

Finding Your Theme.

In *Finish Your Book in Three Drafts (3D)*, I recommended four ways of finding your theme. What follows here is a hybrid of these strategies that I designed for a workshop setting originally but that can be applied to your work as it stands right now.

Although I definitely recommend doing theme work while preparing to write your method draft, it can be done at any time, and more than once. Each iteration gets you closer to the heart of something that is always changing before it gets fixed in the form of a finished book.

Step 1. Write a four-sentence description of what your book is about. You might use the top four of your series sentences in a top-down order of importance, or you might just use your presence and your instinct.

When we did this exercise in class, my student Kimberly reflected on her work-in-progress and wrote the following:

KIMBERLY'S
FOUR SENTENCES

This is not a theme so much as it is an elevator pitch—you know, that brief speech you are supposed to have prepared in case you ever run into a literary agent and have exactly one minute to pitch your

IN MY NOVEL, THE MAIN CHARACTER IS FORCED TO GIVE UP HER ILLEGITIMATE CHILD AND FOR YEARS SHE IS DETACHED FROM NORMAL LIFE. SHE IS FORCED INTO A WORK PROGRAM THAT CHANGES HER VIEW OF HER OWN LIFE. OUTSIDE INFLUENCES FORCE HER TO FACE HER CURRENT SITUATION AND PICK A PATH MOVING FORWARD. HER JOURNEY IS ABOUT FINDING HOPE, ACCEPTING THE PAST, AND CHOOSING A FUTURE.

book. That is for the external world. A theme, on the other hand, is for you, to help you bring your book to the next level by rearranging the key components around the one thing that holds your work together.

As such, you can probably take out the who, the where, and the when from your theme-in-progress...after all, you already know them. See if you can focus instead on the what, the how, and the why, when you complete the next step.

Step 2. Reduce your four-sentence description to a two-sentence description of what your book is about.

This is a bit like reducing a sauce over medium-high heat. You don't want to damage any of the ingredients, but you have to end up with less.

When Kimberly combined and eliminated her theme material, she came up with the following two sentences:

KIMBERLY'S
TWO SENTENCES

OUTSIDE FORCES FORCE SAMANTHA TO FACE HER CURRENT SITUATION AND PICK A PATH MOVING FORWARD. HER JOURNEY IS ABOUT FINDING HOPE, ACCEPTING THE PAST, AND CHOOSING A FUTURE.

This is close, but there is still too much going on here. While the last three actions—"finding hope," "accepting the past," and "choosing a future"—are all obviously related, each could be the theme of a book.

Step 3. Reduce your two-sentence description to a one-sentence description of what your book is about. Kimberly chose hers by circling it in her notebook:

KIMBERLY'S
THEME

OUTSIDE FORCES FORCE SAMANTHA TO FACE HER CURRENT SITUATION AND PICK A PATH MOVING FORWARD. HER JOURNEY IS ABOUT FINDING HOPE, ACCEPTING THE PAST, AND CHOOSING A FUTURE.

"Choosing a future" is rich enough that it implies other necessary actions; it is internally wound in a way that provokes both curiosity and identification in the reader. "I want to read about that," someone might say. "That affects me today."

“Choosing a future” is short as far as themes go; you know from *3D* that a theme can be as long as twenty-eight words or longer. The shortest a theme can be, however, is two words: a subject and a verb. If you just have a subject, like “Madness” or “Adultery,” you might proliferate your manuscript with associations, but you will get distracted and confused without a direction to travel in.

One of my students once told me the theme of her novel was “Conformity.” Her story looked at three generations of Germans: the first succumbed to the Nazi regime; the next violently rejected anyone who was a part of their nation’s darkest era; and the third tried to navigate a path between generations at such odds with each other.

It wasn’t until my student announced, “Conformity corrodes,” that the subject could be limited, or at least bounded, and the verb could operate through all of the major actions of her book. Having a subject and a verb is akin to having a topic and an angle at the same time. Of course, a theme can be much longer than two words, as evidenced by the variety presented in *3D* and the next PDF (PDF #7). But it has to be short enough that you can remember it when you are at your desk and you get a new idea. By holding the theme in mind, you can then ask, “How does this idea apply?”