

Theme & Central Message

Lesson 1: topic, plot or theme?

GRADES 3-5



CHANGE



THEME

ANCHOR CHART

2 ORIGINAL STORIES

SORT + EXIT TICKET

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Teacher page: goal, 15-20 minute plan, standards
- Illustrated anchor chart: finding the theme
- Guided fable with think-aloud notes (Level A)
- Independent story (Level B) + 7 questions
- Cut-and-glue sort (12 cards) + mat
- Exit ticket (two per page) and answer keys

Topic, plot or theme?

LEARNING GOAL

I can find a story's theme by looking at how the main character changes, and say it as a full sentence about people.

THE 15-20 MINUTE LESSON

3 min	Hook	Anchor chart (page 3): read Kit's story. Ask: what is it about? What happens? What does it teach?
8 min	I do	Read Bear and the Bridge aloud (page 4). Think aloud with the notes for sentences 4, 11, 14 and 18.
5 min	We do	Partners compare Bear in sentence 8 and sentence 14. What did he learn? Say it as a sentence about people.
3 min	Check	Exit ticket (page 9), two per page.

Next day, centers or homework: The Broken Flowerpot and seven questions (pages 5-6) and the cut-and-glue sort (pages 7-8). Answer key: page 10.

Say: The theme is what the story teaches about life. Look at how the main character changes. Then say the lesson so it fits people, not just that character. Should and always are clues, not rules: ask whether the story shows it.

LISTEN AND LOOK FOR

- Students name the change: what the character does at the start and at the end.
- Students say the theme as a full sentence, not one word ("teamwork" is a topic).
- A student who picks the answer that copies the story's words needs one more example: retelling what happens is not a theme.

STANDARDS (QUOTED FROM THE OFFICIAL COMMON CORE ELA STANDARDS)

RL.3.2	Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.
RL.4.2	Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
RL.5.2	Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

This unit teaches the theme part of each standard with original fables, folktale-style tales and realistic stories; it does not teach summarizing, drama or poetry. Check your state or district document for its own wording.

WHERE THIS LESSON FITS

This is Lesson 1 of the Theme & Central Message Complete Unit (Grades 3-5). Page 11 shows real pages from the unit and what it adds.

Finding the Theme

What does the story teach about life?



CHANGE

Look at the main character at the start and at the end.

What did they learn?

IN THE STORY

“Kit ate the last plum alone, and her brother walked away. The next day, Kit shared her pear, and they played all afternoon.”



THEME

Say the lesson as a full sentence about people.

Check: does the story show it?

THEME

“Sharing can bring people closer.”

NOT A THEME (TRICKY!)

- 1 A topic is not a theme. “Sharing” is one word: say what the story teaches about it.
- 2 Retelling what happens is not a theme. “Kit shared her pear” is the plot.
- 3 A lesson for one character is not a theme yet. “Kit should share” is only about Kit.
- 4 Lesson words are clues, not rules. Should and always do not make a theme, and good advice is not a theme unless the story shows it.

Listen to the think-aloud. How does Bear change from sentence 8 to 14?



Bear and the Bridge

● Level A · 169 words

- 1 Dark clouds rolled over the forest, and the stream was rising fast. 2 Bear needed a bridge to carry his food across before the rain. 3 "I am the strongest animal here," he said. 4 "I can build it by myself."
- 5 Beaver and Otter came along the bank with armloads of sticks. 6 "We can help you carry the logs," said Otter. 7 Bear shook his head. 8 "I do not need anyone," he said.
- 9 Bear lifted a huge log onto his shoulder. 10 It was too long to hold, and it slid into the water. 11 He tried again and again, but each log rolled off the rocks. 12 Soon the sky grew dark, and Bear's arms were shaking.
- 13 Bear sat down on the muddy bank. 14 "Will you work with me?" he asked quietly. 15 Beaver held one end of a log, and Otter held the other. 16 Bear pushed from the middle, and the log stayed in place. 17 By the time the rain came, the bridge was finished. 18 That night, Bear shared his berries with his new friends.

THINK ALOUD

4 At the start

Bear says he can build it by himself. That is how he acts at the start.

11 The problem

His plan keeps failing. How will Bear respond?

14 The change

Bear asks for help. He has changed. What did he learn?

18 Topic, then theme

Topic: teamwork. Theme: Some jobs are too big to do alone. It fits people, not just Bear.

Read the story. Then answer the questions on the next page. Ask: how does Theo change? What does the story teach?



