

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Fiction Track

Step Four: Author's Purpose and Theme

Before we get too much further, I want to take a day where you think about your purpose in writing this story. We want this story to be well-crafted, not just thrown together because we think writing is fun. To do this, we're going to think through *why* you're writing and *how* you're going to communicate your purpose to the reader through theme.

Don't let the academic-sounding term throw you off. The "theme" of a story simply refers to its main topic or central idea. I suppose the major theme of a given work is the sum of all its ideas. Whether you like it or not, your story has a theme, because all stories ultimately have one major idea. This is because we as writers are fueled by ideas.

Before you even begin work on your story, you should identify what your story's theme is. Ask yourself what, underneath all of your plots and subplots, your characters and your descriptions, is your story really about. Is it a story about how love conquers all? Is it about the complicated relationship between mothers and daughters? Good versus evil is a common theme. Is your story about how evil never triumphs and good always wins? Is it about how evil triumphs despite good? Any of these make excellent examples of themes. Of course, your story may have more than one theme. But you should at least identify one "main theme," or major idea, that your story will focus on. It may also help to identify the "spine" of the story, or the main narrative thread. The spine is usually just one sentence that summarizes what the story is mostly about. This will help you retain your central idea throughout the work and prevent you from getting sidetracked by subplots, secondary characters, and long passages that don't relate.

Take a look at the main character(s) in your current work-in-progress, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is my character at the beginning of the story?
- What are their flaws, and what holds them back from happiness or fulfillment?
- How do the events of my story shape my character for the better or the worse?
- Do they overcome their characters flaws and the obstacles that stand in their way? How so?
- Who has my character become by the end of the story?

Once you've answered these questions, review what you've written and try to identify any themes that naturally arise. What are you trying to say about these topics? Voila! Just like that, you've found your thematic statement — one that you've already built directly into your story.

How to weave the theme into your story

A solidly presented theme will emerge through many different facets of your story. Start thinking about how your theme will become apparent to your readers. Some of these ways include:

- Through characters' actions, thoughts and speech
- Through symbolic use of the environment
- Through repeating ideas
- Through highlighting symbols or landmarks
- Through contrasting values

The question then becomes how, exactly, do you build a theme into your work? Other than your **characterization**, the main way is through **motifs** and **symbols**. Taken together, these three things are powerful tools when it comes to making sure your theme is easily understood and constantly present in your story. Let's look at each one in turn.

A **motif** is a recurring structure, symbol, or literary device that helps develop and inform your theme. The more a motif turns up in a story, the more prominently it will factor into your theme. For instance, taking *The Great Gatsby* as an example, some of its motifs include geography (the East Coast represents decadence and cynicism, while the West represents more traditional, straightforward "American" values) and the weather (the changing weather patterns reflect the shifting tone and mood of the characters and the story).

A **symbol**, on the other hand, is an image, a character, an object, or figure that represents something beyond whatever is just on the surface. At the end of the first chapter of *Gatsby*, the narrator, Nick Carraway, observes Jay Gatsby emerging from his mansion at night. Carraway considers calling out and introducing himself, but thinks better of it: "I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness." This green light makes several appearances during the novel, most notably again at the very end: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us." Clearly, the light resembles something more than just a green light. It represents Daisy, who in turn represents Gatsby's unattainable American dream. Further, green is the color of money and envy, two things that Gatsby struggles with throughout the novel. The light is a symbol, deepening the story's themes.

Think through your current outline and characters. Then think of your main theme (sum of all your ideas). How are you going to get your point across? Think through some of these options given above and make some notes within your outline (or on a separate sheet of paper) of ways you can incorporate different tools to get your theme across throughout your story.