

Writing a Theme
(Courtesy of Prof. Bozicas!)

A theme is always an idea and must be stated in a sentence. “The theme of this poem is death” is not correct, because death is a topic, not a theme. In order to discover a theme in a work, you need to have done some critical thinking about the work. Even then, it can sometimes be difficult to write a theme as a theme (an idea). A good practice is to use the formula below. Although I don’t usually advocate formulas in writing, I have discovered this particular sentence form to help many students:

The theme of this poem is that

or

Frost’s theme is that

Or some other version of this form sets you up to write an idea rather than just a topic. The word “that” makes it difficult to write simply a topic. Using the above example, if you were to write “The theme of this poem is that death,” you would know you had not written a complete idea—“that” here works as a quick reminder that you need to say something about death. “The theme of this poem is that death is inevitable” is an idea, though a basic one. Still, it allows the student to work with an idea rather than a topic, which makes it easier for the writer to see a more specific or complex theme as he or she is working.

A good example of a student making his theme more specific:

Original theme in his paper (about Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask”):

The theme is that the “mask” is worn despite the great pain it causes.

Revised theme:

Humans wear this mask to hide their true nature from one another even though doing so causes emotional pain. [He has taken the first idea and rewritten it in active voice, which is less awkward and more specific—he is now focused on the subject (humans); he also gives a reason (to hide), and he specifies the type of pain (emotional).]

Notice that the revised theme doesn’t begin “the theme of this poem is that.” It is not necessary to structure your sentences about theme in that form; it’s just an easy way to check that you have a theme—especially early in your writing. Once you know you have a theme, you could continue to use this structure, or you could revise your sentence into whatever structure or style best reflects your own writing or specific purpose.