

## TRAIT FOCUS: IDEAS

## Lesson Objective

Students write a clear focus statement that identifies the theme for a response to literature essay.

## Crafting a Clear Focus Statement

Response to literature essays in the elementary school grades most often take the form of plot summaries and only the beginnings of literary theme analysis. In most Middle School curricula, however, student writers are expected to analyze and deconstruct the parts of a story in order to decipher how they form a meaningful whole. It therefore might take an extra bit of coaching for your students to understand theme in a way that lets them write comfortably.

A useful bridge to deep analysis of theme is to begin with conflict summation. Conflict in a story is much more transparent and can provide a good starting point for a response to literature essay. The struggles the main character faces give clues to the story's theme. The lessons he or she learns are often directly tied to the overall theme.

The short story "The Flying Machine" by Ray Bradbury is an excellent mentor text for summarizing conflict and analyzing theme. Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your curriculum of response to literature essays as a way of teaching writers how to craft clear focus statements about theme.

## Story Overview

Taken from the collection *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, Bradbury tells a story set in ancient China in which Emperor Yuan discovers a man who has invented a machine for flying. Horrified, he calls the man down and demands to know how many others know of the contraption. No one else knows.

Seeing the potential for great danger, the Emperor has the inventor executed, explaining: "...one must lose a little beauty if one is to keep what little beauty one already has."

## Focusing on the Theme

1. Explain that in a response to literature essay, your students will be discussing a story's theme, or the main idea of the story. They will want to show their readers how the theme develops through the story's characters and events.
2. Remind them that the story's conflict is the main problem the main character faces. It forms the plot and has rising action, a climax, and a resolution. Identifying the conflict is a great way to get clues to the story's theme.
3. Read or discuss Bradbury's tale with your class. What happens? (Emperor finds an inventor with a flying machine, wants to destroy it) What is the climax? (the inventor is killed) What lesson does the emperor ultimately learn? (you cannot stop innovation)
4. Break your students into pairs or small groups. Have them work toward a consensus on what the conflict of the story means in terms of the life lesson the Emperor learns. They may continue discussing the characters and what they do, what events take place, and what understanding is reached at the end of the story.
5. Have the groups use the conflict to write a theme. The theme statement can be worded as: "In the end, Emperor Yuan learns that..."
6. Next, have the groups turn the theme into a focus statement for an actual response to literature essay. It should be a one-sentence summation of the theme. However, remind your students that they must be able to support their focus statements with evidence from the story. Afterward, discuss the different focus statements as a class.
7. With this exercise in mind, your writers are ready to tackle their own response to literature essays. Or as an extension, have them write an essay on "The Flying Machine" using the focus statements discussed in small groups.