

Some New Ideas to Support a Unit on Thematic Text Sets and Interpretation

For those of you who teach in New York State, the placement of this unit makes it especially imperative that students maintain their volume of reading—tests loom around the upcoming bend, and evidence is clear that the volume of reading students do relates to the level of text difficulty they can handle with ease. The last thing we can afford is for students to slip backwards because we are suddenly doing more writing about reading than reading. So as we go forward, you'll see that there is a lot of reading, thinking, and talking about reading happening in reading workshop, with some very quick fast writing that happens within five or ten minutes. Then at the same time, in writing workshop, there is time to write drafts of quick on-the-run essays about the stories that students are reading.

As with any unit, teachers need to first decide upon the skills that will be forwarded. We recommend using the performance assessment aligned to the curricular calendar to glimpse what your kids can do with interpretation and with thinking across two texts. Chances are very good that all your students need considerable help with these skills, in which case, you will be wise to teach this unit with a lot of heft, using your small groups and individual conferring and book clubs as forum for supporting your students' progress towards being able to read interpretively. Book clubs, especially, will be the perfect forum for this work.

Once students can read interpretively, can talk and write quick interpretive essays, and can see that texts often address the same theme, then you can help students notice differences in nuance of the message or in each author's treatment of the message. Students will be able to contrast how authors present or develop a meaning, theme, or character—first in conversation, and then in writing.

You can meanwhile teach a parallel unit in the writing workshop on writing literary essays, using some of the reading workshop (as well as other short-text work) as grist for their writing mills.

But again, a quick word of caution. Data from 80,000 readers has shown us that scores on the tests correlate well with the levels of text-difficulty that students can handle. Those levels, of course, are a direct reflection of the volume of reading students have been doing (which is why students go down 2-3 levels every summer). So be sure this unit supports a volume of reading—that's why we have kids reading chapter books, rather than short texts—so that they are reading hundreds of pages across the unit, not dozens.

Resources:

This unit will not require any special new texts. Universal ideas (i.e., literary themes) are universal because they are important in a great many stories. You will not need especially constructed text-sets in order for readers to think about how different authors convey the same theme. It will be important for your class to have a set of shared texts to mine in this unit—and presumably those will be the books and short texts (picture books) you have read aloud all year, combined with books that students know from previous years (*The Paper Bag Princess*, for example, may qualify). If you have not done much reading aloud and your class does not have a shared repertoire of texts, then begin reading aloud now!

During the reading workshop, members of a book club will read books together—say, for example, four students read *Hatchet*. Within a week of the start of this unit, you'll be encouraging readers to think between the one book that they are reading—in this instance, *Hatchet*—and other books the class has read. How is *Hatchet* like (and unlike) *My Side of the Mountain*? How is it like (and unlike) *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*? or *The Maze Runners*? Readers will create their own text sets by looking across books they've read and plan to read, and finding ones that address similar themes.

That is, the progression we are now recommending for this unit is not the same as that which we recommended in the curricular calendar. In that document, we suggested that the first couple of texts students read in this unit will not be related to each other in any specific ways and in the curricular calendar write up, interpretation work emerged over time, slowly. We have since come to believe that *as soon as* students begin reading a new book within this unit, you can help them think thematically between that book and other books—assuming the other books are books that the classroom community has shared earlier in the year, ones your students know well. Once readers have seen themes that are applicable across texts, they'll learn to compare *how* authors have developed a similar theme in different ways in one text, and in another. That is, readers will study the craft decisions that writers of various related texts made and the effect those decisions had on each author's message. For all this work, your students can use any books they select, although well-written books will be more supportive than others.

You may decide to make this a unit about growing and defending ideas as we read, and to first review the idea-work that students learned to do in the character unit, reminding them that they can grow ideas about the kind of person a character is, about the issues that a character struggles with, about the character's changes, and so forth.

Many of you, however, will feel that your students can develop ideas about characters and are needing help developing more interpretive ideas—in which case, progress to Bend I.

We are assuming that the work described in this document supporting interpretation will be taught alongside a unit in the writing workshop on writing literary essays. Please see that document for more details.

