



MISSISSIPPI  
**EXEMPLAR**  
Units *&* Lessons

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

**Grade 4**

## Lesson 1: Understanding Themes

**Focus Standard(s):** RL.4.2

**Additional Standard(s):** RL.4.1

**Estimated Time:** 1-2 days

**Resources and Materials:**


- Handout 1.1: Details, Topics, Themes Sort
- Handout 1.2: Choosing Details to Support a Provided Theme
- Handout 1.3: Frayer Model
- Handout 1.4 Word Wall Games
- Handout 1.5: Student Progress Tracking Chart
- *Piper* (short film-available on iTunes)
- *For the Birds* (short film)
- *Oktapodi* (short film)
- *Inner Working* (short film)

**Lesson Target(s):**

- Student identify key details (objects, actions, setting, descriptions or depictions, word choice, changes in the main character) in a text that contribute to a theme.
- Students explain how the key details contribute to the development of the provided theme.
- Students use examples to explain the difference between the subject/topic of a literary text (e. g. war) and a theme of a literary text (e.g., War is a curse on humanity).
- Students use examples to explain how the subject/topic of the literary text (e. g. war) can help them identify a theme of a literary text (e.g., War is a curse on humanity).

**Guiding Question(s):**

- What are different types of details that authors use to develop a theme?
- How do authors use details develop a theme?

| Vocabulary  |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Academic Vocabulary:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key details</li> <li>• Subject/Topic of a Literary Text (e.g., war)</li> <li>• Theme (e.g., War is a curse on humanity.)</li> <li>• Theme Development</li> </ul>  | <p><b>Instructional Strategies for Academic Vocabulary:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Introduce words with student-friendly definition and pictures</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Model how to use the words in writing/discussion</li> </ul> |
| Symbol  | Type of Text and Interpretation of Symbol   |
|    | <p>Instructional support and/or extension suggestions for students who are EL, have disabilities, or perform/read well below the grade level and/or for students who and/or a more advanced text for students who perform/read well above grade level.</p>                                  |
| ✓   | <p>Assessment (Pre-assessment, Formative, Self, or Summative)</p>   |
| Instructional Plan  |   |
| <p><b>Understanding Lesson Purpose and Student Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Students review the following “I Can Statements” for this lesson, being sure to underline the parts of the statements that seem easy and circle the parts that seem difficult: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can identify key details (objects, actions, setting, descriptions or depictions, word choice, changes in the main character) in a story.</li> <li>• I can explain how the key details contribute to the development of the provided theme.</li> <li>• I can use examples from a story to explain the difference between the subject/topic of a literary text (e. g. war) and a theme of a literary text (e.g., War is a plague for humanity).</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Anticipatory Set/Introduction to the Lesson:</b></p> <p><b>Note:</b> Before class, cut out each square individually on the first page of <b>Handout 1.1: Details, Topics, Themes Sort</b>. See the direction on the handout.</p> <p>Divide students into groups of 3-4 students. Provide each group with a copy of the second page and a set of cutouts from the first page of <b>Handout 1.1: Details, Topics, Themes Sort</b>.</p> |   |

**Note:** Based on your knowledge of your students, you may choose for students to work individually instead of in groups. If students work individually, each student will receive his/her own set of cards and column sheet.

T: “There is a difference between the details in a story, the theme in a story, and the topic of story. I want to see what you already understand about these three terms. Take the individual cards in a stack, work with your group members to place each card under one of the three categories: details, topics, or themes. Each card will belong under one of the categories.”

Without support or guidance, have students work with their group members to sort the cards under the appropriate columns: details, topics, or themes.

- ✓ Monitor students as they sort the cards. Make note of any misconceptions and understandings in their discussions or in their placement of cards. Students’ understanding will vary but likely be low as this is a pre-assessment. These misconceptions and understandings will need to be addressed during the lesson.

### **Activity 1: Understanding Theme**

Define theme to students in a way they can understand.

Theme- what an author/artist wants you to learn or know, a universal message or idea about life that can apply to multiple real-life or imagined contexts, situations, and stories. Theme is an opinion of the author/artist. Often, a theme is an opinion shared amongst many people and can be applied to many different situations/contexts, but it is based on an author/artists point of view, background, and experience of and in the world.

