



Step 5: Identify Themes

It's often a story's theme that resonates with readers long after finishing a novel, but there's not a single method, so you must explore the path that's right for your story.

Your Story's Themes Leave Lasting Impressions

Storytellers have the power to shape the lives of young and old.

- A story's themes leave impressions on readers, often lasting.
- Sometimes writers create specific themes, but other times, they emerge organically, a natural outgrowth of characters' thoughts, choices, words, and actions.

You remain in control of this power – the theme conveyed by your narrative.

Common Issues with a Story's Themes

An overt focus on a story's message can appear preachy, irritating rather than inspiring readers.

- On-the-nose themes come across as one-sided arguments for or against a subject or person (e.g., politics, religion).

- A lack of understanding of themes can hold writers back from expressing a helpful message.
- Sometimes a helpful theme gets paired with the wrong story, negating the effectiveness of the message.

Learn which themes combine with genre-based expectations, characters' beliefs, and universal truths to solve these common issues.

A Guide to Simplify Themes

As with so many aspects of writing, it's about principles, not rules.

- There is no single right way to include themes in your story.
- Some of the top writers recommend steering clear of themes, contending the only good ones are those that happen as a byproduct of the creative process.
- Other writers argue the opposite, recommending you strive to inspire readers with your story's theme.

What's clear from studying timeless masterworks is some stories contain messages that stick with readers long after they finish the novels.

Breaking Down Themes into Categories

Themes in stories take many forms, but typically fit one of these categories.

- **External Theme:** The external theme gives meaning to the overarching narrative relating to what your book is about.
- **Internal Theme:** The internal theme gives insight into the protagonist's life, amplifying conflicts, experiences,

discoveries, secrets, and emotions, including the change required for the lead character to solve the story's central problem.

- **Philosophical Theme:** The philosophical theme taps into the audience's collective knowledge of a universal truth, and typically provides the lead character with the motivation to learn the internal theme's life lesson.

Some stories focus on one theme category, while others include all three.

Identify Themes that Fit Your Story

Again, there's no single method of develop the theme or themes for your story.

For example:

- Some writers like to wait until they finish that all-important first draft before they identify their story's themes, and that's okay.
- Many authors preplan themes before they write, evaluating how the combination could influence characters and resonate with audiences.
- Other writers use a hybrid approach, going in with preconceived themes, but remain open to changes as the story unfolds and characters develop.

Check out the Amazon book reviews of bestsellers to find themes readers love in your chosen genre, but keep in mind it's your story, so you control the number and application of themes.

Match Your Themes to Readers' Expectations

The best themes convey messages subtly through stories that entertain, inform, and inspire readers.

- You'll find themes expressed in most genres.
- Some themes are so subtle they're easy to miss.
- Well done themes are like echos that resonate with readers long after they finish the novel.

Avoid offending readers with on the nose themes, and instead, develop character who serve as subtle positive and negative examples, guiding readers with life lessons.

Way Forward

Themes convey to readers why the story matters.

- Even though genres suggest external themes, writers often use internal themes and philosophical themes to enhance their stories.
- Like a lighthouse, themes can:
 - Express positive ideas that draw people toward a safe harbor, or
 - Include negative messages to warn readers of life's dangers.
- The best themes base the messages on universal truths, the ones that resonate with people down through the ages.

Read this step's workbook and complete the worksheet.