Bend I - We Don't Just Read Fiction to Learn What Happens to Characters, We Also Read to Learn The Life-Lessons That Characters And Stories Can Teach Us. This Kind of Thinking—Thinking About The Life Lessons, Or The Big Ideas—Is Something All of Us Can Do, And Not Just When We Are Reading Books, But Also When We Are Thinking About Our Lives, And When We Are Studying Social Studies.

Dear Teachers,

This bend is all about being the kind of people who not only tell stories....but who make ideas. It's also about helping students become accustomed to the notion that the stories they are reading are about more than what happens to the characters—they are also about ideas. Those

ideas reside in the story, and in the hearts and minds of readers. In this unit of study you'll help students express those ideas.

We imagine that this bend in the road of the unit is very short because the kids will be rereading (not reading) texts, and there's a risk that this means they won't actually be reading all that much. That is okay for 2 days—but not for a week! That is especially true now when keeping kids moving up the trajectory of text-difficulty is all-important.

The goal of these two days is to give kids (and ourselves) lots of repeated practice interpreting so that over the two days, everyone becomes fluent with this sort of thinking, more aware of text-interpretations that exist out there in the world, more accustomed to speaking in this 'language.' We also want kids to realize that they are interpreting all the time, and that any one event or story can have lots of different interpretations.

The important thing to realize is that sometimes we have taught interpretation as the One Big Idea that a text teaches, channeling kids to think about this only when they are two thirds of the way through a text, and channeling them towards the interpretation that we have decided is the best one. The problem is that when we do this, we put interpretation on a high-up shelf, out of reach from kids' sticky fingers. It is somehow Higher Thinking, reserved for times when the teacher is fully in command, when the book is an especially beautiful and deep one. As a result, lots of kids (and frankly, lots of us, as teachers) feel uncomfortable with interpretation. We feel as if this is literary criticism and we are not sure we're entitled to have a go at it.

So this part of the unit aims to reverse or avoid that damage, helping kids know that interpretation is what thoughtful people do all throughout our lives, and it is within grasp of us all. By inviting kids to feel at home interpreting, we expect they'll become accustomed to this way of thinking and this way of talking about texts, and their interpretations will get far better just from immersion.

So please, during this first bend in the road of the unit, issue a generous invitation to kids, welcome much of what they say, don't get bent out of shape by what may seem like shallow interpretations, and know that your students' room for growth stems largely from unfamiliarity with this work.

Bend I - An Invitation to Interpretation

Session I: Books Offer More Than a Good Plot—Readers Are on the Lookout for Lessons As We Read, Knowing Authors and Characters Teach Big Things

Connection

“Readers, do you know that feeling of watching a movie or a TV show or reading a book, and not wanting to stop because you are DYING to know what happens next?”

“You all are terrific at watching TV and watching movies like that....thinking, ‘Oh my God, what's going to happen?’ and the cool thing is that MANY of you know what it is to READ like

that that—reading on the edge of your seat because you just gotta know what the character does next, and next.”

“Well today we are starting a whole new unit, a new chapter in our reading lives. And this unit, this chapter, will be all about something REALLY IMPORTANT that good readers know, and a lot of kids DON’T know. And this is it.”

Name the teaching point.

“Good readers don’t just read to find out what the character does next. We also read to find out what the character learns....and what the character (and the author) teaches us. We know that books aren’t written just to tell the plot, they are also written to tell life lessons.”

Teaching

“The really cool thing is that you and I can read not just other people’s writing, but also our own writing, and we can think, ‘What is the character (and that’s often us) learning about life? What can readers learn about life from reading this?’”

“Let me show you how I ask those questions as I reread my own notebook, because later today, you’re going to have a chance to read not just books by other people—but entries by YOU....and you’ll be asking, ‘What did the character learn? What is the character teaching—about friendship, and family, and handling hard times....about life?’”

“You’ll see that as I read this, I’m asking, ‘So what did the character (that’s me) learn about life?’ and I sort of think to myself, ‘Hmmm, could I have learned (this) or, could I have learned (that)....?’ I try out different ideas.”

