



## Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis

### Recognizing Plot and Inferring Themes

Purpose: Differentiating between plot and theme, and inferring the big ideas or themes  
Resource: *Teammates*, by Peter Golenbock  
Responses: Class discussion; chart of themes; theme boards

Literature, both fiction and nonfiction, is rife with themes. Books and articles rarely promote just one main idea but rather several themes for readers to ponder and infer. When we talk to students about themes, we help them discern the difference between theme and plot. We explain that the plot is simply what happens in the narrative. The themes represent the bigger ideas of the story. The plot carries those ideas along. To demonstrate plot, we choose a simple narrative that everyone is likely to be familiar with. We might recount the plot of *Goldilocks* and the *Three Bears* by summarizing the events of the story as follows. A girl named Goldilocks was wandering through the forest and entered an unfamiliar, empty house. She tasted porridge that didn't belong to her, broke a chair, and slept in a bed that wasn't hers. She was caught when the bears returned, and she ran out of the house scared to death.

We explain to our students that themes are the underlying ideas, morals, and lessons that give the story its texture, depth, and meaning. The themes are rarely written out in the story. We infer themes. Themes often make us feel angry, sad, guilty, joyful, frightened. We tell kids that we are likely to feel themes in our gut. To help students more clearly understand the difference, we might ask, "What are the bigger ideas in *Goldilocks* and the *Three Bears*?" Kids tend to identify taking things that don't belong to you, selfishness, thoughtlessness, and so on. They have experienced these notions and they understand them.

### Inferring Themes in *Teammates*

A nonfiction picture book we have used to demonstrate inferring themes is Peter Golenbock's *Teammates*. It is the moving story of Jackie Robinson's courageous breakthrough into the all-white major leagues. It goes beyond the history and describes the personal relationship between Jackie and his white teammate Pee Wee Reese. Pee Wee was the only player on the Brooklyn Dodgers team that supported Jackie's quest.

To continue their study of inferring, Steph demonstrated a think-aloud with *Teammates* to the fifth graders in Jennifer Jones's class the day after taking them through the Goldilocks exercise. After describing the hard, segregated life of players in the Negro leagues, Golenbock writes that life was much better for players in the major leagues. They were paid well, and many were famous all over the world. Steph coded her sticky note I for inference while noting that this kind of racial inequality might breed anger. She suggested that both racial inequality and anger might be themes in the story even though the writer hadn't written those very words. On a large piece of chart paper she wrote the words racial inequality and anger under the heading Themes.

When Curtis heard that Branch Rickey, the manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, was looking for a man who

“would have to possess the self-control not to fight back when opposing players tried to intimidate or hurt him,” he suggested that self-control might be a theme. Steph concurred and added it to the chart. When Steph finished reading the story, she facilitated a discussion about the bigger ideas in the narrative.

“Jackie was really brave,” Chantal said.

“How?” Steph nudged as she wrote bravery on the theme chart.

“He was all alone without a single friend until Pee Wee, and he never gave up no matter how badly they treated him,” Chantal answered.

“So, would loneliness be a theme?” Steph asked.

“Yeah. I know how he felt. When I moved here I didn’t have one single friend,” Rogers said, as Steph added loneliness to the theme chart.

“But Pee Wee was his friend,” Jaquon added.

“So, is friendship a theme?” Steph asked.

“Sort of, but most of the team would not be his friend because he was black,” Jaquon continued.

“That’s racist,” Curtis added.

“It sure is racist, Curtis. Are racism and friendship both themes in Teammates?” Steph asked.

The kids nodded and added both of those themes to the chart. And so the discussion went for nearly forty-five minutes, culminating in the following theme list:

**Themes**

racial inequality	segregation
anger	heart
self-control	self-determination
bravery/courage	teamwork/working together
loneliness	sadness
racism	taking a stand
friendship	living up to the best of your ability
fairness/unfairness	violence
internal pain	self-respect

Steph reiterated that all of these themes represented the bigger ideas in the story and that most of them evoked strong feelings. We have noticed that kids are more likely to remember important themes when they derive the ideas themselves and feel them deeply. It is our role to help draw students out through engaging discussions about the bigger ideas in the story. Often, the kids used their prior knowledge to infer themes and better understand the narrative, as Rogers did when he mentioned being the new kid on the block. As students talk about the bigger ideas, it is our responsibility to help them label the ideas and articulate the themes. For instance, they may understand the concept of self-determination, but they may not know the word for it. As teacher facilitators, we can help them put language to their thoughts and feelings.

### **Theme Boards: Hey, What's the Big Idea?**

Jennifer continued to work on surfacing themes throughout the year. She reported that her students became quite adept at inferring themes as well as labeling them. They even began to notice when certain themes appeared over and over. To reinforce theme identification and the connections between themes in one text and those in another, Jennifer established a theme board headed Hey, What's the Big Idea? Each time the class read a book, they developed a theme list and added the list to the theme board. Themes identified from Sherry Garland's *The Lotus Seed* included

keeping traditions alive	cooperation
sharing traditions	sadness
courage	loneliness
internal pain	

It didn't take kids long to notice the overlapping themes in certain books, such as *Teammates* and *The Lotus Seed*. This was a great literary lesson. Experienced readers know that the same themes are likely to appear over and over in literature. Why not begin to teach this in elementary school?