

## Chapter 3: **Theme**

*Characters must touch the viewers. Their actions must generate a sense of recognition, feelings of concern, and a desire for “payoff,” an emotional outcome that feels logical to the audience.*

Every writer faces the question, “What is your script about?” Once when an agent asked, I launched into, “It’s about these people who . . .” He cut me off. “No. Don’t give me a biography. Just say what your script is about. You should be able to tell me in a few words. One sentence at the most. If you can’t, you don’t know what it’s about, and your material isn’t ready for submission.”

It was a humbling moment. But his attitude is typical. As a rule, industry people can’t and won’t spare time for long explanations. So you better be ready when they pop the question. A strong theme statement can be an important part of your reply.

### **PREPARING A THEME STATEMENT**

#### **Your Subject**

Human beings are psychologically based creatures. We feel first and behave second, expressing our inner feelings through physical actions. In short, our emotions compel and propel our behavior. Of course, as noted earlier, external influences alter human emotions. Time, place, conditions of life. But drama begins with the emotions themselves. For example, Indiana Jones is a bullwhip-toting archeologist who seeks the Lost Ark. But *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is not merely about an eccentric scientist and a missing treasure. (If it were, it would be a documentary.) In fact, the subject is *triumph*. A good man confronts an evil man. An emotional tug-o-war ensues. The film’s lively given circumstances . . . Indy’s exotic profession, his urgent quest, the dangerous setting . . . provide a strong frame for the characters. But by themselves, these details won’t hold an audience.

We want to share feelings with Indy. Fear. Determination. Excitement. That’s why we buy a ticket. Indeed, every film story begins with human emotions. Therefore, the subject of your story needs to be an emotion or a condition that has an emotional connection. You should be able to state it in one word: a noun. For example, you could choose love, hate, courage, or guilt.

At this point, we’re laying out the bare bones for your story, so we want to keep things simple. Choose basic feelings that will spark your characters’ behavior. Attributes such as values and ethics are layers you can add later. There are no restrictions except the kind of story you want to write. Your subject can be lofty or completely depraved. (Indeed, the Seven Deadly Sins are dramatic fast food for screenwriters.)

Of course, no writer can say everything about love, hate, joy, sorrow, or any other subject within the two hour time limit of the average screenplay. So if you wish, use an adjective to narrow the emotional field. For example, *love* can be mother love, unrequited love, forbidden love, or adulterous love. Be very stingy with your descriptive words. Never use more than two. Now you have your subject. Jot it down on a piece of paper.

## Your Basic Action

The emotion you choose for your subject will motivate your characters, making them do things to each other. Next you can decide what behavior the emotion makes the protagonist display. (His action then prompts the antagonist and other characters to respond.) The best way to express the protagonist's behavior is to choose the *-ing* form of a transitive verb. (A verb that shows behavior going from one character to another.) Write this verb, ending in *-ing*, beside your subject. For example:

### SUBJECT BASIC ACTION

Mother love    Protecting  
Courage        Fighting  
Loneliness    Searching  
Reconciliation Forgiven

Okay. Now you have a subject and a basic action. Put an "arrow" sign between the words that signify emotion and behavior. The arrow indicates that the emotion *leads to* the action.

### SUBJECT BASIC ACTION

Mother love → Protecting  
Courage → Winning  
Loneliness → Searching  
Reconciliation → Forgiven

Each combination launches behavior which can go from one character to another. Opening the door for the other character's reaction. People doing to each other.

Choose a basic action (behavior) that links logically with your subject (emotion). For instance, "mother love" leads to "protecting" seems quite logical. Odd combinations, such as "mother love" leads to "killing," may be original ideas, but they also can create a credibility gap that destroys your story. Your play must *make sense* to the audience. If you choose an illogical basic action, you may need incredible skill to create a script your audience will believe.

If you decide to try an odd combination, use your given circumstances to tip the credibility scales. For what logical reason might a loving mother kill her children? If it's 2000 years ago, they're Jewish, and they're trapped at Masada, you have a poignant tale that will make complete sense to an audience.

If your character is like the Greek witch Medea, who killed her sons because she hated her husband, you must motivate her behavior so your audience knows its cause. They won't approve. No doubt they will be outraged. But they need to understand. Even bizarre science fiction tales must be grounded in genuine emotion and logical basic action. If your subject and basic action don't fit properly, try other combinations. Work until you get a logical "mesh."

## The Goal Sentence

For the next and final step of constructing your theme statement, you will write your *protagonist's goal*. This short, simple sentence goes under your subject/basic action equation. It states what your protagonist wants to do and names the antagonist who receives the action and resists. The goal sentence must evolve logically from your subject and basic action. Crucial because it sets the focus for your central conflict, this last little element often trips up those writers who confuse the protagonist and antagonist. To keep the characters straight, use the method below exactly as you see it written:

**NAME THE PROTAGONIST, THE “DO-ER” OF THE ACTION** (Hamlet . . . )

**IN A FEW WORDS, STATE WHAT HE WANTS TO DO** (Hamlet wants to get even . . . )

**NAME THE ANTAGONIST WHO RECEIVES THE ACTION AND RESISTS** (Hamlet wants to get even with King Claudius.)

See how that works? How straightforward and simple it is? By all means, keep it that way. You can add details later.

