


Determining Theme

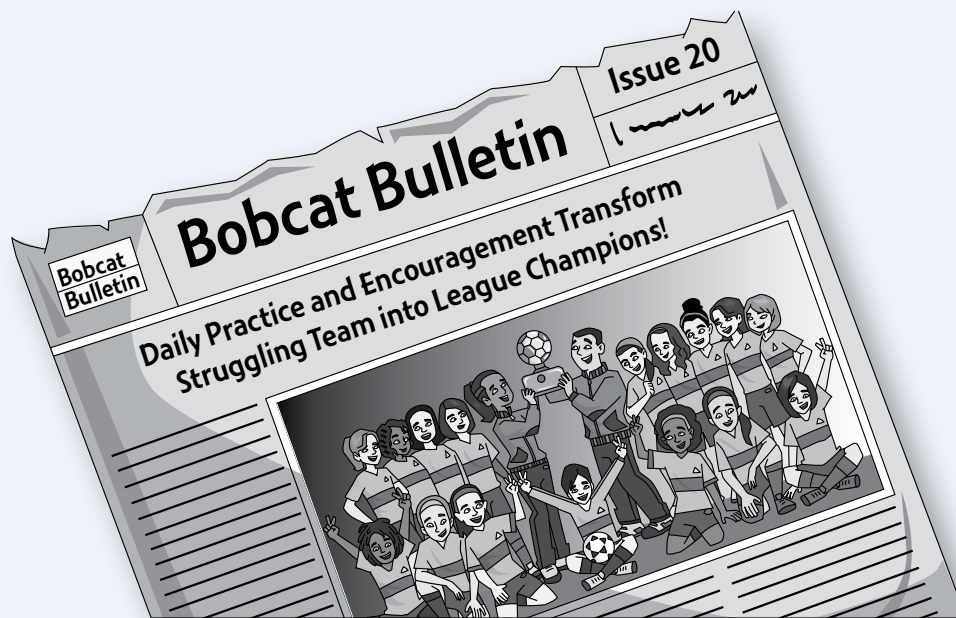
 **MS CCRS RL.7.2:** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text ...

Theme: *Setting a New Course*

Think back to your childhood. What life lesson did you learn from stories such as “Little Red Riding Hood” or “Snow White”? Here’s a hint: They both have the same **theme**, or main message, which is “Good wins out over evil.”

In a story, a theme **emerges**, or is revealed. It is then **shaped** and **refined**, or developed, by specific details in the text.

Study the image and headline below. Think about the theme they suggest.



Circle the most important words in the headline. Then read the chart below to see how organizing details can help you figure out the message of the illustration.

	Events	Theme
Beginning of Season	The team struggles.	Hard work and the support of others leads to success.
End of Season	The team succeeds.	
Reason for Change from Beginning to End of Season	The coaches encouraged the team to practice more and work hard.	

Just as a winning team develops over time, an author develops a theme over the course of the story. As you read, note clues such as how characters change or how story events develop to help you identify the theme, or lesson about life, that the author is trying to share.



Read the first two paragraphs of a story about how a boy named Mick deals with a difficult situation.

Genre: Realistic Fiction

A Different Day *by Rachel O'Meara*

“Hand over your lunch money, kid!”

Mick stopped daydreaming and looked in the direction of the voice. In front of him was an all-too-familiar scene. Aaron was picking on Jake, just as he did every day at recess. But that was okay with Mick, because at least Aaron was not picking on him. It was also fine because everyone picked on Jake—that was just how things were around here, the accepted norm. In fact, every school Mick had ever attended had had a kid like Jake—someone who was an obvious target, easy to tease and bully.

Today was different, though, because Jake was standing tall, acting brave, and trying to stick up for himself. Aaron responded by getting nastier and louder as he hurled insults at Jake. He pushed forward, forcing Jake backwards and jabbing him in the chest. Jake looked terrified, and Mick could see that Jake’s lips were stretched thin as he tried not to let anyone see he was close to yelling for help—or worse, sobbing. But to Mick’s surprise, Jake still wasn’t backing down.

(continued)

Explore how to answer this question: “What theme is emerging in this part of the story?”

Mick’s feelings and observations about the other boys’ actions offer clues about the theme.

Find specific details that tell how Mick thinks and feels, some of which are shown in the chart below. Add details from the text, and complete the chart.

Point in Story	Important Events	Character’s Words, Actions, and Feelings	Theme
Beginning	Aaron demands Jake’s lunch money.	Mick watches Aaron pick on Jake. Mick feels that the situation is okay because everyone picks on Jake.	
Middle	Jake is standing up to Aaron.		



Close Reading

In the first part of the story, Mick only watches Aaron’s interactions with Jake. In the second part of the story, Mick’s feelings change.

Underline the sentence that describes when Mick takes action.

Hint

Think about how Mick changes over the course of the story. Which choice best sums up the lesson you learn about life?

