Let’s make sure we can distinguish a **topic** or **subject** from a literary **theme**.

**Theme**: could be thought of as “moral” / “message” / “meaning”

Abstract thinking – needs to be a general claim that can be supported

- Generalizing from our experience is how we learn (from experience): *e.g.*, *Candide*
- Reading & studying literature—as we make meaning from what we read—therefore involves learning from other people’s experiences

A theme is NOT something factual, extremely specific, or simply concrete

It is usually something implied rather than stated within the text (if it were obvious, then there’d be no reason to write a paper about it). You, as reader, need to infer your understanding of theme by using critical thinking.

**A topic** (or **subject**) is usually articulated in a single word.

A topic is the seed that the theme will grow out of.

A topic/subject is broad or vague, whereas

- **A theme** must be more than a single word—a sentence, a complete thought, a claim
- **A theme** is a claim about how the subject works in the text
- **A theme** is a debatable opinion about the subject
- **A theme** is an abstract concept articulating what the work is about
- **A theme** is an underlying meaning within the work, often a truth or insight about life—not necessarily something intended by the author

**The theme ultimately belongs to you**, not the author

**ARTICULATING A THEME**

Construct a sentence, a claim, about the topic.

Your sentence could be an answer to the question, “what is this text [book, story, play, poem] about?”

Then ask the question, “**what does this text [book/story/play/poem] say about [my topic]?**” When you can provide an answer to that question in a specific way, you should be articulating a theme.

It might help to think of theme as a “lesson” that you’re taking from the story.

Try to avoid writing your college-level paper about the most obvious topic or theme. Your task is to dig deeper to find something to say that will interest and engage your readers, who have already read the text and will be bored if you tell them what they already know.

Your sentence could be the answer to a “how” or “why” question about the text.

  (Be careful, though: the answer can’t just be about a character or the plot of the story.)
You might ask yourself, “how do these two texts fit together? What is a subject common to both of these texts, and what does each text distinctly say about that theme?”

It’s probably going to be most interesting and most effective for you to find two texts for which you can articulate their different themes on the same subject, or different ways of approaching the same theme.

Here are three quotations about the general topic of “learning”:

“The only way to teach these people is to kill them.” - playwright David Mamet

“True learning does not reside in the realm of the comfortable and familiar. We learn when we are stretched and challenged out of our native element, beyond the easy and the known. Sometimes when we cling to what’s familiar, we close ourselves off to learning. We can only really learn when we are open to grappling with the new, when we are amenable to allowing it to change us.” - from your midterm exam prompt

“If everyone is thinking alike, then no one is thinking.” – Benjamin Franklin

You should be able to take the examples offered by these quotations and offer a specific statement about a theme pertaining to learning in one of the texts we’ve read.

Now, take a look at the brainstorming samples we have produced together:

- Which of the samples actually articulates a theme?
  - Which of the theme statements do you like best? Why?

- Which of the samples name topics rather than themes?
  - Select three of these topics and turn them into themes.
  - I will ask you to share your three theme statements with a peer from class.

Once you identify your literary texts and theme(s), as you write your paper:

If the theme is hidden (or implied or must be inferred by the reader), if it’s not obvious, then you certainly need to use your essay to show how the text presents or reveals this theme. (Let me reiterate that you’re making a poor choice if your theme is obvious.) Supplying evidence and reasoning from your own careful reading of the text is going to be key.

Build your essay around a claim that is substantial enough that it needs to be proved or supported. If your claim is weak or vague/broad or factual, then your paper is going to be weak—probably, its discussion will lapse into plot summary (which you should avoid). Anchor each of your paragraphs with a topic sentence that makes a point or mini-claim that the whole paragraph will serve to develop and support.