

# Writing on Theme

## Using “The Clumsy One” by Ernest Buckler

### Definition

The **theme** of a story, novel or poem is the major idea expressed as a statement. It is **not** a moral, a cliché, plot, or a one-word idea. Thus to say that a theme of a work is “love” or that “love is blind” is **not** a statement of theme. But a statement such as “unfulfilled love can cause significant psychological damage” would be a possible theme statement *if* the elements of the story or poem supported it. Theme must be a *generalization about life, not a statement about a particular person or event*.

### How to find the theme

In determining the theme of a work, one needs to consider the meaning of what was read and then develop an *explanatory* and **comprehensive statement with a subject and a predicate**. However, before this comprehensive statement can be developed, one has to determine the author’s **central purpose** in writing this piece of fiction. That is, why did the author write the story?

Why did Buckler write “The Clumsy One?”

- to write about brothers
- to demonstrate that there is rivalry between brothers
- to demonstrate that even though there is rivalry there is also love and respect

Thus, Buckler wrote “The Clumsy One” to demonstrate that although the two brothers Danny and David are different and competitive, they nevertheless respect and love one another. In a statement of central purpose, names of characters in the piece of fiction may be used. This is because this is not theme statement but a statement to be used to help one develop the theme statement.

Identifying central purpose and theme of a piece of fiction can be done by looking at a variety of techniques authors may use.

1. Examine the use of **figurative language**.  
What impressions are we given of characters, situations, the environment, or the actions?  
Are there any symbols?
2. Examine the use of **character**.  
Do the characters and their actions stand for any ideas or values?  
How has the main character changed and what has he discovered?
3. Identify the type and use of **narrator**.  
Who is telling the story? Why?
4. Examine the nature and purpose of **plot**.  
What is the central conflict and its outcome?  
What is the importance of the characters/actions in the story?

5. Identify the **significance of the title** of the work.  
How does the title supply significant clues to the author's main purpose?
6. Determine the **author's purpose** in writing the poem, story, or novel.  
Why is the story being told?

Once one has done all of these activities, then a theme statement may be written.

### Writing about theme

1. Determine the **major** idea of the work. A work may express many ideas but the major theme must give meaning to every part and be suggested by every part of the work. State this idea in the beginning of your paragraph or essay and state your goal of showing its importance in the work.
2. In the body **discuss how** character, action, language, etc. supports the development of the theme.
3. Conclude by summarizing your support for a theme and perhaps evaluate the validity or the force of the theme.

### Sample Writing

Read each of the following paragraphs which explore theme in "The Clumsy One" by Ernest Buckler.

1. "The Clumsy One" by Ernest Buckler is about two brothers and it shows the love between them. The two brothers, Danny and his older brother David live on a farm and both work on it, but David is the older and stronger brother who is really good at farm work; Danny is better at book learning and is not as strong and cannot do anything right or work for a long time. So Danny loses his temper when his weaknesses show because he is too embarrassed to show he can't do something. You might think that David would be jealous of Danny because David just gets to stay on the farm and work, whereas Danny gets to go to school and always gets special presents like books and two good suits. But David always is very patient with Danny and helps him out when he can. Then one day Danny's friends come and they have a conversation in front of David about city and school life. Danny doesn't introduce his friends to his brother and is happy that David feels left out. This is Danny's revenge and way of showing David that Danny has a life away from the farm where he is special and that world is one David could never understand. Afterwards, as usual, Danny feels guilty about doing this but doesn't know how to apologize. Then David does something to get even with Danny. He makes him work for a long time at a bunch of chores until Danny has to admit to everyone that he cannot work any longer. Then Danny thinks that David hates him and he did that in revenge, but Danny learns that David did that to help Danny forgive himself for the humiliation he caused David when Danny's friends came by. So he learns that his brother loved him after all and he is happy because he loves his brother too. So the story shows that even if brothers are kind of cruel to one another sometimes, they still do love one another.

2.

