

# Story Outlining



Jump to...



Distance-Educator.com ► Story 101 ► Resources ► Module B: Theme

## Introduction

Originality is critical to writing stories. The reason you are writing a story in the first place is because you have something to say, something new, something that comes from your heart and imagination. Even if you retell an old tale, you must give it your own voice.

You need to be clear about what it is you want to say. Most people don't know the whole story at first, but most do have something burning within them that says, "This is my story and I need to tell it!"

By the time you've completed this module, you should be able to:

- Define style, theme, controlling question, and thematic characters
- Differentiate between the two types of thematic characters (i.e. change and obstacle character)
- Identify the theme, controlling question, and thematic characters (i.e. the change and obstacle character) in a movie
- Create a list of values and select a value you would like to champion as a theme in a story

## Connect

### What is style?

To write a story, you must find your own style. Style reveals an author's soul. Your **style** expresses the totality of your inner view of life, your reality, your reasoning mind, your humor, and your sincerity. Your style drives your themes.

### What is a theme?

To write a story, you need to have a theme. The **theme** is the central message of the story. The theme is the point of the story. It is the statement you want to make about the human condition. If you don't have a theme to your story, you run the risk of losing the interest of your readers.

As Neal Page (Steve Martin) said to Del Griffith (John Candy) in the movie Plains, Trains, and Automobiles, "And by the way, you know, when you're telling these little stories? Here's a good idea - have a POINT. It makes it SO much more interesting for the listener!"

Writing is about recreating what you have learned about life into a story. Themes in a story should be about the grand issues of life. How you write about these issues should reflect your sense of life.

Through stories of values realized/unrealized and wrongs righted/overlooked, readers gain a connection to the author's view of how life can and ought to be lived. The story entertains but the theme energizes, uplifts, and sometimes changes readers.

### The controlling question

The theme of the story also is the answer to the controlling question of the story. The **controlling question** is the question that asks if the value being championed by the writer is more important than the value being challenged. It *controls* which competing values will be compared within the story. The controlling question is always answered in the climax at the ending of the story.

What are thematic characters?

The theme of the story is manifested through the change of a character as a result of the conflict. This change always comes at the end of the story. The **thematic characters** are the two primary characters that provide the answer to the controlling question at the end of the story.

The two thematic characters in every story are the **change character** and the **obstacle character**. The main character of the story will always be either the change character or the obstacle character.

The change character is the character that must go through a paradigm shift. The change character literally embodies the controlling question and ultimately answers it at the end of the story. This character usually starts out believing all the wrong things, laboring under false assumptions as they search for solutions. The change character is changed by the influence of the obstacle character, not the circumstances.

The obstacle character is the character that helps the change character change. Unlike the change character, the obstacle character never changes. The obstacle character is not always the bad guy; they are often a guide or mentor to the change character. A relationship must exist between them that pushes the change character to act. The obstacle character nudges the change character along through help or conflict.

For example, in the movie *Star Wars: A New Hope*, the main character is Luke Skywalker. Is Luke the change character or the obstacle character in the story?

If you said the obstacle character, you are correct. Luke's values never change throughout the first movie. He did not change his values in the end. He did learn to trust in the force, but trusting the force is not the theme of the story.

Han Solo was the change character. It was Han Solo who had to change his values. It was Han Solo who had to learn from Luke to care about someone other than himself. How do we know this?

Before the battle against the Deathstar, Han Solo just wanted his money to pay off his debt – that's all he cared about from the beginning – he was selfish. That all changed in the climatic end of the movie when Han Solo came swooping in to save the day, blasting away Luke Skywalker's pursuers, so Luke could have a shot at the target that would destroy the Deathstar.

Does the theme always win?

Do not feel obligated to have the value you are championing win in the end. Sometimes through its defeat you create a sense of tragedy that in turn validates your theme. If your theme succeeds, it must appear as a good thing. Otherwise, its failure must appear as a bad thing. Looking at it another way, if the "success" of the value you are challenging is "bad" for the characters and the world they live in, this sometimes provides validity to your value by invoking remorse.

**Apply**

## Analyze the movie *The Fugitive*

Before you begin to identify your theme for your story, it is helpful to practice identifying how other writers have incorporated a theme into the fabric of their stories.

To find the theme, look for main character in the story. Did the main character change any of their values at the end of the story? If so, what value changed? If not, they are the obstacle character. You need to look at who they had a supporting or conflicting relationship with that was a major character. What value changed in that character through the influence of the main character?

If you have not already done so, watch the movie *The Fugitive*. While watching the movie, answer these questions:

- What is the theme?
- What is the controlling question?
- Who are the thematic characters?
- Which is the change character?
- Which is the obstacle character?
- What changed in the change character?
- Was the theme proven through success or failure?

Post your answers under the forum topic: [Theme and Thematic Characters in The Fugitive](#).

Do your best with this exercise – it is not about being right. We will discuss the correct answers during the next class session.

## Reflect

### Identify a theme for your story

The first step to writing a story is to determine what you want to write about. You need to identify the theme you want to champion. To identify a theme for your story, you must identify your values; you must clarify your inner view of life.

Follow these steps to identify your theme.

1. Ask: What are my values? What inspires me? List your values/inspirations. If you find it difficult to do this, ask what values you dislike in other people and list those. This often reveals your own values.
2. After you have identified your values, identify values you dislike that you would like to challenge and replace with your values. Think of this as a science experiment. To tear down values you dislike, they will need to be tested in a story.
3. Select the value you dislike the most.

4. Identify the value of yours which will champion enlightenment in your story against the value you disliked the most.

Congratulations! You have identified your central message – your theme.

To take it a step further, create the controlling question for your story:

5. Rephrase the value you will champion versus the value you will challenge. For example, in the movie *Jaws*, the controlling question is: Is protecting lives or protecting business more important?
6. Answer your question. For the movie *Jaws*, the answer was “lives.”

## Extend

### Techniques for expressing themes

There are several literary techniques that are often used to express themes.

- Leitwortstil is 'the purposeful repetition of words' in a given literary piece that "usually expresses a motif or theme important to the given story". This device dates back to the *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as the Arabian Nights, which connects several tales together in a story cycle.
- Thematic patterning is the distribution of recurrent thematic concepts and moralistic motifs among the various incidents and frames of a story. In a skillfully crafted tale, thematic patterning may be arranged so as to emphasize the unifying argument or salient idea which disparate events and disparate frames have in common. This technique also dates back to the *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Last modified: Wednesday, February 18, 2009, 09:27 PM

 [Docs for this page](#)

You are logged in as [Steve Corbett](#) (Logout)

Story 101