Continue reading the story. Use the Close Reading and the Hint to help you answer the question.

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As he watched from a few feet away, Mick slowly began to fill with anger toward Aaron and compassion for Jake. What was happening wasn’t right, and somebody ought to do something. But, on the other hand, Aaron was a nasty character. And when dealing with someone like that, it might be best to lie low and not interfere.

“Hand it over! Now!” insisted Aaron impatiently.

Aaron faked a swipe at Jake, and then laughed loudly when Jake jumped back and cringed. The laughter was even crueler and more hurtful than the words. Today is different, thought Mick, and he forced his feet toward the conflict.

“Not today, Aaron,” shouted Mick. “Leave Jake alone!”

Circle the correct answer.

Which statement best states a theme of the story?

- A** Only someone who has been bullied can understand bullying.
- B** It’s best to stay out of trouble and never get involved.
- C** It’s important to take a stand against bullies.
- D** Bullying will always be a problem that affects many teenagers.



Show Your Thinking

Look at the answer you chose above. Tell which specific details in the story led you to choose that sentence as the theme.



With a partner, take turns summarizing the story. Then discuss which story events shape and refine the story’s theme.



Read the story. Use the Study Buddy and the Close Reading to guide your reading.

Genre: Realistic Fiction



The author includes specific details to help me understand what kind of person Laila is. I'm going to underline clues that tell me something about her.

Close Reading

Laila has mixed emotions about the situation.

Underline the sentence that explains why she feels the way she does.

How does Laila change at the end of the story?

Circle the sentences that describe when Laila makes a decision to act differently.

The Substitute *by Bailey Sebastian*

- 1 When Laila walked into math class on Thursday, the room was in an uproar. Although the students usually took their seats immediately and opened their books quietly, today they were gathered in groups, chatting loudly, and laughing.
- 2 Laila stopped just inside the doorway, but then quickly spotted the reason for the change. Instead of Ms. Vasquez, a rather short, older gentleman with glasses perched crookedly on his nose stood at the front of the class. Laila did a double-take—the man was her neighbor, Mr. Marrero! She and her family had gone to pay their respects after his wife had passed away last year, and she remembered him telling an amazing story about surviving an emergency landing during a transcontinental flight.
- 3 “Hey, Laila, wasn’t *Teen Idol* awesome last night?” yelled Jason.
- 4 “Y-yeah,” stammered Laila. Jason didn’t usually talk to Laila. The popular kids just wrote her off as “that quiet girl.”
- 5 Laila bit her lip; she *wanted* to keep talking, but she felt bad for Mr. Marrero, and she was embarrassed by her class’s behavior. Without realizing it, Laila reached over and flicked the light switch, just like Ms. Vasquez did when the class was unruly.
- 6 Suddenly silent, every classmate turned to stare at her, and Laila’s cheeks burned bright red. But then she smiled at the substitute and said, “Hello, Mr. Marrero—”
- 7 Mr. Marrero focused, and then recognition dawned and he responded, “Oh, my neighbor . . . Laila, right?”
- 8 Laila heard someone snicker and knew it was time to blend back in or help Mr. Marrero. She took a deep breath. “Mr. Marrero, will you tell us about the time you were on a jet that crash-landed in the ocean?”
- 9 Thirty mouths gaped open, and sixty eyes looked with curiosity at Mr. Marrero, soon to be their new favorite substitute.



Hints

To help me answer the first question, I'm going to look back at the text I underlined in the story.

Only one claim is directly supported by specific details from the story.

Choose the specific details that best support the theme of the story.

Use the Hints on this page to help you answer the questions.

- 1 Which statement best describes Laila at the beginning of the story?
 - A Laila is a quiet student who appreciates an orderly classroom.
 - B Laila enjoys chatting with her friends before class.
 - C Laila likes to be the focus of attention in all of her classes.
 - D Laila dislikes the popular kids who ignore her.
- 2 Which sentence best states an important theme about human behavior as described in "The Substitute"?
 - A Choosing to take action requires courage.
 - B Older people often have wisdom to share.
 - C A quiet person isn't necessarily a shy person.
 - D Being popular isn't as important as being kind.
- 3 Select **two** pieces of evidence from "The Substitute" that support your answer to question 2.
 - "him telling an amazing story about surviving an emergency landing"
 - "The popular kids just wrote her off"
 - "that quiet girl"
 - "she wanted to keep talking, but she felt bad for Mr. Marrero"
 - "every classmate turned to stare at her"
 - "knew it was time to blend back in or help"
 - "she took a deep breath"
 - "tell us about a time when you were on a jet that crash-landed in the ocean"



Read the story. Then answer the questions that follow.

from *Little Women*

by Louisa May Alcott

While their father is serving in the Civil War, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy help their mother, Marmee, carry on with their daily lives. The family makes do with what little money they have. Then a telegram arrives. Father is ill, and Marmee needs to go to Washington.

