

Universal  
Truths



# Story Themes Workbook



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# **The Trellis Method's**

## **Story Themes Workbook**

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**[WritingForEternity.com](http://WritingForEternity.com)**

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# THEMES:

## External, Internal, and Philosophical

### *What Are Story Themes?*

The external, internal, and philosophical themes convey what your story is about, but trying to take control of your story themes can feel as elusive as Indiana Jones' quest to find the Holy Grail. Fortunately, there are principles to develop your story's external, internal, and philosophical themes. Some genres dictate the external theme. You can use the internal and philosophical themes to set your story apart from others. Let's start by looking at how themes relate to characters, plot, and structure.

### *Characters, Plots, Themes, and Structure*

A symbiotic relationship exists between characters, plot, theme, and structure.

- Characters are *who* experience the story.
- Plot is *what* happens within the story.
- Themes are *why* the story matters.
- Structure is *how* the story is told.

## *Multiple Ways to Define Story Themes*

Themes are *why* the story matters to the audience, and that creates the opportunity to show the reason in multiple ways. Themes convey universal truths, binding essential elements of your story, providing insights into how humans behave and the world works. However, there is no single path to identifying your story's themes. Instead, there are time-proven principles for identifying and applying themes to your story. Even though genres suggest external themes, writers use internal themes and philosophical themes to enhance their stories.

- **External Theme:** The external theme gives meaning to the overarching narrative, emphasizing what the book is about. For example, a murder mystery is about achieving justice.
- **Internal Theme:** The internal theme gives insight into the chief protagonist's life, amplifying conflicts, experiences, discoveries, and emotions, including the change required for the lead character to solve the story problem. For example, the sleuth in a cozy mystery solves the murder when she puts the needs of the community ahead of her needs.
- **Philosophical Theme:** The philosophical theme taps into the audience's collective knowledge of a universal truth and typically provides the lead character with the motivation to

learn the internal theme's life lesson. For example, the cozy mystery sleuth applies the internal theme only after a friend serving as the foil character reflects how the lead character's compromised values (i.e., the philosophical theme) hindered the chief protagonist from identifying the killer.

## *The Story's Controlling Idea*

In Robert McKee's book *Story*, he used the term *Controlling Idea* because *theme* had become rather vague. He wrote, "A true theme is not a word but a sentence—one clear, coherent sentence that expresses a story's irreducible meaning. I prefer the phrase Controlling Idea, for like theme, it names a story's root or central idea, but it also implies function..."<sup>1</sup>

## *Themes Resonate with Audiences*

Themes make sense of what the story is about and why it matters to characters and audiences. According to McKee: "A CONTROLLING IDEA may be expressed in a single sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> McKee, Robert. *Story* (pp. 114-115). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## *A Controlling Idea Two Components*

The Controlling Idea identifies:

1. The positive (e.g., *justice*) or negative (e.g., *injustice*) change in the story's critical value, and
2. Why this change matters (e.g., *justice rules*) after something causes the value to change (e.g., *when the sleuth succeeds*).

Readers want to know how the value will change, and regardless if positive or negative, they want to understand why that change is of importance to them, not just the characters.

## *Control Your Story Themes*

You can use any of the three themes as your controlling idea for the entire narrative. The key principle here is that your readers will already have external theme expectations based on their preferred genres. You may encounter adverse audience reactions if you stray too far from the familiar mix of a theme pre-established for a genre. When writers combine genres (e.g., romance and mystery), typically one will dominate to express clearly the primary theme. Ultimately, one of the three themes serves as the controlling idea. The combination of characters, plots, themes, and structure works together to make your story unique and enjoyable for readers.



## *Examples of Theme Elements*

Entire books have been written about identifying and using themes, so the examples below merely illustrate how they are frequently used in mysteries.

