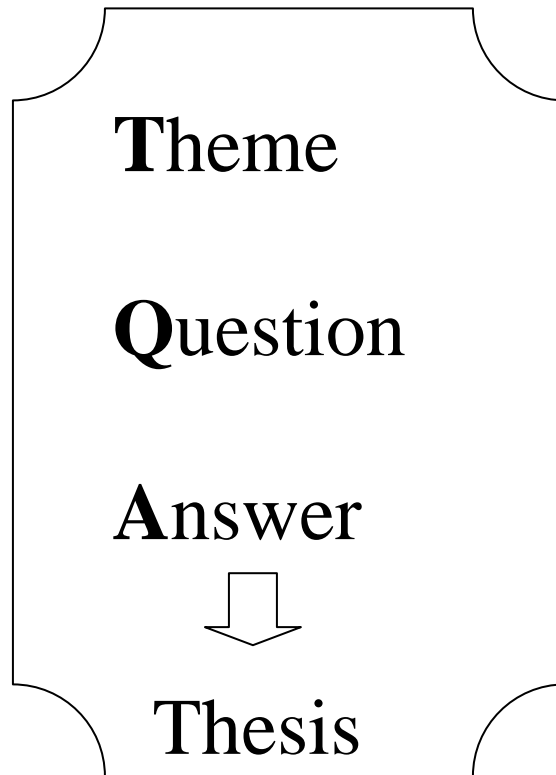
- Persuasive essay
- Persuasive letter or letter to editor
- Editorial
- Compare/contrast essay
- Political speech
- Critical reviews
- Character analysis

Response to Literature

Shares the same purpose and characteristics as above, but demonstrates an understanding and interpretation of literary work and supports viewpoint through specific references to text

T-Q-A Essay Prewriting

Use the following strategy to help students “discover” ideas by writing. This activity may also help them find a focus and a thesis for their essay.



Procedure:

- Brainstorm as a whole class themes in the novel/story just completed (or assign themes). Write the themes on large pieces of poster paper.
- Have students walk around the classroom writing questions about each theme. You may want to assign groups and give each group several minutes at each poster.
- Students choose a theme they want to work with, and they write ONE QUESTION about this theme at the top of a blank piece of paper and “quickwrite” an answer to it (8-10 minutes). You may want them to prepare another theme and question in case they run out of ideas for the one they first chose to write about.
- Students use “looping” (as described on the next page) to refine their thinking about this topic and to prepare to write a thesis statement.

- Share in small groups what students wrote before “assigning” the essay!

LOOPING

Looping is an exercise many writers use to narrow the focus of a piece. Often, in early drafts we write anything and everything that comes to mind about our topic (and this is okay!). As we revise, we want to “zoom in” on only the most important and interesting parts of our narrative. We need to discover our PURPOSE for writing.

Tell Students:

Step 1: Re-read your entire piece.

Step 2: Choose one line that stands out to you. Maybe it is an extremely important moment in your story, maybe it is the most exciting point, or maybe you just like the idea you are trying to express.

Step 3: Underline or highlight that line.

Step 4: On a blank piece of paper, write ONLY that line at the top of the paper.

Step 5: Now, for next ten minutes, write as QUICKLY as you can about only that line.

Step 6: Think about what happened. Do you like what you just wrote more than your first draft? If so, you now have a NEW and more specific focus for your story. At the very least, one part of your story has been “exploded.”



Preparing to Write MY Access! Theme in Literature

Your **thesis statement** is a sentence or two that tells the reader the **main argument** you will be making in your essay. It cannot simply be a fact from the story, but it needs to include **your opinion**. In other words, your thesis is an interpretation, and your essay will explain WHY your thesis is true. Let's begin by writing a thesis. *You can use one of the formats below, but it is okay to change words or to try your own format.*

I. Thesis/Controlling Idea (try one of these):

1. The three main themes in _____ are _____, _____, and _____ . These teach the reader _____ .

2. _____ is a major theme in the story. It teaches the reader _____ .

II. Introduction: Your introduction needs to do these things:

- Introduce the title and author of the story.
- Give the reader some background information about the story and/or your theme.
- Present (usually at the end) your thesis statement.
- Try to catch the reader's attention!

III. Body: The body of your essay contains at least three paragraphs that illustrate and support your thesis statement. For this essay, try these body paragraphs:

For thesis 1: Each body paragraph (at least three) will introduce one of the themes mentioned in the thesis and explain why it is important and what it teaches the reader.

For thesis 2: Each body paragraph (at least three) will provide a specific reason and example for why the ONE theme chosen teaches the reader the important lesson mentioned in your thesis.

IV. Conclusion: The conclusion often restates the thesis and offers the reader some final thoughts about your essay. Try to think up a way to push your reader’s thinking about your topic even deeper.

