



1 Learn the Skill

A story's **theme** is an insight or a general idea about life or human nature that the author shares with readers. A theme does not summarize a story's plot. For example, the plot of the fairy tale "Cinderella" revolves around a poor, mistreated girl who marries a prince. Its theme, however, might be stated as *Keep hoping for better days* or *Kindness is often rewarded, and unfair treatment is punished*. Themes usually are not stated directly, so you must use clues from the text to discover the implied idea.

2 Practice the Skill

By practicing the skill of identifying a story's theme, you will improve your study and test-taking abilities, especially as they relate to the GED® Reasoning Through Language Arts Test. Read the passage below. Then answer the question that follows.

UNEXPECTED GIFTS

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. ...

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say, "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. ...

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? ... Give me your watch. I want to see how it [watch chain] looks on it." ...

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. ..."

From THE GIFT OF THE MAGI by O. Henry, © 1905

a Della and Jim each sell a prized possession—her hair and his watch—to buy a gift for the other. These sacrifices are important in identifying the story's theme.

b Remember that the magi were the wise men who brought gifts to the baby Jesus in the manger. The story's title, "The Gift of the Magi," provides an important clue about the theme.

MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

It is safe to assume that there is a parallel between the magi and Della and Jim. Consider the ways in which Della and Jim show wisdom in the art of gift giving.

1. Which sentence **best** states the theme of this passage?

- A. It is wrong to worship material objects.
- B. Gift giving places hardships on poor families.
- C. Years of poverty and sacrifice can destroy love.
- D. Willingness to sacrifice characterizes true love.

3 Apply the Skill

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage, read each question, and choose the **best** answer.

DONALD IS UPSET

- 1 In a way, Donald's absences are a fine arrangement, even considerate. He is sparing them his darkest moods, when he can't cope with his memories of Vietnam. Vietnam had never seemed such a meaningful fact until a couple of years ago, when he grew depressed and moody. ... He isn't really working regularly at the strip mines. He is mostly just hanging around there, watching the land being scraped away, trees coming down, bushes flung in the air. Sometimes he operates a steam shovel, and when he comes home his clothes are filled with the clay and it is caked on his shoes. The clay is the color of butterscotch pudding.
- 2 At first, he tried to explain to Jeannette. He said, "If we could have had tanks over there as big as Big Bertha, we wouldn't have lost the war. Strip mining is just like what we were doing over there. We were stripping off the top. The topsoil is like the culture and the people, the best part of the land and the country. America was just stripping off the top, the best. We ruined it. Here, at least the coal companies have to plant vetch and loblolly pines and all kinds of trees and bushes. If we'd done that in Vietnam, maybe we'd have left that country in better shape." ...
- 3 She didn't want to hear about Vietnam. She thought it was unhealthy to dwell on it so much. He should live in the present. Her mother is afraid Donald will do something violent, because she once read in the newspaper that a veteran in Louisville held his little girl hostage in their apartment until he had a shootout with the police and was killed. But Jeannette can't imagine Donald doing anything so extreme. When she first met him, several years ago, at her parents' ... luncheonette, where she was working then, he had a good job at lumberyard and he dressed nicely. He took her out to eat at a fancy restaurant. ... Back then, he talked nostalgically about his year in Vietnam, about how beautiful it was, how different the people were. He could never seem to explain what he meant. "They're just different," he said.

From BIG BERTHA STORIES by Bobbie Ann Mason, © 1988

2. Which sentence **best** states the theme of this passage?
- A. Veterans' wives fear violence from their husbands.
 - B. The physical injuries from war heal slowly and often incompletely.
 - C. War disrupts people deeply.
 - D. Strip mining destroys the countryside.
3. How do Donald's depression and moodiness relate to the theme of the passage?
- A. His work at the strip mines makes him uneasy.
 - B. His experience in Vietnam still haunts him.
 - C. He feels trapped by living with his family.
 - D. He cannot explain his feelings to Jeannette.
4. Donald says in paragraph 2 that "We were stripping off the top. The topsoil is like the culture and the people, the best part of the land and the country ..." How does this comparison **best** support the theme of the passage?
- A. Both activities destroy what is valuable in a place.
 - B. Both activities are productive for the economy.
 - C. Strip mining damages land, but war damages people.
 - D. Strip mining damages land, but soldiers tried to help Vietnamese people.
5. Paragraph 3 supports the theme of the passage by
- A. providing background information about Jeannette.
 - B. describing Donald as he was when he and Jeannette met.
 - C. explaining why Donald feels as he does about strip mining.
 - D. comparing Donald with a violent Vietnam veteran.
6. With which theme-related statement would Donald **most** likely agree?
- A. If you break something, you should fix it.
 - B. Men should work hard for their families.
 - C. Big industry is vital to America's economy.
 - D. Families always try to understand soldiers' experiences.

1 Review the Skill

The **theme** of a story is an idea about the world we live in or about life in general. Themes usually are not stated explicitly; they must be inferred from the details and clues included in the story. A story's theme usually can be expressed in a short statement.

