Finding the Theme: Clues, Growth, and Summary

Teacher		**Class**	Grade 8
Subject	ELA	**Topic**	Reading comprehension: theme
Date		**Room**	
Lesson length	60 minutes	**Country**	United States

Students learn to find theme and trace how it grows. They track clues and write a short objective summary.

Curriculum links

- 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
- provide an objective summary of the text

Learning objectives

- Students will determine a theme and trace its growth from start to end.
- Students will explain how character, setting, and plot develop theme with evidence.
- Students will write an objective summary of key events in order.

Success criteria

- I can state the theme in one full sentence about life.
- I can show how character, setting, and plot built the theme.
- I can write a short summary with facts only and no opinions.

What students already know

Ask: What is the difference between topic and theme? Show thumbs up if you can give an example of each in 2 minutes.

Key words

theme	the author's big message about life shown by the story
central idea	what a text is mostly about, said in one sentence
development	how a message gets clearer step by step through a story
objective summary	a short retelling with only important facts in order and no opinions
setting	where and when a story happens, plus the mood of the place

Materials

- Slides 1-4, 6-7, 9-10, 12
- Video clip 3 Theme in literature (0:00-5:00) on slide 6
- Copies of Worksheet Passage The Empty Lot (page 3), one per student
- Sticky notes in three colors, pencils, chart paper, markers

Before the lesson

- Print one copy of The Empty Lot passage per student and one chart paper per group
- Sort sticky notes into three colors for character choice, setting detail, and plot turn
- Load slides 1-4, 6-7, 9-10, 12 and test Video clip 3 (0:00-5:00) with sound
- Set desks for groups of three to four with pencils and markers ready

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Lesson outline

0–8 min **Starter** 8 min · Whole class

Activate topic versus theme and set the goal of hunting theme clues.

YOU DO

1. Show Slide 1 title and Slide 2 objectives and read the I can statements aloud.
2. Show Slide 3 key words and Slide 4 Topic Is Not Theme for sorting talk.
3. Say the hook and model one topic to theme change with courage.
4. Cold-call two students to turn friendship into a full theme sentence.

STUDENTS DO

1. Listen, repeat the three clues: character, setting, and plot.
2. Turn to a neighbor and turn honesty into a full theme sentence.
3. Share ideas and vote which topic could fit our lesson story.

Say: A good story does not hand you the big idea on page one. It hides three clues. Let's find all three together. Today we will track character, setting, and plot to name the theme and then summarize without opinions.

Worked example: Topic: courage. Not a theme because it is only one word. Theme: Sticking with hard work even after failure helps people belong. This is a theme because it is a full sentence message about life that a story could prove.

Ask: Is friendship a theme or a topic? Why? (A topic, because theme must be a full-sentence message about life, not one word.) · Which three parts help theme grow? (A character's choices and change, the setting and mood, and the plot problem and ending.)

Check understanding: Use thumbs up, sideways, down for: I can tell topic from theme. If many are unsure, model one more example with fairness before moving on.

Support: Give sentence stems: Topic is ___ . Theme is ___ because in life ___ . **Stretch:** Ask students to give two different theme sentences for the same topic of growing up.

Use: Slides 1-4

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8–20 min **Teaching** 12 min · Whole class

Model how to spot theme clues in character, setting, and plot.

YOU DO

1. Play Video clip 3 (0:00-5:00) on Slide 6 about how characters show theme.
2. Show Slide 7 Track Theme Like a Detective mindmap and think aloud with paragraph 1.
3. Model color coding: pink for character choice, yellow for setting detail, blue for plot turn.
4. Model paragraph 2 clue and ask how the idea gets stronger or shifts.

STUDENTS DO

1. Watch video and jot one way characters show theme.
2. Follow the mindmap and place sticky-note colors on the modeled clues.
3. Answer turn-and-talk: how did paragraph 2 make the message stronger?

Say: Detectives collect clues in order. We will mark one clue for character, one for setting, and one for plot. Then we ask: what message about life is getting clearer? Watch how I link each clue to a possible theme.

Worked example: Paragraph 1: Setting clue - In late August, an empty lot behind the middle school sat full of trash and dry weeds. Character feeling - Everything felt strange and lonely, from the loud hallways to the new bus route. Link: The lot matched how she felt inside: ignored and overgrown. Paragraph 2: Plot turn - Instead of answering, she dug the hard soil, planted the seeds, and carried water in a bucket from home. Growing idea: Belonging may grow when a person keeps trying and cares for a place.

Ask: How does the setting in paragraph 1 push toward theme? (The trash-filled lonely lot matches her lonely feeling and sets up need to belong.) · How does her action in paragraph 2 develop the idea? (Digging, planting, and carrying water shows persistence despite doubt, pointing to keeping trying.)

Check understanding: Show fingers 1-3 for how many clue types you can name. Reteach any missing type with the mindmap if needed.

Support: Provide a printed mindmap with icons for choices, place/time/mood, and problem/turning point.
Stretch: Ask students to predict what storm in paragraph 3 might test about the theme.

Use: Video clip 3 (0:00–5:00), Slides 6–7

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20–45 min **Main Activity** 25 min · Groups

Track theme development across beginning, middle, and end in groups.