The subject/basic action equation and the goal sentence form a complete theme statement.

For example, if the play is *Hamlet*:

justice → killing

Hamlet wants to kill King Claudius.

The subject is justice. The basic action is “killing.” Hamlet, the protagonist, leads the action. In his quest for justice, Hamlet forces Claudius to respond and oppose Hamlet, setting the focus for the central conflict. (Will Hamlet kill the king?)

If the film is *ET*:

separation → getting help

ET wants a boy to help him go home.

The subject is separation. The basic action is getting help. ET leads the action. His desire to go home forces the boy to respond and oppose ET because the boy doesn't have the power to do what ET wants.

Or *My Fair Lady*:

acceptance → teaching

Prof. Higgins wants to teach Eliza proper speech so society will accept her.

The subject is acceptance. The basic action is teaching. Professor Higgins leads the action. His desire to teach Eliza forces her to respond and opposes him because she resents the way he treats her.

Again, you need a *transitive verb* that can take a direct object. These verbs are the strongest words in our language. They indicate action that passes from one character to another, causing a reaction. Here are some transitive verbs that will serve you well:

to lead (leading)

to seek (seeking)

to bond (bonding)

to escape (escaping)

to win (winning)

to reject (rejecting)

to save (saving)

to fight (fighting)

to forgive (forgiving)

To keep yourself on track, simply remember:

Subject → Basic Action = Reaction

(Emotion leads to behavior that causes a reaction.)

Be careful to avoid subject/basic action equations or goal sentences that seem awkward or don't make sense. With beginning writers, it's common to see elements such as:

murder → killing (murder leads to killing)

love → committing (love leads to committing)

Is murder an emotion? Or is it behavior an emotion can cause? In fact, it is behavior. Indeed, murder and killing are the same thing. The equation is wrong because it has two *behaviors*. Let's try a rewrite:

hate → killing

When the emotion *hate* motivates the behavior *killing*, the equation makes sense.

Turning to the second equation given above, love is an emotion, and committing is a transitive verb. But we use committing in the sense of committing an act, such as murder.

Typically we don't think of "committing love." Instead, we relate love to making a commitment. Or perhaps bonding.

love → bonding

In this example, bonding is a stronger and more logical basic action.

## Things to Avoid

### Intransitive Verbs

In particular, avoid *to be* and its forms (*is, was, were*). Some other intransitive verbs are *to think*, and *to have*. Even some verbs that seem like action, such as *to laugh*, actually are "one way" words. They represent actions people do *for themselves* rather than *to others*.

success → being happy  
Eliza wants to be happy.

"Being" is an intransitive verb, and "happy" describes the state of mind Eliza desires. The statement may reveal her inner struggle to readers, but for actors, it is passive and static. For that, she needs to show behavior that can motivate a response:

love → giving  
Eliza wants to give Henry Higgins her love.

Aha! There you have plenty of potential for action and reaction. Eliza can foist 'er affections on 'er nry, and 'e can frow 'em right back in 'er fice!

It's true, however, that some transitive verbs turn behavior back to the person who does them:

success → learning  
Eliza wants to learn proper speech.

"Learning" tricky because it belongs to a group that can be both transitive and intransitive verbs. But don't despair. To make sure, ask yourself, can Eliza learn anybody else anything? No. She can teach other people, but she can't learn them. Learning is "one way" behavior that Eliza does for herself. She is the only person who can respond. No one else can get into the act!

## THE ACID TEST

To check your theme statement and see if it works, you also can ask yourself brief questions such as those shown below in brackets.

love [*Who shows it? Who feels it?*] □ giving [*To whom? For whom?*]

Eliza wants to give Henry Higgins her love. [*Will the first character's action force a response from the second character?*]

Your answers should jive, and the elements go together in a logical manner.

## THE GOOD NEWS

A proper theme statement is simple and clear. If you read theme statements aloud and they are easy to say, the odds are they will work as drama. If you falter, however, if your statement sounds awkward or forced, you have a glitch. Simply do it over. Try a different subject and/or verb. Adjust the goal sentence until it specifies in plain, simple terms what the protagonist wants.

## The Value of Theme Statements

A theme statement helps you set up your central conflict because it makes you identify the protagonist's goal before you begin writing. If you travel in a foreign country, wouldn't you obtain a map? Well, your theme statement is your screenplay's map. Use it before you begin your journey.

Now, think . . . what will your protagonist do to get what (s)he wants? What will happen if (s)he succeeds? What will happen if (s)he doesn't? These questions will lead you straight into the reactions of your other characters.