1 How still the room was as they listened breathlessly and how suddenly the whole world seemed to change, as the girls gathered about their mother, feeling as if all the happiness and support of their lives was about to be taken from them.

2 Mrs. March read the message over, and stretched out her arms to her daughters, saying, in a tone they never forgot, "I shall go at once, but it may be too late. Oh, children, children, help me to bear it!"

3 For several minutes there was nothing but the sound of sobbing in the room, mingled with broken words of comfort, tender assurances of help, and hopeful whispers that died away in tears. Poor Hannah, their servant, was the first to recover, and with unconscious wisdom she set all the rest a good example . . .

4 "I won't waste no time a-cryin', but git your things ready right away, mum," she said heartily, as she wiped her face on her apron . . .

5 "She's right, there's no time for tears now. Be calm, girls, and let me think."

6 They tried to be calm, poor things, as their mother sat up, looking pale but steady, and put away her grief to think and plan for them.

7 "Where's Laurie?" she asked presently, when she had collected her thoughts and decided on the first duties to be done.

8 "Here, ma'am. Oh, let me do something!" cried the neighbor boy, hurrying from the next room . . .

9 "Send a telegram saying I will come at once. The next train goes early in the morning. I'll take that."

10 "What else? The horses are ready. I can go anywhere, do anything," he said, looking ready to fly to the ends of the earth.

11 "Leave a note at Aunt March's. Jo, give me that pen and paper."

12 Jo drew the table before her mother, well knowing that money for the long, sad journey must be borrowed, and feeling as if she could do anything to add a little to the sum for her father.

13 "Jo, run to the rooms, and tell Mrs. King that I can't come. On the way get these things . . . I must go prepared for nursing. Hospital stores are not always good . . . Father shall have the best of everything. Amy, tell Hannah to get down the black trunk, and Meg, come and help me find my things, for I'm half bewildered."

The family rush off to help Marmee prepare. Beth runs to ask their neighbor, Mr. Laurence, for help. To the relief of the girls, he also makes plans to have his grandson's tutor escort Marmee to Washington.



14 Everything was arranged by the time Laurie returned with a note from Aunt March, enclosing the desired sum, and a few lines repeating . . . that she had always told them it was absurd for March to go into the army, always predicted that no good would come of it, and she hoped they would take her advice the next time. Mrs. March put the note in the fire, the money in her purse, and went on with her preparations . . .

15 Jo came walking in with a very queer expression of countenance, for there was a mixture of fun and fear, satisfaction and regret in it, which puzzled the family as much as did the roll of bills she laid before her mother, saying with a little choke in her voice, "That's my contribution toward making Father comfortable and bringing him home!"

16 "My dear, where did you get it? Twenty-five dollars! Jo, I hope you haven't done anything rash?"

17 "No, it's mine honestly. I didn't beg, borrow, or steal it. I earned it, and I don't think you'll blame me, for I only sold what was my own."

18 As she spoke, Jo took off her bonnet, and a general outcry arose, for all her abundant hair was cut short.

19 "Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty." "My dear girl, there was no need of this." "She doesn't look like my Jo any more, but I love her dearly for it!"

20 As everyone exclaimed, and Beth hugged the cropped head tenderly, Jo assumed an indifferent air, which did not deceive anyone a particle, and said, rumpling up the brown bush and trying to look as if she liked it, "It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, so don't wail, Beth. It will be good for my vanity, I was getting too proud of my wig. It will do my brains good to have that mop taken off. My head feels deliciously light and cool, and the barber said I could soon have a curly crop, which will be boyish, becoming, and easy to keep in order. I'm satisfied, so please take the money and let's have supper."

Answer the questions.

- 1** How does Aunt March's response to Marmee's note help to develop the theme?
- A** Despite the situation, Aunt March still wants to prove she was right.
 - B** Aunt March gives only the amount of money she feels she is obligated to give.
 - C** Even though she expressed her disapproval, Aunt March is still willing to help.
 - D** Aunt March realizes that her early warnings were inappropriate and apologizes.



2 This question has two parts. First answer Part A. Then answer Part B.

Part A

What is an important theme of the story?

- A** Vanity and selfishness are stronger than generosity and kindness.
- B** In times of trouble, family and good friends support each other.
- C** Misfortune can overwhelm even the strongest people.
- D** The best way to deal with grief is to distract yourself with other tasks.

Part B

Which quote from the story **best** supports the answer in Part A?

- A** "I won't waste no time a-cryin', but git your things ready right away, mum."
- B** "I earned it, and I don't think you'll blame me, for I only sold what was my own."
- C** "She's right, there's no time for tears now. Be calm, girls, and let me think."
- D** "That's my contribution toward making Father comfortable and bringing him home."

3 Describe how the author uses the characters' actions to shape and refine the theme over the course of this story. Cite at least **two** specific details from the text to support your response.



Self Check

Go back and see what you can check off on the Self Check on page 44.