The Broken Flowerpot

■ Level B · 206 words

- 1 Theo was kicking his soccer ball against the garage wall after school. On the tenth kick, the ball sailed over the fence into Mrs. Park's yard. He heard a loud crack. When Theo peeked through a gap in the boards, he saw her blue flowerpot lying in pieces on the patio, with dirt spilled everywhere.
- 2 Theo's heart pounded. Nobody had seen the ball fly over the fence. He could slip back inside, and Mrs. Park might think a raccoon had knocked the pot over. Theo grabbed his ball and climbed the steps to his back door. Then he stopped with his hand on the doorknob.
- 3 At dinner that night, Theo could barely eat. He kept picturing the red flowers that Mrs. Park watered every single morning. After the dishes were done, he walked next door and knocked. His voice shook as he told her what had happened.
- 4 Mrs. Park was quiet for a moment, and then she smiled. "Thank you for coming to me," she said. "That pot was old, but the flowers can still be saved." On Saturday, Theo helped her replant the flowers in a new pot. Now he waves to her every morning on his way to school, and she always waves back.

Use The Broken Flowerpot to answer each question.

- 1 Which sentence is the best theme of the story?
- (A) Theo walked next door and told Mrs. Park what had happened.
 - (B) Theo should kick his ball far away from the fence.
 - (C) It is better to admit a mistake than to hide it.
 - (D) Practice can make you a stronger player.
- 2 Theo could have hidden what happened. Which sentence shows what he did instead?
- (A) Theo grabbed his ball and climbed the steps to his back door.
 - (B) Nobody had seen the ball fly over the fence.
 - (C) He kept picturing the red flowers that Mrs. Park watered every single morning.
 - (D) After the dishes were done, he walked next door and knocked.

IS IT A THEME OF THE STORY? IF NO, CHECK WHY.

- 3 “Owning up to a mistake can make things right.”
- YES** **NO** If NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown
- 4 “Music can make a hard day easier.”
- YES** **NO** If NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown
- 5 “You should always read a little bit every day, just for fun.”
- YES** **NO** If NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown
- 6 “He should tell his neighbor the truth.”
- YES** **NO** If NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown
- 7 Write a theme about people, not only Theo. Copy a clue from paragraph 3 or 4.

Theme: _____

Clue: _____

Cut out the 12 cards. Is each one a theme of The Broken Flowerpot? If NO, write why on the card: topic, retells, one character or not shown.

1 Hiding a mistake often makes you feel worse.

If NO, why? _____

2 Theo's ball sailed over the fence.

If NO, why? _____

3 You should always own up to mistakes.

If NO, why? _____

4 Dreams can come true if you never give up.

If NO, why? _____

5 He should play in a safer spot.

If NO, why? _____

6 People often forgive an honest mistake.

If NO, why? _____

7 It is never too late to tell the truth.

If NO, why? _____

8 Taking turns makes a game more fun.

If NO, why? _____

9 Honesty and neighbors

If NO, why? _____

10 Honesty turns neighbors into friends.

If NO, why? _____

11 Good friends can cheer each other on.

If NO, why? _____

12 Telling the truth can take courage.

If NO, why? _____

Sorting mat

Glue each card under YES or NO. Every NO card needs its reason on the line.



YES

It is a theme.



NO

Not a theme.

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

glue

LESSON 1 · EXIT TICKET

Is it a theme?

Name _____

- 1 Sam's team lost. Sam shook hands with every player on the other team.

"Being a good sport matters even when you lose."

YES

NO

If NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

- 2 Kira forgot her lunch. Her friend Leo gave her half of his sandwich.

"A friend shared half of a sandwich."

YES

NO

If NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

- 3 Nico kept falling off his skateboard, but he practiced every day. Now he rides all the way down the block. Write a theme.

Theme: _____

cut

LESSON 1 · EXIT TICKET

Is it a theme?

Name _____

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"Being a good sport matters even when you lose."

YES

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- 3 Nico kept falling off his skateboard, but he practiced every day. Now he rides all the way down the block. Write a theme.

Theme: _____

Lesson 1

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE: THE BROKEN FLOWERPOT

1	C	C is the theme: Theo admitted what he did, and it turned out better than hiding it. A only retells what happens; B is advice for one character only; D is good advice the story never shows.
2	D	A echoes the question but shows him heading home to hide it; D: he went to Mrs. Park.
3	YES	Theo told Mrs. Park, and they replanted the flowers together.
4	NO - not shown	Good advice, but no one plays or hears music in this story.
5	NO - not shown	Good advice, but no one reads anything in this story.
6	NO - one character	Advice for Theo only. The story shows him doing it, but a theme fits everyone.
7	2 points	1 for a full sentence about people (not only Theo), 1 for a clue from paragraph 3 or 4 that shows it. Sample: Theme: Telling the truth can be scary, but it can make things better. Clue: His voice shook as he told her what had happened.