Use **Handout 1.3: Frayer Model** to assist students with understanding theme better. Project **Handout 1.3** onto the board. Draw attention to each corner of the theme Frayer model and discuss with each aspect.

- ✓ With each corner, ask students to turn and talk about their thoughts before calling on answers.

**Note 1:** For examples and non-examples of theme, see this [resource](#).

**Note 2:** This is an opportunity to model using the Frayer model, which will be included in other activities later in the unit. After students complete their Frayer models, create an anchor chart to hang in the room.

Explain theme by using stories your students already know (e.g., *Finding Nemo*). Use the examples from the anticipatory activity to help guide your conversations with students about what a theme is and the difference between details, topics, and themes. Explain that the theme for *Finding Nemo* could be the following statement: Friends can help you to accomplish a difficult task if you allow them to help. Also, explain how some of the details in the story led you to make that determination. Be sure to display the list of different types of details found on **Handout 1.2: Choosing Details to Support a Provided Theme** and refer to different types of key details as you explain how the details helped you to identify a topic and how that topic helped you to form a theme statement.

**Types of details that develop a theme:**

- How a person/character responds to an event
- A person/object's appearance, facial expressions, gestures, thoughts, portrayal, actions
- Setting
- Word choice (if words are included)
- Colors/shading
- References to music, historical events, art, famous individuals (deceased or alive)
- Point of view
- Objects or portrayals the artist chose to leave out that other artists may have included

Create an anchor chart to define theme and provide different examples of key details that contribute to theme development. Post theme and compare and contrast theme with main idea for students.

**For students who are EL, have disabilities, or perform/read well below the grade-level:**

- Provide teacher notes for students who need assistance. Give students a word bank to call from.

**Activity 2: Academic Vocabulary Foldable**

- ✓ Students record their understandings of the academic vocabulary terms introduced in this lesson. Review each word with the class. Have students create a foldable to write the word, student-friendly definition, and an image/symbol to represent the meaning of this word. Work with students to create a movement/gesture to represent the meaning of the word. Tell students that when they hear these words throughout the lesson, to make that movement/gesture.

**Note:** To save time, provide an already-cut and folded foldable for students.

**For students who are EL, have disabilities, or perform/read well below the grade-level:**

- Provide an example with the first word.

**Extensions and/or a more advanced text for students who perform/read well above grade level:**

- Have students provide examples for the class about some key details and themes with the books they are currently reading.

**Activity 4: Theme Practice**

Display a list of the videos listed above in the materials section. Tell students that in a moment, they will watch several short films, also referred to as “shorts” in the film industry, to practice identifying theme and tracking its development. Explain that with the first short film, you will provide a model of how to analyze theme development.

- ✓ The second short film: Students work in pairs or small groups of 3-4 students to analyze theme development. The third short film: Students work individually to analyze theme development.

**Activity 4a: Teacher Model**

As you play the video, *For the Birds*, use the questions and think aloud below during the viewing. Complete **Handout 1.2: Choosing Details to Support a Provided Theme** for students as you think aloud and as students help you answer questions to provide a model.

T: What are the little birds’ initial reactions and responses to each other?” (Student Response: One bird gets angry that another bird touches him, and then it starts a chain reaction as all the little birds land on the wire. They are all bickering at one another.)

T: What is the new bird’s response to the little birds? (Student Response: trying to make friends with the other birds)

T: What are the little birds’ reactions to the new bird? (Student Response: tease him and run to the other side of the wire)

T: What does this reveal about the little birds? (Student Response: They don’t like the new bird. They are mean. They want to make the new bird go away. They are grumpy birds.)

T: On **Handout 1.2**, you will notice the different types of details that author's use to develop themes that we discussed earlier. One type of detail is how a person/character responds to an event. Let's record the type of detail in the first column, the evidence from the text in the middle column, and what this reveals in the third column.

T: What were the little birds' reactions when the new bird landed on the wire? (Student Response: They were angry and two birds started to peck at his feet as the other small birds cheered them on. They wanted him to fall off.)

T: What was the new bird's reaction to this? (Student Response: He thought they were having fun and he started to cheer as well.)