Yes, your theme statement can change. Your interest in the subject may flag, or you may decide another basic action is stronger. You may even write many theme statements for one story. That's fine. Just choose the strongest.

## A TEMPLATE FOR THEME STATEMENTS

You know now that the elements of a theme statement look like this:

**Subject → Basic Action**  
**Goal Sentence**

A learning aid follows that can help you get started writing theme statements. With practice it will become second nature, and you will do it in your head.

## Finding the Subject

To identify your subject, you need only to say to yourself, "The emotion (desire, need) that compels \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_."  
(*protagonist's name*)                      (*your subject*)

Remember to use one word: a noun. It can be a plain, straightforward emotion, such as love. Or it can be a need or a desire with an emotional connection, like success. In *Citizen Kane*, the emotion (desire, need) that compels the reporter is success.

## Finding the Basic Action

To identify your basic action, say to yourself, “A need or desire for \_\_\_\_\_  
(your subject)  
motivates \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.  
(your protagonist) (a transitive verb)

Therefore, the basic action is \_\_\_\_\_.”  
(the -ing form of your transitive verb)

A need for survival—so he can keep his job— motivates a reporter to investigate Charles Kane.  
Therefore, the basic action is investigating.

## Finding the Goal Sentence

To write your goal sentence, you can say to yourself, “ \_\_\_\_\_ wants to  
(your protagonist)  
\_\_\_\_\_ in spite of \_\_\_\_\_  
(a few words stating the protagonist’s wish or desire) (your antagonist)  
who \_\_\_\_\_.”  
(a few words stating the antagonist’s opposition)

The reporter investigates to find out the meaning of “rosebud” in spite of Charles Kane who died without leaving a clue.

## Keep Sentences Simple and Avoid Details

“Driven by heartache, Dick persistently strives to win Jane’s heart in spite of her engagement to a bumbling Neanderthal football player named Tom.”

Such rambling will only confuse you. Delete all descriptions. What does the protagonist want? What does the antagonist want? Use plain language and make short, clear statements. “Dick wants to win Jane in spite of her desire to marry someone else.”

When you finish with *Citizen Kane*, your theme statement should look like this:

**CITIZEN KANE:** survival → investigating

The reporter investigates to find out the meaning of “rosebud” in spite of Charles Kane who died without leaving a clue.

Remember, always use the above sentence patterns and fill in the blanks. It’s okay, however, to discover the elements in whatever order occurs to you Perhaps you can’t think of a subject or basic action, but you have a goal sentence in mind. Great! Write your goal sentence first. Generally, the elements that you already have can help you identify other parts of the equation. Frankly, I often write my goal sentence first. Then I figure out the emotion and basic action I’m writing about. But ultimately, I have all three elements written down.

If your first statement doesn’t work, try another. Remember the first time you used a hammer? It looked easy. But you got bent nails. Like other tools, a theme statement takes practice. But once you get the hang of it, you can go straight to the heart of a play or film. When you write, your theme statement promotes clear, purposeful work instead of letting you flounder.

## EXERCISE 3

1. Look up the following verbs in the dictionary. Which are transitive (take a direct object) and intransitive (no direct object)? Which will force reactions from a second character?

to go	to defeat	to send	to shine	to take
to dream	to cling	to fight	to hide	to lead
to need	to work	to change	to get	to die

2. Try the direct object test.

To make sure you have a transitive verb, start with the infinitive (*to love*). Add the objective pronoun *whom* and a question mark. (*To love whom?*) Does the result make sense and open the door for a response? Think what the response might be. Write down what another character might do. For example:

To change (*To change whom?*) If you want to change people, they can refuse.

To challenge (*To challenge whom?*) If you challenge people, they can fight.

Intransitive verbs don't take a direct object, so they will never work:

To die (*To die whom?*) If you die people, they can \_\_\_\_\_. What? Turn green? No. You can kill people. But you can't die them. (At least not without a really big vat and scads of boiling water.)

Some transitive verbs won't work, either, because they become awkward and clunky:

To sacrifice. (*To sacrifice whom?*) If you sacrifice people, they can \_\_\_\_\_. What? Like "committing," *sacrifice* can mean two things: actually sacrificing someone or "making a sacrifice" for them. For this verb to take a direct object and to work as drama, you must sacrifice *someone*. Think! What is your true intent?

To cling (*To cling whom?*) If you cling people, they can \_\_\_\_\_. What? If you cling Sue, how will she respond? On the other hand, if you cling *to* her, she can push you away. But cling is a difficult and rather clunky verb. *Hold* means basically the same thing, but it doesn't need a "helper" word to clarify the action. Any time your verb phrase sounds forced or ungrammatical, try a different verb.

3. Choose five subjects that interest you. Create a theme statement for each. Be sure to include all three parts written in the proper format:

**Subject → Basic action**

**Goal sentence**

This exercise seems easy, but the simplicity is deceptive. It can seriously tax your imagination to come up with five different theme statements.