In “The Clumsy One” by Ernest Buckler sibling rivalry between two brothers is presented to show several ideas. For example, just because one brother is intellectually superior in academics, it doesn’t mean that he is capable of being a superior human being. In fact, the story shows that any talents or other advantages one may have in life don’t “matter”. Furthermore, unjust, uncontrollable cruelty towards one’s brother can hurt both the giver as well as the receiver. However, ultimately in the end what is treasured is the love and respect between even such opposites and that it depends upon sensitivity to the needs of the other and protecting that person against all harm. This recognition is developed principally through a variety of techniques. First of all, the brother’s characters are quite the opposite of one another. Danny is the intellectually talented younger, physically weaker brother whereas David is the older, physically strong and mechanically talented one. Danny is constantly trying to do the farm chores well, but his inabilities cause him much frustration so he “strikes” out at his brother with anger which is generally forgiven and forgotten by the older brother except one time. Danny’s striking out against his brother and David’s response form the crux of the action for it is the one cruel act that Danny regrets and learns from. This happened when Danny was visited by some college friends; he deliberately ignored David’s presence and did all he could to diminish David in their eyes. “The others scarcely glanced after him. I suppose they thought he was the hired man. I still talked their way, for him to hear. I let him believe that the glibness of my mind and theirs was a strangeness between him and people like us that he could never hope to overcome. That he wouldn’t fit in with us at all. I put him outside, in the cruelest way it is possible to be put outside.” In seeming retaliation David uncharacteristically exposes Danny’s physical and mechanical weaknesses the next day by forcing Danny to admit he couldn’t work any longer and then shouting for all to hear that Danny was dismissed and that he and the other workers could finish the job. Danny was certain that David hated him. However, upon David’s forgiveness, Danny recognizes that David’s action sprang not only out of wanting to get even with Danny, a natural response to Danny’s cruelty, but also to allow Danny to forgive himself. For David, the supposed intellectually inferior brother, understood that this cruelty was not indicative of Danny’s regard for him and that he would suffer from guilt for the rest of his life. In fact Danny was present when David died in the war and was able to act appropriately and show his love for his brother. “I was small, but when I was angry I was as strong as the others. I was with David when he was in danger now, and so I was strong all the time. And the day David was killed I was right there, and in that last minute when all things are without falseness of any kind, he knew at last that I had been sick for what I had done to him. He knew that I wished we might change places. That the quickness of my mind would be nothing to part with, if it could save *him*. That I was never proud of it, myself, if it stood between us.” Thus, the “clumsy one” wasn’t David with his supposed inability to understand concepts; compassion and love was something Danny couldn’t learn from his books, but was a value “clumsy,” physical David could teach.

## Quick Scale: Grade 10 Writing About Theme

*Writing is usually required to be carefully revised, edited, and proofread.*

Aspect	Not Yet Within Expectations	Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)	Fully Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
<i>SNAPSHOT</i>	<i>The writing features problems with style, form, and mechanics that make it difficult to determine the purpose and meaning. Reflects little knowledge of theme and writing conventions and techniques.</i>	<i>The writing is generally clear, with a beginning, middle, and end. Development may seem uneven. The writer has difficulty controlling the form and style. Tends to talk about theme rather than identify it.</i>	<i>The writing is clear and carefully developed, with some sense of audience and purpose. Some variety and engaging features. May overexplain in places, telling rather than showing” what the theme is.</i>	<i>The writing creates an impact, with a sense of vitality, economy, and finesse. Features some complex, engaging ideas, language, structures, and techniques. Well-written theme statement.</i>
MEANING • sense of audience • understanding of the topic • theme • development • support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little sense of audience or purpose (unfocussed)</li> <li>• may be too short with few examples and details</li> <li>• no clear theme statement</li> <li>• inadequate material and understanding of theme</li> <li>• details, examples, or quotes not clearly linked to support theme statement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• some sense of audience; little impact</li> <li>• includes basic understanding of theme</li> <li>• easy-to-follow development with a simple understanding of theme</li> <li>• simple details, examples, or quotes sometimes linked to support theme statement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sense of audience; some impact</li> <li>• clear, focused theme statement</li> <li>• clearly and logically developed demonstrating good understanding of theme</li> <li>• relevant details and examples support theme statement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• strong sense of audience; engaging</li> <li>• clear if not provocative theme; strong sense of direction</li> <li>• efficiently developed around relatively mature understanding of elements of theme; attempts to interpret</li> <li>• well-chosen details, examples, and quotations</li> </ul>
STYLE • voice and tone • syntax • word choice • techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little awareness of audience</li> <li>• simple sentences and coordination; limited range</li> <li>• basic vocabulary; may make errors; repetitive as well as colloquial</li> <li>• immature style</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• voice and tone may be inconsistent</li> <li>• some sentence variety; often problems with subordination</li> <li>• some variety in word choice; not concise</li> <li>• direct, conversational; difficulty expressing abstract ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appropriate voice and tone</li> <li>• varies sentences</li> <li>• varied word choice; some complex vocabulary</li> <li>• some risk-taking to create effects; uses a variety of stylistic or rhetorical techniques</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creates and sustains effective voice and tone; may use humour or irony</li> <li>• syntactic maturity</li> <li>• effective, economical word choice</li> <li>• takes risks, often showing originality and inventiveness</li> </ul>
FORM • beginning • structure and sequence • transitions • paragraphing • ending	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• beginning unclear</li> <li>• sequencing is often confusing</li> <li>• few transitions; may seem disjointed</li> <li>• paragraphing illogical or missing</li> <li>• weak ending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organization adequate but ineffective</li> <li>• connections among ideas often unclear</li> <li>• transitions awkward; paragraphs not well developed</li> <li>• conclusions often short or formulaic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organization carefully and logically structure</li> <li>• transitions make connections clear</li> <li>• competently developed paragraphing</li> <li>• explicit, logical conclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• structure appears natural and spontaneous</li> <li>• well-chosen transitions create unity</li> <li>• effective paragraphing creates continuity</li> <li>• ending has some “punch”</li> </ul>
CONVENTIONS • spelling • sentence structure and punctuation • usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• frequent noticeable errors in basic sentence structure, spelling, and usage that distract the reader and may interfere with meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• noticeable errors that may cause the reader to pause or reread; often surface errors could be fixed by careful proofreading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• few errors; these do not affect meaning; appears to have been carefully edited and proofread</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• few errors; these do not distract the reader (may only be noticeable when the reader looks for them)</li> </ul>