CUT-AND-GLUE SORT (A NO CARD NEEDS ITS REASON ON THE LINE)

1	YES Theo could barely eat while he kept it hidden.	7	YES Theo first went inside, then told Mrs. Park that night.
2	NO - retells It only tells what happened in paragraph 1.	8	NO - not shown Good advice, but nobody takes turns in this story.
3	YES Theo told Mrs. Park, and things turned out well.	9	NO - topic A topic: a few words, not a lesson about life.
4	NO - not shown Good advice, but the story is about telling the truth, not dreams.	10	YES Now Theo and Mrs. Park wave to each other every morning.
5	NO - one character or not shown Advice for Theo only, and the story is not about where to play.	11	NO - not shown Good advice, but no one cheers for anyone in this story.
6	YES Mrs. Park smiled and thanked Theo for coming to her.	12	YES Theo's voice shook as he told her what had happened.

EXIT TICKET

1	YES	Sam's team lost, and he still shook every player's hand.
2	NO - retells	It only tells what happened in the story.
3	Sample	Theme: Practice can help you get better at something hard.

Theme & Central Message Complete Unit

Real pages from the unit (reduced):

MILESTONE READING SKILLS · THEME & CENTRAL MESSAGE

LESSON 1: PRE-ASSESSMENT Form A

Name: _____ Date: _____

Read carefully. Take your time. Score: ____ / 12

PART A: READ THE SCENE

Lena's Sunflower

1. Lena planted a sunflower seed in a paper cup. 2. Every morning she checked the cup, but nothing had changed. 3. On the fourth day, she dug up the seed to see if it was growing. 4. Its tiny root snapped off. 5. Grandma gave her a new seed. 6. He showed her how to water it and then leave it alone. 7. Many days later, a green shoot pushed up through the dirt, and Lena shouted with joy.

IS IT A THEME OF THE SCENE? CIRCLE YES OR NO. IF NO, CHECK WHY.

1. "Growing a sunflower." YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

2. "Rushing spoils what you are waiting for." YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

3. "You should always share your snacks with your friends at lunch." YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

4. "The seed's tiny root snapped off." YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

5. "She should wait next time." YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

6. "You should always learn from someone who knows more." YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

Milestone Reading Skills · Theme & Central Message Complete Unit Page 1

Pre-assessment, Form A

MILESTONE READING SKILLS · THEME & CENTRAL MESSAGE

LESSON 2: PART B Theme or Not?

Name: _____ Date: _____

Each sentence is about The Baker's Last Loaf. Is it a theme of the story? Write YES or NO. For a NO, check one reason.

Sentence	YES or NO	IF NO, check one:
1. Kindness can come back to you.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown
2. Olga gave the traveler the bigger half of her bread.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown
3. It is important to give, even with little.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown
4. Practicing a little every day can help you improve.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown
5. Olga should bake more bread in winter.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown
6. Sharing with a stranger.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown
7. Small acts of giving make a big difference.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown
8. Good friends always tell the truth.	☐	☐ topic ☐ one character ☐ not shown

Milestone Reading Skills · Theme & Central Message Complete Unit Page 16

Lesson 2: Theme or Not? chart

MILESTONE READING SKILLS · THEME & CENTRAL MESSAGE

LESSON 3: YOU DO Tricky themes

Name: _____ Date: _____

Should and always are clues, not rules. Ask: does the story show it? Does it fit people beyond the story?

1. "A song let the last friends to the shore."

YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

2. "Your own voice can be a gift to others."

YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

3. "You should always try your best in school, even when the work is hard."

YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

4. "You should always be yourself instead of copying others."

YES NO IF NO: ☐ topic ☐ retells ☐ one character ☐ not shown

PART B: CHOOSE THE BEST ANSWER

1. Which sentence is the best theme of the story?

A. Being true to yourself can be a gift to everyone.
B. Practicing a little each day can help you get better.
C. Singing at night.
D. The frogs followed the sound of the way to the shore.

2. Which sentence shows the moment Chirp's own song helps the frogs?

A. But next to the frogs, his own song sounded thin and squeaky to him.
B. One warm evening, a heavy fog rolled across the pond.
C. Without stopping to think, he sang his own high song, loud and clear, over and over.
D. Soon he stopped singing at all.

Milestone Reading Skills · Theme & Central Message Complete Unit Page 20

Lesson 3: tricky themes

MILESTONE READING SKILLS · THEME & CENTRAL MESSAGE

LESSON 4: YOU DO Change to theme

Name: _____ Date: _____

Copy one clue from paragraph 1 (Josh at the start), one from paragraph 3 (what changes) and one from paragraph 4 (Josh at the end). Then write what each shows.

