

Themes In Dialogue Worksheet

Dialogue is one of the most dynamic elements of novel-writing. It reveals character, deepens conflict, and shares information. However, did you know that dialogue is also a fantastic way of nurturing a story's themes? If you closely study what's being said, you'll find that the message being delivered is often as memorable as the speaker's words and emotions.

How can you let your story's themes shine through in your dialogue without making them too obvious? That's what the **Themes In Dialogue Worksheet** is for! It includes three activities that will help you determine how well your story's dialogue reveals literary themes through conversation basics, emotional subtext, and repetition.

This worksheet is based on the activities in my DIY MFA article "Developing Themes In Your Stories: Part Four – Dialogue." [Click here to read the article before continuing.](#)

Instructions:

Print out a copy of this worksheet, and have either a print or electronic version of your WIP available for selecting dialogue excerpts to use in the following activities.

1. Dissect Your Dialogue Using the Four Basics of Conversation

Purposeful dialogue consists of four conversation "basics" that can be dissected as follows:

- a) **Topic:** What is the subject of the dialogue, or of the chosen excerpt from a longer conversation?
- b) **Details:** What questions do the participating characters ask? What information is revealed?
- c) **Opinions:** What points do the participating characters make in favor of or against the topic? How do other characters receive those opinions?
- d) **Themes:** What high-level concepts emerge from the dialogue? In other words, what are the characters really talking about?

Chances are, the first three "basics" will be revealed directly through dialogue. Finding the theme requires a close examination of the conversation's dynamics (reactions, emotion, etc.) and piecing together the answers from the previous questions.



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Activity #1: Choose a dialogue excerpt from your WIP. Read it, then answer the Dialogue Dissection questions on Page 1. Did you discern any theme(s)? If not, how could you revise the dialogue so it's still realistic but lets the theme(s) be more present? Feel free to also try this exercise on dialogue from published books you've read.

Use the blank space below to jot down your answers.

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2. Identify the Emotional Subtext in Your Dialogue

As your character is speaking, consider his opinions at that time. How do they clash with those of other participating characters? How does he react as a result? These details can help reveal a character's view on the topic while offering additional insight on the theme in two ways:

- **Showing a Character's Emotions:** What is your character's body language (posture, gestures, head movements, etc.)? How about his tone of voice? What internal sensations ("butterflies in his stomach," muscle tightness, breathlessness, etc.) does he experience?
- **Appropriate Word Choices:** Do the words alone convey emotion? Are they forceful or gentle? Direct or conceptual? How do the word choices reveal the speaker's feelings about the topic of discussion and influence the theme?

Activity #2: Using the dialogue excerpt from Activity #1, look for reaction cues from the participating characters. What emotions do those reactions reveal? Why would your characters feel that way? What can you infer about the theme in question based on those reactions? Also, do the words themselves reveal the speaker's emotions? If not, how could you revise the dialogue to incorporate more emotion through reaction cues and/or word choice?

Use the blank space below or on the back of this page to write down your answers.

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3. Determine If Your Themes Repeat Throughout the Story's Dialogue

[If you've read my DIY MFA article on themes in dialogue](#), you may have noticed that the same theme (adolescence) popped up in both excerpts from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. This is not a coincidence. Passage after passage of dialogue in this book touches on adolescence, each reflecting on different aspects of the theme. The same goes for the novel's other themes like power, isolation, and friendship.

Repetition is crucial to delivering literary themes. In fact, [it's part of DIY MFA's working definition of "theme."](#) Presenting such concepts once won't teach the protagonist – or the reader – much about them. They can only be ingrained if the writer revisits them throughout the story and forces the protagonist to struggle with them as part of the overall character arc. After all, we learn and succeed through repetition, don't we?

Activity #3: Repeat Activities #1 and #2 with other dialogue excerpts from your WIP. Do the same themes keep emerging? Do any themes appear only once? If so, how could you revise the example so it's more on-point with other, more consistent themes?