Think of the story "The Ugly Duckling." A baby bird is left on its own and believes it is a duck, although other ducks see it as different and unappealing. At the end of the story, the "duckling" grows up to be a beautiful swan. The theme of this story could be stated as *Do not judge others on their appearances.*

2 Refine the Skill

By refining the skill of identifying a story's theme, you will improve your study and test-taking abilities, especially as they relate to the GED® Reasoning Through Language Arts Test. Read the passage below. Then answer the questions that follow.

PLAYING IN WINTER

When the short days of winter came dusk fell before we had well eaten our dinners. When we met in the street the houses had grown sombre. The space of sky above us was the colour of ever-changing violet and towards it the lamps of the street lifted their feeble lanterns. The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent street. The career of our play brought us through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses where we ran the gauntlet of the rough tribes from the cottages, to the back doors of the dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ashpits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness. When we returned to the street light from the kitchen windows had filled the areas. If my uncle was seen turning the corner we hid in the shadow until we had seen him safely housed.

From ARABY by James Joyce, © 1914

a At the beginning of the passage, the narrator describes the scene. The descriptions give readers a sense of how the children live.

b The narrator describes the children's activities and the different ways that the children play together, despite the cold weather.

TEST-TAKING TIPS

Look for details that contribute to a larger idea. These details may be descriptions, actions, thoughts, or words. Narrators often reveal significant thematic clues.

- Which sentence **best** states the theme of the passage?
 - Children are able to find ways to have fun in different situations.
 - Cold winter air is bad for gardens.
 - It is dangerous for children to hide from their relatives.
 - The winter is bleak and unappealing to city dwellers.
- Which sentence from the passage **best** supports the theme?
 - "When the short days of winter came dusk fell before we had well eaten our dinners."
 - "When we met in the street the houses had grown sombre."
 - "The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed."
 - "If my uncle was seen turning the corner we hid in the shadow until we had seen him safely housed."

3 Master the Skill

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage, read each question, and choose the **best** answer.

RAY'S THOUGHTS ABOUT UNFAIRNESS

- 1 The beauty of the country about Winesburg was too much for Ray on that fall evening. That is all there was to it. He could not stand it. All of a sudden he forgot all about being a quiet old farmhand and throwing off the torn overcoat began to run across the field. As he ran he shouted a protest against his life, against all life, against everything that makes life ugly. "There was no promise made," he cried into the empty spaces that lay about him. "I didn't promise my Minnie anything and Hal hasn't made any promise to Nell. I know he hasn't. She went into the woods with him because she wanted to go. What he wanted she wanted. Why should I pay? Why should Hal pay? Why should anyone pay? I don't want Hal to become old and worn out. I'll tell him. I won't let it go on. I'll catch Hal before he gets to town and I'll tell him. ..."
- 2 Then as he ran he remembered his children and in fancy felt their hands clutching at him. All of his thoughts of himself were involved with the thoughts of Hal and he thought the children were clutching at the younger man also. "They are the accidents of life, Hal," he cried. "They are not mine or yours. I had nothing to do with them."
- 3 Darkness began to spread over the fields as Ray Pearson ran on and on. His breath came in little sobs. When he came to the fence at the edge of the road and confronted Hal Winters, all dressed up and smoking a pipe as he walked jauntily along, he could not have told what he thought or what he wanted. ...
- 4 "You came to tell me, eh?" he said. "Well, never mind telling me anything. I'm not a coward and I've already made up my mind." He laughed again and jumped back across the ditch. "Nell ain't no fool," he said. "She didn't ask me to marry her. I want to marry her. I want to settle down and have kids."

From THE UNTOLD LIE by Sherwood Anderson, © 1947

3. Which sentence **best** states the theme of the passage?
- A. Even in beautiful country, farm owners treat their employees unfairly.
 - B. A hasty marriage often leads to tragedy.
 - C. Disappointed people may try to stop others from making similar mistakes.
 - D. Good friends will try to help each other when problems arise.
4. Ray asks "Why should I pay?" (paragraph 1). How is Ray's protest related to the theme of the passage? He is protesting against his
- A. responsibilities.
 - B. job as a farmhand.
 - C. torn overcoat.
 - D. brief friendship with Hal.
5. Which detail about Ray **best** supports the theme?
- A. He throws off his torn overcoat.
 - B. He runs to catch Hal before he does something with which Ray disagrees.
 - C. He enjoys living in a beautiful, peaceful place like Winesburg.
 - D. He is a quiet, old farmhand.
6. How is paragraph 1 connected thematically to paragraph 3?
- A. Paragraph 3 summarizes Ray's thoughts and feelings introduced in paragraph 1.
 - B. Paragraph 3 describes the landscape of Winesburg.
 - C. Paragraph 3 reveals that Ray will not share his thoughts.
 - D. Paragraph 3 shows that Hal has fashionable clothing.

★ Spotlighted Item: **FILL-IN-THE-BLANK**

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage. Then fill in your answers in the boxes below.