ORGANIZING YOUR ESSAY

Thesis Statement

--

Support for Thesis/Topic Sentence

Examples from Text as Evidence

Support for Thesis/Topic Sentence	Examples from Text as Evidence
1.	
2.	

3.	
----	--

Revising Your Essay

Revision means to “re-see” your writing. Before you “re-see” it, however, you need to re-read it! Use the following suggestions to help you determine what you need to do to improve your essay.

Introduction (must include first three bullet points):

- Highlight background information about the topic in YELLOW.
- Underline your thesis statement in BLUE.
- Circle the title and author of the story.
- Is your introduction interesting? ___yes ___no

Body (for each paragraph):

- Highlight your topic sentence (the sentence that tells your reader what the paragraph is about) in BLUE.
 - If you don't have a topic sentence check here—you need to write one!
 - Does your topic sentence support your thesis statement?

Paragraph 1	___yes	___no
Paragraph 2	___yes	___no
Paragraph 3	___yes	___no

- Highlight the examples *from the story* you use to support your topic sentence in GREEN.
 - If you don't have any examples check here—you need to add some in!

- Highlight your own thoughts and commentary in RED. This is the part of your paragraph that explains why your examples are important.
 - If you don't have any commentary check here—you need to add your own thoughts in!

Conclusion

Does it restate the thesis or your main argument in a new way? ___yes ___no
 Does it push your reader's thinking deeper? ___yes ___no

MY Access! Writing Domains

Type of Writing:

Your writing will be evaluated on the basis of five domains or trains of writing. Study each domain on the rubric and USE BULLET POINTS to take notes so that you can define each one. The feedback you receive will use the language on this chart.

Focus & Purpose	Content & Development	Organization	Language Use & Style	Mechanics & Conventions
				<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Piece is paragraphed• Grammar errors do not interfere with the message• Uses proper punctuation• Excellent spelling

Model Essays

Score 6:

The Door in the Wall, a classic piece of English Literature, is a well-crafted novel that takes readers on an unforgettable adventure and has many worthwhile themes and lessons as the story progresses. Set in the Medieval Times of Shropshire, London, this wonderful tale written by Marguerite de Angeli follows the journeys of a young boy named Robin. Robin is lame in his legs and in the beginning of the novel is considered a brat. This all changes however, when Brother Luke whisks Robin away and takes him to the castle of Sir Peter de Lindsay. He gradually gains strength in both his body and mind, and begins to appreciate himself a little bit more. Robin goes on to discover that he is not helpless and saves the castle and learns that there is more than one way to serve the king. Although Robin is crippled, he was able to pull himself out of helplessness and become a hero. Adults and children alike will learn valuable lessons of strength, courage, and opportunity from this awesome novel.

The first worthwhile theme that runs through this story is strength. Strength is shown as the ultimate goal wanted to achieve and as something that appears both mentally and physically. We see the essence of strength in this tale shown by the quote, "His chest felt tightly squeezed, and as if sharp knives pierced him. He seemed unable to breathe, and his head felt ready to burst. But he struck out fiercely, and after a few strokes began to breathe more easily. Warmth crept through his body and a feeling of power, as if nothing could be too difficult for him. He swam strongly across the swift current toward the path he had seen from the top of the tower." This quote takes place when Robin must swim across the depths of a river to reach help. This is the ultimate test of physical strength for Robin, because his legs are lame and he must only use his arms. Beating all odds, Robin makes it across the river using the great physical strength that he has achieved by hard work and practice and accomplishes his goal. In this story, Robin gains strength which leads him to believe in himself and gain courage as well.

The second major theme shown throughout the course of this novel is courage. Courage is one of the things that Robin gained throughout the story. If Robin did not have courage, he would have never had saved the castle and become the hero. Courage assisted Robin a great deal in his adventures, and the only way that he found this courage was by believing in himself and knowing that he could do it. An example of the courage shown by Robin in The Door in the Wall is when it reads "Let me go," said Robin. "I can go out the small door at the north whilst it is early morning..." This quote shows Robin's newfound courage because he volunteered himself for the dangerous mission of seeking help and fooling the Welsh at the same time. Knowing that this was a deadly feat, he willingly and courageously defied the Welsh and was able to get help and save the day. At the beginning of this novel, Robin was barely courageous enough to go into the water, yet alone cross paths with armed men. He has shown a great deal of character development in the form of courage throughout the course of the story. While courage is a value that made it possible for Robin to save the castle, he would have never had gained courage if Brother Luke hadn't opened his eyes and showed him the final theme, opportunity, and where it hides.