YOU DO

1. Hand out The Empty Lot passage and three sticky-note colors with chart paper.
2. Direct silent individual reading, because reading is generally an individual activity done silently [3].
3. Direct groups to lay notes in order: beginning, middle, end for character, setting, plot.
4. Circulate with prompts about what the main character wanted, chose, and what changed after [1].

STUDENTS DO

1. Read silently and mark one clue in beginning, one in middle, one at end.
2. Lay sticky notes in order on chart paper and discuss how theme gets clearer or changes.
3. Write one-sentence theme plus two sentences explaining how character, setting, and plot built it.

Say: Read silently first and mark three clues. Use pink for a character choice, yellow for a setting detail, and blue for a plot turn. In your group, lay them beginning to end and discuss how the theme gets clearer.

Worked example: Beginning pink: 14-year-old clears one corner alone. Yellow: late August lot full of trash, lonely mood. Blue: plants seeds despite doubt. Middle blue: heavy night storm flooded the lot and washed most of the sprouts away. End pink and blue: They worked together all afternoon, building higher rows and sharing the watering job. Theme sentence: Belonging grows when people keep trying and care for a place together.

Ask: How did the final choice plus setting and plot develop the theme? (Working together in October garden after storm shows belonging comes from shared persistence.) · Did the character learn, resist, or cause the lesson? (Learned: from wanting to quit to staying and accepting help, which proves the theme.)

Check understanding: Collect chart quick-scan: each group must show theme sentence plus character, setting, plot links. Pull back groups missing one link for reteach.

Support: Give a frame with blanks for character, setting, and plot, plus a word bank like bravery, fairness, growing up, and pressure. **Stretch:** Ask students to track a second, smaller theme and explain where the two themes connect or conflict.

Use: Worksheet Passage 'The Empty Lot' (page 3), Slides 7 and 9

45–60 min **Plenary** 15 min · Pairs

Practice objective summary and confirm theme versus summary are separate.

YOU DO

1. Show Slide 10 photo caption and model crossing out opinion words like best and boring.
2. Guide pairs in frequent process-based writing to draft and quickly revise a two-sentence summary [1].
3. Show Slide 12 quiz and check topic versus theme and story parts.
4. Have two pairs read summaries and lead thumbs-up vote for objective, complete, short.

STUDENTS DO

1. With a partner, draft a two-sentence objective summary with no opinions.
2. Answer Slide 12 quiz questions and compare theme sentence to summary.
3. Vote with thumbs up if each read-aloud summary is objective, complete, and short.

Say: Editors cut opinions fast. Keep the facts, cut the feelings, keep the meaning. Write two sentences in order with no I think. Put your theme in a separate sentence, not mixed into the summary.

Worked example: Opinion version to fix: I think the boring lot story was the best about nice friendship. Objective version: A 14-year-old cleared part of an empty lot and planted seeds. After a storm destroyed the sprouts, she replanted with neighbors and they shared a garden by October. Separate theme: Belonging grows when people keep trying and care for a place together.

Ask: Is friendship a theme or a topic? Why? (Topic. Theme must be a full-sentence message about friendship.) · Name two story parts that develop theme. (Any two: character choices and change, setting and mood, plot problem and ending.) · What must an objective summary leave out? (Opinions, I think language, and tiny extra details; keep central idea and key events in order.)

Check understanding: Use exit tickets to check summary has facts in order and theme is separate. If opinions remain, model cutting one opinion word as a class.

Support: Provide a starter frame for who did what, what problem came up, and how it ended, with opinions already removed. **Stretch:** Have students add one final sentence that states the theme separately from the summary without mixing opinion words.

Use: Slides 10 and 12

Common mistakes

Mistake	How to spot it	How to fix it
Writing a one-word topic like courage as the theme	Theme line is one word or label with no message about life	Expand to full sentence using stem: ___ leads to ___ or ___ requires ___, then link to character, setting, plot [1].
Adding opinions like I think, best, boring to a summary	Summary has feeling words or judgments instead of only facts in order	Cross out opinion words and keep who, problem, key events, and ending only.
Finding theme only at the end and ignoring growth	Evidence comes from one paragraph with no beginning-middle-end change	Require one clue from beginning, middle, and end and ask how each makes the message clearer.

Support

- Use frame with blanks for character, setting, and plot plus word bank: bravery, fairness, growing up

Stretch

- Track a second, smaller theme and explain where the two themes connect or conflict

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pressure

- Let students discuss with a partner first and use action-reason-result chart before whole-class share
- Provide caption starters first, next, then, finally for ordering events
- Argue how the story would point to a different theme if the main character had made the opposite choice
- Add a separate theme line after summary and cite one early and one late action to show growth

For the LSE or teaching assistant

Sit with target groups during main activity; prompt sticky-note sorting by paragraph number and scribe theme frame if needed.

Check for understanding

Question	Answer
State a theme for The Empty Lot in one full sentence.	Belonging grows when people keep trying and care for a place together.
How did setting help develop that theme? Give one detail.	The trash-filled lot in August felt lonely, then the shared October garden showed belonging.
Write a one-sentence objective summary of the text with no opinions.	A 14-year-old planted a lot garden, lost sprouts in a storm, then replanted with neighbors and shared the harvest.

Homework

List one character, one setting, and one plot clue from a book you read that points to its theme.

Sources

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