T: What does the new bird's response reveal about him? (Student Response: He isn't catching on to what the birds are doing; he does not see the real intentions behind the other birds' actions; he may not be that smart; or he may not be used to mean behavior.)

T: On **Handout 1.2**, you will notice the different types of details that author uses to develop themes we discussed earlier. One type of detail is how a person/character responds to an event. Let's record the type of detail in the first column, the evidence from the text in the middle column, and what this reveals in the third column.

T: Why did the one small bird make a worried face when the new bird was about to fall off? (Student Response: He figured out that once the new bird fell off, the wire would bounce back and all the small birds would be flung off.)

T: So, what do we keep discussing and repeating about the way the birds are acting towards the new bird? (Student response: mean, hurt, treating the new bird differently/badly)

T: Based on that answer, what could the topic of this text be? (Student Response: being mean, hurting others, treating someone differently/badly).

T: I will place the topic of this text on Handout 1.2 next to the Topic/Subject heading. Now we know that our topic is about hurting others, being mean, treating others badly. We need to ask some questions to determine what the author is trying to reveal about this topic.

T: What was the result of the little birds trying to hurt this other bird? (Student Response: The little birds got hurt.)

T: Are you saying the little birds ended up hurt when they tried to hurt another bird?

T: What opinion could the author be trying to state about hurting others? (Student Response: I think this film is about what happens when you are unnecessarily mean to someone.)

T: What evidence do we have to support this? (Student Response: I think this because all the little birds were being mean to the new bird, but in the end, the little birds ended up hurting themselves by trying to hurt the other bird.)

T: What is the theme of this video? Turn and talk to someone to put the words into a sentence. Try to state the theme using the topic of the text and words like *when/if someone* or *when/if people* instead of *when/if you*. (Students share responses.)

T: Here is the theme: When people deliberately try to hurt others, they sometimes end up hurting themselves.

T: Notice how I did not write the topic only. My theme statement includes the topic, but it also includes reasoning and conditions. Notice also that I did not include words like “always” because themes suggest possibilities, not absolutes. In other words, this story shows us one example/scenario of how this possibility of someone getting hurt from deliberately trying to hurt another could play out. Someone who deliberately tries to hurt others may not always end up hurting themselves, but sometimes they may.

T: Here is how you write it in a formal manner by adding the title and author: *For the Birds*, a Disney Pixar short film, presents the idea that if people deliberately try to hurt others, they may end up hurting themselves.

Create or display an anchor chart displaying the steps with the following sentence starters to show how to write a theme statement:

In <Title of Text>, <Name of Author> presents the idea that <Theme Statement>.

The text <Title of Text>, written by <Name of Author>, portrays the idea <Theme Statement>.

<Name of Author> uses the details in <Title of Text> to develop the following theme: <Theme Statement>.

Have students ask questions and discuss with a partner what they have learned about theme development. Have students write a reflection about what they learned about theme development.

- ✓ Monitor students as they discuss. Make note of any misconceptions and understandings in their discussions on **Handout 1.5: Student Progress Tracking Chart**.



**Activity 4b: Working Together**

As you play the video, *Oktapodi*, have student in pairs/small groups. Together, they can complete **Handout 1.2: Choosing Details to Support a Provided Theme** to guide them through stating details/asking questions about the video during the viewing. Walk around the room as students watch the videos to ensure support is given when needed.

- ✓ Monitor students as they discuss. Make note of any misconceptions and understandings in their discussions using another copy of **Handout 1.5: Student Progress Tracking Chart**. Use this data to make determinations about interventions and other supports needed before and during independent practice.

**Activity 4c: Independent Practice**

- ✓ Play the short film, *Piper*, and complete a new copy of **Handout 1.2** independently.

**Note:** Provide the appropriate supports and extensions during this practice.

**For students who are EL, have disabilities, or perform/read well below the grade-level:**

- Provide students with sentence starters as they fill in the boxes in **Handout 1.2**.
- Refer students back to the model lesson and the anchor charts for assistance on specific skills they need assistance with.

**Extensions and/or a more advanced text for students who perform/read well above grade level:**

- Students can independently research more shorts like these and report them to the class with their findings from **Handout 1.2**.