The final theme in The Door in the Wall is opportunity. There are many opportunities throughout this book, which is why it is the main theme. The title, The

Door in the Wall, represents opportunity. You must search hard to look for valuable opportunities, and when you take the opportunity, you are rewarded. The Door in the Wall represents opportunity in the quote “For reading is another door in the wall, dost understand, my son?” Robin smiled and nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I see now what you mean by the door in the wall.” The door in the wall, in this quote, obviously represents opportunity. Robin must seize the valuable opportunity of learning how to read, to educate himself and better assist him on future outings. Robin went on to learn how to read and write, and it paid off greatly by the end of the book. It is important to take chances when you get them, for opportunity is always knocking.

This fine children’s tale does much more than just entertain. It displays many worthy themes woven throughout the course of the book. Its meaning is much deeper than just an easy read. It teaches valuable lessons that are necessary to lead a successful life. In conclusion, this well-crafted novel displays the themes of strength, courage, and opportunity.

Score 5:

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The final theme in *The Door in the Wall* is opportunity. There are many opportunities throughout this book, which is why it is the main theme. The title, *The Door in the Wall*, represents opportunity. You must search hard to look for valuable opportunities, and when you take the opportunity, you are rewarded. *The Door in the Wall* represents opportunity in the quote "For reading is another door in the wall, dost understand, my son?" Robin smiled and nodded. "Yes," he said. "I see now what you mean by the door in the wall." The door in the wall, in this quote, obviously represents opportunity. Robin must seize the valuable opportunity of learning how to read, to educate himself and better assist him on future outings. Robin went on to learn how to read and write, and it paid off greatly by the end of the book. It is important to take chances when you get them, for opportunity is always knocking.

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Score 4:

The theme of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is true love always prevails. I think this because when a situation like Hermia and Lysander's is looked at, it is easy to see that they stayed together through thick and thin. In the end they became a happily married couple, and everything turned out fine.

Helena stayed devoted to Demetrius no matter what he did or said to her. This is because she had true love for him. Even though Oberon seemed to be cold-hearted with his situation regarding Titania, he turned out to be sympathetic. When he saw and noticed Helena's plight, he thought he would help her out. He told Robin Goodfellow to find the flower and anoint Demetrius' eyes. Although, it may have taken a few tries to get it right, he did it. By doing this he was also helping Lysander and Hermia with their situation. So they both became perfect couples.

When Duke Theseus was on his hunting trip, he found the four lovers. He noticed that they were all in love. This gave him an idea to invite them to join his wedding. His actual speech was, "These couples shall eternally be knit, and, for the morning now is something worn, our purposed hunting shall be set aside, away with us to Athens; three and three, we'll hold a feast in great solemnity." Even though Egeus didn't agree with Theseus' idea he had to live with it. Hermia certainly lucked out with this, because it

would usually be unheard of at this time for a girl to decide who she married. Luckily for her the Duke could change the law. I think that is proof that true love will always prevail.

When events such as these occur, it shows a person's capability for true love. Helena's devotion was an example of this. This is why I think the theme of this Shakespearean play is: True love always prevails.

Score 3:

The third wish is a story about a man that wishes for a wife as beautiful as the forest. His wife was a swan that was unhappy. So he wished to turn her back into a swan. The monkey's paw is a story about an old man that wishes for 2,000 pounds and son dies. They wish for her son to come back, something bad starts to happen. The theme is you should be careful what you wish for. You should be careful what you wish for because in the third wish a guy wishes for a wife and it turns out that she is unhappy. She is unhappy because she was a swan and she misses swimming in the pond. In the end the guy is unhappy too. That's why you should be careful what you wish for.

In the monkey's paw you should also be careful what you wish for. Because his dad wishes for 2,000 pounds and his son dies and the insurance company gives them 2,000 pound. Second she wishes for her son to come back from the dead. When she wishes for her son to come back something weird and bad starts to happening. That's why you should be careful what you wish for.

In real life you should be careful what you wish for because it could come true. Each of the story's they wished for different things and bad things happen to them. Like a man got an unhappy wife and at the end he was unhappy too. In the other story his dad wishes for 2,000 pounds and their son died. That's why you should be careful what you wish for.

Score 2:

In "What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?" by Ari. The theme is unhappiness and can cause blindness. One way the theme is presented is shown is how Ms. Markham is so depressed that she doesn't see anything

In the story Ms. Markham is always sad since her husband left her. That's why she was unhappy and is becoming blind and nothing makes her happy. She's always in her house in the dark until Willie comes from school. Ms. Markham does not listen to Willie that much. It's because she's getting sick and doesn't listen to Willie.

Ms. Markham is like a fish in a cave That's related because she is the in the dark for a very long time and if she doesn't gets out of her unhappiness, she is going to get blind.

Score 1:

The book A Midsummer Nights Dream is about love. A love that can never be seperated. Unless you have magic flower peadles and squeez them in peoples eyes. This book teches you that love is blind and the course of love never did run smooth. The coarse of love never did run smooth, that is what lysander said when he decided to risk it all for love. Thesis could cut there heads off just for trying to leave his Athenean rule.

I think this is a book about love and how it conquers all.