What does Josh learn? Write a theme as a sentence about people.

A clue from the story (copy it)	What it shows about Josh
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____

Why is "Josh should practice more" not a theme? Rewrite it as a theme.

Milestone Reading Skills · Theme & Central Message Complete Unit Page 24

Lesson 4: organizer

MILESTONE READING SKILLS · THEME & CENTRAL MESSAGE

LESSON 5: SHOW WHAT YOU KNOW Ada and the Deep End

Name: _____ Date: _____

Read the story, then answer the Show What You Know questions.

Ada and the Deep End

1. Ada was the only student in her class who still had not passed the swim test. 2. Every Tuesday, while her classmates practiced diving, she stayed in the shallow end and kept one hand pressed against the wall. 3. Nobody teased her about it, but she still felt left behind. 4. To her, the deep end looked dark, cold and impossible for away. 5. One afternoon, Coach Rivera sat down beside her on the edge of the pool. 6. "You don't have to stop being scared," he coach said gently. 7. "You just have to swim one stroke, and then the next one." 8. Then the coach went back to the lifeguard chair. 9. Ada did not answer, but she kept thinking about those words for the rest of the week. 10. On test day, Ada's legs were shaking as she stood at the edge of the deep end. 11. She took an enormous breath and jumped in anyway. 12. The water was cold. 13. She kicked as hard as she possibly could, cutting every stroke out loud so that she would not think about the water below her. 14. At twenty-three strokes, her fingertips finally brushed against the far wall. 15. Ada climbed out of the pool, dripping and breathing hard. 16. She was still a little nervous about deep water, but she could not stop smiling. 17. Her classmates cheered from the bleachers. 18. The following week, a younger girl was standing frozen at the edge of the deep end, exactly where Ada used to stand. 19. Ada sat down beside her on the wall. 20. "One stroke," Ada told her quietly, "and then the next one."

Milestone Reading Skills · Theme & Central Message Complete Unit Page 28

Lesson 5: Level C passage

MILESTONE READING SKILLS · THEME & CENTRAL MESSAGE

REVIEW TASK CARDS Theme or not?

Name: _____ Date: _____

Is the sentence a theme of the card's story? Record YES or NO and why.

TASK CARD Hos broke Eli's pencil case by accident and said he was sorry. Eli was angry at first. The next day, Eli saved Hos a seat at lunch. Is this a theme of the story? "You should always forgive a friend who says sorry."	TASK CARD Rene was upset when her best friend Amy won the spelling bee. Then Rene saw Amy's hands shaking on the stage, and she cheered louder than anyone. Is this a theme of the story? "Rene cheered louder than anyone for Amy."
TASK CARD Graciela lent Lucas a green sweater with lumpy sleeves. Lucas thanked him and wore it to school the next day, even though it was a little too big. Is this a theme of the story? "It is important to give your pets fresh water every day."	TASK CARD Yan promised to feed the class fish over the break. He forgot for three days, and the water turned cloudy. Yan held his teacher and helped clean the tank. Is this a theme of the story? "You should always fix a broken promise."
TASK CARD Amy yelled at her little brother for losing her markers. Later, she found them in her own backpack. She knocked on his door to say sorry. Is this a theme of the story? "It is important to say sorry."	TASK CARD Grandma promised to come to Buffy's school concert. A snowstorm closed the roads, so she watched the whole show on a video call and cheered from her kitchen. Is this a theme of the story? "Always look both ways before you cross the street."

Milestone Reading Skills · Theme & Central Message Complete Unit Page 33

24 story task cards

WHAT THE FULL UNIT ADDS TO THIS LESSON

- 4 more lessons in gradual release: theme or not, lesson words are not rules, how a character changes, and a one-story-three-levels finale
- 4 more original stories in 6 more leveled passages (150 to 270 words), level and length printed; the finale is one story at three levels
- 24 story task cards with a recording sheet
- Pre- and post-assessment in parallel forms (12 points each) with a class tracker
- 4 small-group reteach cards, one for each way a sentence is not a theme
- Exit tickets for Lessons 1-4 and an answer key for every page

Find the full unit on TpT:

<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/x-17726695>

THANK YOU

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TOMORROW: THE FOUR MIX-UPS AND WHAT TO SAY

A topic. Ask: what does the story teach ABOUT it? Make the word into a sentence.

A retelling. Ask: is that what happened, or what it teaches? Take out the events.

One character. Ask: take out the name. Does it still fit people?

Not shown. Ask: where does the story show that? Good advice is not a theme unless the story shows it.

Next step. Sort the exit tickets into got it, almost and not yet. Give the almost pile one new mini-story to judge aloud.

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