**Reflection and Closing:**

- ✓ Students reflect on what they learned about theme. Then students share with the class what they have done during the lesson that really helped them understand theme and theme development.

## Homework

Provide the following directions to students:

After reading a book, sum up the book in one or two sentences. Decide what the entire story was about. Give details that support the theme of the story.

**Note:** For longer books, tell the theme and key details in each chapter, rather than the entire book.

See page 6 of the [Family Guide for Student Success](#).

**Handout 1.1: Details, Topics, Theme Sort**

Teacher Directions: Make enough copies of this sheet for each group of students. Cut out each square and provide one whole set for each group of students.

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| A clown fish named Marlin lives in the Great Barrier Reef loses his son, Nemo.   | While Marlin ventures off to find Nemo, Marlin meets a fish named Dory, a fish suffering from short-term memory loss.   | Sometimes, parents have to trust their children, even if the situation is potentially dangerous.                       |
| Marlin is overly cautious because of his wife's (Nemo's mom) death.  | Parents who are overly strict and controlling often create the very problem they are trying to prevent.                 | Dory and Marlin encounter a host of dangers in the ocean, including jellyfish, sharks, and other predators.            |
| trusting others  | Nemo has a flawed fin that makes it difficult to swim.  | the benefits of friendship   |
| Friends can help you to accomplish a difficult task if you allow them to help.   | Nemo makes friends with the Tank Gang members. They assist him in returning to the ocean and reuniting with his father. | Marlin finally allows Nemo to do something dangerous on his own when he lets Nemo assist Dory in escaping her captors. |
| Someone's obstacles, limitations, weakness, or disabilities do not have to define you or keep you from accomplishing your goals. | overcoming obstacles to achieve a goal  | Difficult or dangerous tasks can be achieved if you work with others, work hard, and face your fears.                  |

| <b>Details</b> | <b>Topics</b> | <b>Themes</b> |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|
|                |               |               |

## Handout 1.2: Choosing Details to Support a Provided Theme

**Directions:** Complete a new table like the one below during your analysis of each image provided in Handout 1.2.

**Topic/Subject:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Types of details that develop a theme:

- How a person/character responds to an event
- A person/object's appearance, facial expressions, gestures, thoughts, portrayal, actions
- Setting
- Word choice (if words are included)
- Colors/shading
- References to music, historical events, art, famous individuals (deceased or alive)
- Point of view
- Objects or portrayals the artist chose to leave out that other artists may have included

| Type of Detail (from the list above) | Example from the Text (Words or Paraphrase) | What Does This Reveal about the Character or Author's Opinion? |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
|                                      |   |  |
|                                      |   |  |
|                                      |   |  |
|                                      |   |  |

Theme: \_\_\_\_\_

**Handout 1.3: Frayer Model**

|                   |                                    |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Definition</b> | <b>Characteristics/Explanation</b> |
| <b>Examples</b>   | <b>Non-Examples</b>                |

**Vocabulary Word**

## Handout 1.4 Word Wall Games

Place vocabulary alphabetically on word walls-play interactive games during the unit



### Guess Who Game

Each day before your students enter the classroom, choose a few words on the wall and flip the card over so the definition is showing. At the beginning of class, ask the students to identify which words are flipped over by using the definition. You could also substitute a synonym or antonym for the definition in this game.

### Alphabetizing

Before the students enter the classroom, mix up some of the words on the word wall and ask the students to put them in the correct order again.

### Picture This

Create a picture that relates to some of the words on the Word Wall. Show your students the picture, and ask them to identify words that can be used to describe the picture or relate to the picture.

### Compare and Contrast

Choose two words from the Word Wall and have your students compare and contrast the words.

### Point, Clap, Chant, Read

The teacher states the word, one student points to the word on the word wall and then all students chant the letters of the word and clap for each letter, or syllable then read the word.

**Rhymes**

The teacher states that the word begins with a letter and rhymes with a word on the word wall. The student will write the word on their word wall sheet. The teacher will repeat it 5 times with 5 different words.

**Kid Friendly Definitions**

Students create definitions in their own words for better understanding/ownership.

**Guess My Word**

The teacher will choose one word from the word wall. The teacher will give one clue each time to see how long it will take the students to guess the word.