AN UPRIGHT TOWN

1 It was many years ago. Hadleyburg was the most honest and upright town in all the region round about. It had kept that reputation unsmirched during three generations, and was prouder of it than of any other of its possessions. It was so proud of it, and so anxious to insure its perpetuation, that it began to teach the principles of honest dealing to its babies in the cradle, and made the like teachings the staple of their culture thenceforward through all the years devoted to their education. ... The neighbouring towns were jealous of this honourable supremacy, and affected to sneer at Hadleyburg's pride in it and call it vanity; but all the same they were obliged to acknowledge that Hadleyburg was in reality an incorruptible town. ...

2 But at last, in the drift of time, Hadleyburg had the ill luck to offend a passing stranger—possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself, and cared not a rap for strangers or their opinions. Still, it would have been well to make an exception in this one's case, for he was a bitter man, and revengeful. All through his wanderings during a whole year he kept his injury in mind, and gave all his leisure moments to trying to invent a compensating satisfaction for it. ... At last he had a fortunate idea, and when it fell into his brain it lit up his whole head with an evil joy. He began to form a plan at once, saying to himself "That is the thing to do—I will corrupt the town."

3 Six months later he went to Hadleyburg, and arrived in a buggy at the house of the old cashier of the bank about ten at night. He got a sack out of the buggy, shouldered it, and staggered with it through the cottage yard, and knocked at the door. A woman's voice said, "Come in," and he entered, and set his sack behind the stove in the parlour, saying politely to the old lady ...

4 "Pray keep your seat, madam, I will not disturb you. There—now it is pretty well concealed; one would hardly know it was there. I merely wanted to leave that sack in [your husband's] care, to be delivered to the rightful owner when he shall be found. I am a stranger; he does not know me; I am merely passing through the town to-night to discharge a matter which has been long in my mind. ... There is a paper attached to the sack which will explain everything. Good-night, madam." ... It began as follows:

5 "TO BE PUBLISHED, or, the right man sought out by private inquiry—either will answer. This sack contains gold coin weighing a hundred and sixty pounds four ounces—"

6 "Mercy on us, and the door not locked!"

From THE MAN THAT CORRUPTED HADLEYBURG by Mark Twain, © 1899

7. One theme of the passage is that must be able to withstand challenges.

8. How does the last sentence in the passage reflect the theme?

DIRECTIONS: Read the passage, read each question, and choose the **best** answer.

A SHARP BLADE

- 1 [T]hen he abruptly returns to tanks and helicopters.
- 2 "A Bell Huey Cobra—my God what a beautiful machine. So efficient!" Donald takes the food processor blade from the drawer where Jeannette keeps it. He says, "A rotor blade from a chopper could just slice anything to bits."
- 3 "Don't do that," Jeannette says.
- 4 He is trying to spin the blade on the counter, like a top. "Here's what would happen when a chopper blade hits a power line—not many of those over there!—or a tree. Not many trees, either, come to think of it, after all the Agent Orange." He drops the blade and it glances off the open drawer and falls to the floor, spiking the vinyl.
- 5 At first, Jeannette thinks the screams are hers, but they are his. She watches him cry. She has never seen anyone cry so hard, like an intense summer thundershower. All she knows to do is shove Kleenex at him. Finally, he is able to say, "You thought I was going to hurt you. That's why I'm crying."
- 6 "Go ahead and cry," Jeannette says, holding him close.
- 7 "Don't go away."
- 8 "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."
- 9 In the night, she still listens, knowing his monologue is being burned like a tattoo into her brain. She will never forget it. His voice grows soft and he plays with a ballpoint pen, jabbing holes in a paper towel. Bullet holes, she thinks. His beard is like a bird's nest, woven with dark corn silks.

From *BIG BERTHA STORIES* by Bobbie Ann Mason, © 1988

9. Which sentence **best** states the theme of the passage?
- People need to forget the past and live in the present.
 - Unresolved problems of the past remain in the present.
 - Husbands and wives share and understand each other's feelings.
 - Unsympathetic families can drive people to violence.
10. How does the image of the food processor blade "spiking the vinyl" floor connect to the theme of the passage?
- Donald cannot let go of his memories of the war as easily as he dropped the blade.
 - The blade hurts the floor just as Donald's war memories hurt Jeannette.
 - The blade is a symbol of Donald's violent nature.
 - The blade suggests cutting and destruction and connects to negative images of war.
11. Donald cries when he thinks Jeannette imagines that he will hurt her. How does Donald's emotional response relate to the theme of the passage?
- It reveals Donald's capacity for violence.
 - It emphasizes Jeannette's misunderstanding of Donald.
 - It shows Donald's sensitivity and fragile emotional state.
 - It indicates that Jeannette knows how to comfort Donald.
12. Which situation is **most** like Donald's?
- A bicyclist returns home from a long and difficult ride.
 - A shark-attack survivor has nightmares about sharks.
 - A soldier returns home after an uneventful tour of duty.
 - A war hero returns to receive recognition for his bravery.