

One Page Concept Review: Author's Purpose and Theme

What is it?

While these two concepts are related, they are not identical. The author's purpose is obviously what the author is trying to communicate. This can be a big picture argument (a theme), or it can be what the author is trying to do on a smaller scale at a particular point in the text (develop a character, establish a mood, satirize a way of thinking, set up a conflict, etc.).

A theme is simply an argument that the text is making. *War* is not a theme. *War is pointless and destructive* is a theme.

In terms of the test, what unites author's purpose and theme is that you should *always* be writing about one or both of these in your essays.

Why should I care?

Your job in the essays is to address one or both of these concepts (even if a prompt makes it seem like you don't have to do this). You will never write passing score essays unless you do this, and you will consistently mishandle the multiple choice if you don't try to keep these two concepts in mind.

More broadly, you also don't want to be one of those people later in life who consistently misses the point of everything they see, read, or hear. Learn to break stuff down in order to understand the big picture.

How do I do it?

This is one's that probably easier said than done, since it involves drawing conclusions from a number of skills I have tried to teach you. I do have some general strategies, though:

- Broadly speaking, **always focus on the why**. If you're leaving room for someone to ask, "So what?" then you're doing something wrong. Noticing things that the author is doing are worthless if they're not being connected to some bigger picture. In terms of the AP test, these essays always score 4 or below.
- **Use the test to help you**. The essay prompt will almost always explicitly ask you to focus on either author's purpose or theme. If the prompt is asking you for the author's attitude toward something, the implied task is to uncover whether the author is supportive or unsupportive. If the prompt is asking you to explicate a pattern of imagery or break down an extended metaphor, the implied task is to figure out how this reveals the author's point of view. If the prompt is asking you how the author develops the characters, the implied task is to figure out whether the author wants the reader to approve or disapprove of the character's actions. In other words, **always ask yourself why the question is being asked in the first place**.
- **Use the conflict to help you**. What the problem, and how does it resolve or not resolve? Are you supposed to feel good about this outcome? These questions should help you to figure out what the author's point is.
- **Look for patterns**. Repeated ideas, images, or even words are a big red flag that something is important. If the author is taking the time to stress something, you now have an area to focus on to understand the big picture.
- **Move beyond the literal**. What is the text about? Now ask yourself, what is it *really* about? Once you have a theory about this, now you're ready to pull the evidence that created that impression.

How do students screw this up?

Not Having a Plan

- **Claim statements should be focused on either author's purpose or theme.** This means your thesis should address one of these explicitly, but it also means that your topic sentences must be the steps that make it possible for you to prove that thesis. If there is no clear connection of your topic sentences to your thesis, your argument is drifting. However, if you're focused on what each paragraph is going to do for you before you write, you largely avoid this pitfall.
- **Do not answer half the prompt.** The essay prompt almost always has two parts: 1) look for something, and 2) explain why that something is important. It is very easy to just do the first part of the task and forget about the second. However, this is not good enough to earn a passing score. Again, advance planning helps you to avoid this problem.
- **Use conclusions to synthesize your argument.** Yes, you have to sum up what you've done, but you should *also* be using the conclusions to explain the implications of what you've done in terms of the big picture. In writing about literature, the big picture is almost always author's purpose or theme.

Losing the Forest for the Trees

- **Do not lose focus.** Aimlessly making observations about a grab-bag of things that you see is worthless unless it is at the service of an argument-- and the argument is *always*, "I think the author is doing X for Y reasons." Even if your argument starts strong, if you end up talking about something else entirely, you're almost certainly not addressing the task at hand.
- **Do not expect the reader to make connections for you.** While your grab bag of evidence and observations may have obvious implications for you, unless you bother to tell the reader what those implications are, the writing will be confusing to the reader. Remember, your role is to *teach* an aspect of the text to the reader, and you cannot take the reader's understanding for granted.
- **Focus on the argument, not the "right" answer.** You have to convince the reader that your interpretation (your theory about what the author is trying to do) is the correct one-- not list the evidence that establishes the one correct answer that someone has decided in advance. There will *always* be more than one "right" way of addressing a task, so the graders are not looking for any one approach. The argument is what is important here, and the bottom line is whether or not you are convincing.

Veering Off Into Summary-land

- **Do not prove the obvious.** If something is stated directly, you do not have to prove it. If something is trivial, you should not try to prove it. Instead, your focus should be on underlying meaning, not superficial details.
- **Do not focus on the concrete.** If you can pull a quote or idea that states your argument exactly, this is pretty clear sign that you're missing the big picture (and focusing on events instead of purpose or argument). Your evidence should be the means by which you are able to draw the inference that makes your point (the claim). Therefore, the explanation is nothing more than you spelling out *how* you reached that inference. However, if there is nothing to explain after the evidence, chances are you're summarizing something that is right there in the text (instead of making an argument about what it suggests about purpose).
- In somewhat the same vein, **do not fail to make inferences.** If you're saying that a piece of evidence shows something, it does no such thing unless you explain *how*. If you're not constantly answering the question "So what?" through your explanations, you're either listing or summarizing, and both are deadly to your score.