**Word Sort Activities**

Sort words that match the current phonics skill or pattern (e.g., short vowel sounds, long vowel sounds, magic e, r-controlled vowels, etc.)

Sort words that are similar or opposite in meaning.

Sort nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Open sort – give a group of words and let the students decide how they should be sorted.

**Find and Erase**

Write 5 to 10-word wall words on a lap-size dry erase board with dry erase markers. Say a word's definition at random and have the students find the word in their list and then erase it. Continue until all words are gone.

**Tall Tower**

When you make the word wall words, write a number 1, 2, or 3 on the back of the cards in a corner. (For this activity, you will need blocks, snap cubes, Legos or any type of manipulative that students can build a tower with.) Collect between 6-12-word wall word cards. Shuffle the cards and place face down. Have the students pull a card from the stack reading the word on the face of the card. If they are successful with the knowing the definition, they turn the card over and find the number on the back. They then take that number of blocks and begin building a tower. They continue by adding blocks with every successful definition. Students will take turns and continue until all words are gone. (This can be done as an intervention activity.)

**Word Wall, Beach Ball**

Stand or sit in a circle. Teacher holds beach ball (or a ball or bean bag). The teacher tosses the ball to a child and asks the child to define the word \_\_\_\_\_. (name a word off the word wall at random) The student must find the word on the word wall and define it. Then that child throws the ball to another child and asks the child who caught the ball to define another word on the word wall. Repeat as desired.

**Word Wall Hot Potato**

Play hot potato with a bean bag or small ball. Play music and when the music stops, ask the child



who is holding the ball or bag, to tell you the definition of a word from the word wall. Repeat.

### **Word Wall Bingo**

Give each student a filled in or blank bingo card. If it is blank, have students randomly select words from the word wall cards and write them in the blanks on their card. Collect cards and shuffle. Randomly, select word card and call out a definition. If the child has that word on his/her card, then they must cover it with the marker. Continue until someone bingos or has a complete line across, diagonally, or up and down.

### **Word Wall Tic-Tac-Toe**

Make a laminate blank tic-tac-toe grids large enough for students to write word wall words in the spaces. At the beginning of the game have them write word wall words of their choice in each space. When they are done have them gather those words from the word wall. Shuffle the cards. As you give a definition of a word tell them if it is an **O** or **X**. If they have the word, they put an **O** or **X** over the word. The first person to get a tic-tac-toe wins. Return word wall words to wall.

### **Word wall Fill in the Blanks**

Have the students choose 1-3 words from the word wall to form a guessing pool. Bring the words to the teacher at the teacher table. The teacher makes up a sentence with one of the words from the guessing pool and says it out loud omitting the targeted word. The students must figure out the missing word. Return word wall words to word wall.

**Handout 1.5: Student Progress Tracking Chart**

Directions:

1. Write your students' names in the first column.
2. In the second column, place the following symbols to represent students' understanding of the lesson target:
  - A check mark to represent at-grade-level understanding.
  - A zero (0) to represent no understanding.
  - A plus sign (+) to represent above-grade-level understanding.

| <b>Lesson Targets:</b>   |                 |                 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Students use examples to explain how the key details contribute to the development of the theme.  |                 |                 |
| 2. Students can use examples to explain how the subject/topic of the literary text (e. g. war) can help them identify a theme of a literary text (e.g., War is a curse on humanity). |                 |                 |
| <b>Student Name</b>  | <b>Target 1</b> | <b>Target 2</b> |
| 1.   | 1.              | 1.              |
| 2.   | 2.              | 2.              |
| 3.   | 3.              | 3.              |
| 4.   | 4.              | 4.              |
| 5.   | 5.              | 5.              |
| 6.   | 6.              | 6.              |
| 7.   | 7.              | 7.              |
| 8.   | 8.              | 8.              |
| 9.   | 9.              | 9.              |
| 10.  | 10.             | 10.             |
| 11.  | 11.             | 11.             |
| 12.  | 12.             | 12.             |
| 13.  | 13.             | 13.             |
| 14.  | 14.             | 14.             |
| 15.  | 15.             | 15.             |
| 16.  | 16.             | 16.             |
| 17.  | 17.             | 17.             |

For training or questions regarding this unit,  
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