- **External Theme:** *Justice versus Injustice*. The genre often establishes the external theme—a single controlling idea that spans the entire narrative. For example, in a crime story, the following positive or negative values align with the audience's expectations:
  - **Positive:** Justice results when the protagonist succeeds.
  - **Negative:** Injustice results when the criminal succeeds.
- **Internal Theme:** *Good versus Evil*. The lead character's ability to solve the story problem often depends on learning an essential life lesson in time to influence the result of the external theme. For example, in a cozy mystery, the amateur sleuth's choices dictate whether the individual will pursue the murder investigation.
  - **Positive:** Good (moral) results when a person sacrifices for the needs of others.
  - **Negative:** Evil (immoral) results when a person pursues selfish needs ahead of others.

- **Philosophical Theme: *Honor versus Shame*.** The confluence of characters and plot shapes the protagonist's thoughts, speech, choices, and actions. For instance, in this cozy mystery example, the amateur sleuth ultimately pursues the investigation because she cannot bear the shame of compromising her values and letting the killer escape justice.
  - **Positive:** Honor results when a person lives values without compromise.
  - **Negative:** Shame results when a person compromises personal values.

## *Subtle Versus Explicit Themes*

In popular fiction, authors avoid on-the-nose themes by using subtle suggestions through various techniques. For example:

- Convey the **external theme** through supporting cast members and events.
- Express the **internal theme** through the protagonist's feelings and actions.
- Remind readers of the **philosophical theme** through the changes that take place over the course of the story.

Use various writing techniques to introduce themes that align with your preferences and chosen genres.

## *Methods of Theme Formation*

The methods used to choose themes include:

- **Preconceived Theme:** You can come to your writing desk prepared to expand on a preconceived theme, which may also guide your plot design and character development.
- **Evolving Theme:** It's okay for a writer to begin with a preconceived theme, but as the characters grow, remain open to making changes.
- **Discovered Theme:** If at the outset of a writing project, or deep into your effort, you haven't yet decided on the theme, no worries. Complete your draft, and keep in mind that the plot forces characters to deal with internal and external conflicts. Those conflicts reveal external, internal, and philosophical themes, which you can identify during the editing process.

# THEMES:

## Infographics

Story themes range from simple to complex, and typically, the chosen genre influences what readers expect from the story.

## *Cozy Mystery Example*

### **Crime Genre (External)**

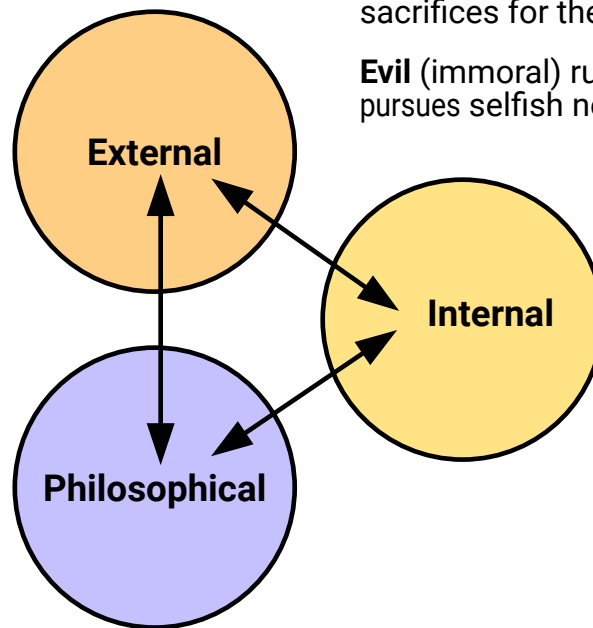
**Justice** rules when the protagonist succeeds.

**Injustice** rules when criminals succeed.

### **Inner Character (Internal)**

**Good** (moral) rules when a person sacrifices for the needs of others.

**Evil** (immoral) rules when a person pursues selfish needs ahead of others.



### **Character Reflection (Philosophical)**

**Honor** results when a person lives values without compromise.

**Shame** results when a person compromises personal values.