

Grade 4 Playlist: Determining Theme

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2:

- Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

Welcome

Aesop was a writer who lived in ancient Greece. He wrote stories called fables. Even though he lived more than 2,500 years ago, many of his fables are still popular today. Aesop's fables are very short and simple, and most of them have animals as characters instead of people. Most importantly, each fable Aesop wrote has a moral.

Watch!

To hear an example of a fable by Aesop, watch this video:

- <https://www.opened.com/video/aesop-s-fable-the-boy-who-cried-wolf/40842>

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- determine the theme of a story, drama, or poem using details in the text.

Review

Key Terms

- The **theme** of a text is the message that the author wants the reader to know. In fables, a theme is called a moral.
- A story's **details** include everything that happens or is mentioned in the story. The story's characters, the things the characters do, and the reasons why they do these things are all types of details.
- An **inference** is something that readers decide about a story that they believe to be true, even though the author does not clearly state it in the story. To **infer** is to make a guess. Inferences are helpful when determining a theme.

Watch!

To learn more about what theme is, watch this video:

- <https://www.opened.com/video/theme/3204561>

Exploring the Standard

Sometimes, an author very clearly states the message he or she is trying to share in a story, drama, or poem. But most of the time, authors do not do this. Instead, it is up to the reader to infer what the theme is by looking at and examining the details in the story.



A Closer Look: Key Details

Details that can help a reader determine a story's theme include its characters and their interactions and motivations (what they say and do around other characters and why they say and do that). One example is the conflict in a story—an event that causes a disagreement or a problem that must be solved.

A story's theme can be determined by answering the following questions:

- What is the conflict in the story?
- What does the conflict make the characters do?
- What does their reaction say about them or about people like them?

Example 1

Read this fable by Aesop, called “The Fox and the Grapes.” While it is very short, it has a theme, and there are enough details to develop that theme well enough for the reader to determine it. While reading, think about how the theme is developed through the fable's details.

A hungry Fox saw some fine bunches of Grapes hanging from a vine that was trained along a high trellis, and did his best to reach them by jumping as high as he could into the air. But it was all in vain, for they were just out of reach: so he gave up trying, and walked away with an air of dignity and unconcern, remarking, “I thought those Grapes were ripe, but I see now they are quite sour.”

First, make a list of all of the details in this fable and the inferences that can be made from these details:

- The Fox is hungry, so he must be looking for some food.
- He sees a bunch of grapes on a vine hanging from a high trellis. This must mean that the grapes will be difficult to reach. Will the Fox be able to reach the grapes?
 - The Fox jumps as high as he can to reach the grapes, but he simply cannot reach them. This detail is the conflict in the story. It creates a problem for the main character.
- He finally realizes that he cannot reach them. How will he react to not being able to reach the grapes?
 - As he walks away, he has “an air of dignity and unconcern.” He does not seem to be very angry or upset about trying so hard to reach the grapes and failing.
- His words as he walks away are, “I thought those Grapes were ripe, but I see now they are quite sour.” He is telling himself that it is a good thing that he did not reach the grapes.



Teaching Notes: Determining Theme

The goal of RL.4.2 is for students to be able to determine the theme of a story, poem, or drama using the details within that literary work. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classrooms as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Activities

1. Discuss theme in poetry or drama. Read a few grade-appropriate poems or dramas to the class and ask students how determining the theme of a poem or drama is different from a story such as a fable by Aesop. Then, as a class, ask students to determine the themes of the poems or drama you read.
2. Share with students an illustrated version of *Aesop's Fables* (one can be found at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34588/34588-h/34588-h.htm>). Ask students how themes in stories and the details that support them can be conveyed through illustrations. Then, instruct students to create their own illustrations for either "The Fox and the Grapes" or "The Mischievous Dog."

Writing Prompts

1. Assign students one of Aesop's fables. Then, have them write a complete short story set in modern times that shares the same theme as their assigned fable. The students may choose to use human characters instead of animals. Challenge the students to closely align their story to the fable's theme while supporting it with different details.
2. Ask students to choose a favorite story or book. (If a student has difficulty choosing, suggest that he or she choose a story or book that your class has already read this school year.) Instruct them to write a short essay explaining the theme of the story and listing the details that support the theme.

Additional Resources

Consider these additional resources when teaching RL.4.2:

"Teaching with Aesop's Fables": This resource gives ideas for how to use the fables of Aesop to teach a variety of skills for young students:

- <http://gec.kmu.edu.tw/~lc/ecorner/eBook/Teaching%20With%20Aesop's%20Fables.pdf>

Other resources for teaching theme in the fourth grade:

- <http://www.k12reader.com/common-core-standard/ccss/ccss-4/ccss-4-r-l/>
- <http://www.net-texts.com/Course/LAN4025/4th-Grade-ELA-Materials-Aligned-to-the-Common-Core-State-Standards>