“You can ski on the blue trails or the green trails,” my Mom said to me. “Just don’t ski the black diamond trails.”

I shouted, “Okay,” and pushed off down the ski hill. Soon I came to a parting of the trails—before me were a green trail, a blue trail, and a black diamond trail. “Should I follow my Mom’s orders?” I thought. “If I go down the green trail, people will think I’m a baby,” I said to myself. “The blue’s a little better, but not much. Big kids ski on black diamond trails and I’m becoming a big kid.” And with that, I turned towards the black diamond trail.

Before long, I was standing on top of a sheet of pure ice. A skier swished past me, twisting and twirling down the hill. “I can’t do that,” I thought. I knew if I went forward, there would be no way to stop. At the bottom of the ice, there was a line of trees. “I’m going to break my neck,” I thought.

For a long while, I just stood there, getting colder and sadder and more scared. Finally, I sat down, took my skis off, and started the long, hard, slow walk back up the hill, lugging my skis, back to the intersection in the paths. Putting my skis on, I took the blue trail—and it was perfect.

“So...I’m going to ask that question that readers ask: “What did the character learn about life? What can the character (or the story) teach us about life?”

“Readers, to answer this question, it sometimes helps to take one of these starter sentences. I’m going to try taking one of these, and then I am going to ask you to take others, and see if YOU can come up with life lessons that readers can learn from my story.”

Phrases Readers Use When Interpreting Books:

Sometimes people....but instead, people should....

I learned from (the character, the event) that in life, it is important to....

Even if you....., you should.....

Don’t forget that even if you....., you should....

This story teaches us not only about....., but also about....

When I first read this story, I thought it was just about....., but now that I think deeper about it, I realize that really, it is also about.....

“Let me take that first one. ‘Sometimes people.....Hmm....ski black diamond trails?’” I asked myself. “No, no, what is this teaching me about LIFE not just about skiing? Umm... Why DID I set out to ski that hard trail? Oh....I know...Sometimes people try to grow up super fast. People should realize that growing up takes time.”

(Teachers, notice that there are a lot of more obvious themes inherent in this story than that one. I chose the one I did because I’m setting the kids up to have an easy time being successful.)

Active Involvement

“Of course, there are other life lessons that this story teaches—it is not just about growing up, is it? Let me reread a bit of it to you, and will you think, ‘What other life lessons does this story teach?’ Try using one of the other phrases from our chart of phrases people use when they are interpreting a story.”

(This time, after students turned and talked, I repeated what I heard them say. Some found the life lessons, “People shouldn’t worry about what others think, people should do what is right for them” and some, “Kids should listen to their parents ‘cause their parents know best.”

Link

“So readers, today, let’s practice doing this very high level thinking, and I’m going to ask you to start by rereading your own writer’s notebook from earlier in this year, and leaving Post-its behind each page, writing one or two or three life lessons that you learned from that page. Then swap your notebook with your partner, and let your *partner* learn life lessons from your entries, leaving his or her ideas on Post-its ON the page. Later, you can compare what you learned from your own stories with what your partner learned....and you will see, every event in life can teach lots of different possible lessons.”

Mid-Workshop Teaching Point (MWTP)/Share

Teachers, you may want to point out that just as we know some things about good story writing, we also know some things about good interpretations. It is helpful to have some ideas about what constitutes a good interpretation. This information can allow readers to self-assess, and to revise interpretations. Together, partners can reread their interpretations and then put stars on the good ones and x out or revise the less proficient ones. Less proficient interpretations are straight retellings—‘Ski the blue trail, not the black one’—or single words or phrases that name a terrain, a topic (good choices, growing up, listening to parents) as opposed to claims (People make good choices when we are not worrying about impressing others). Less proficient interpretations don’t really go with the story.

If there is more time/homework:

It may be important for readers to engage in a second round of work, either during the reading workshop or for homework. If so, they can begin thinking about books they know well—whole class read alouds, for example, or about films they know well, asking, “What life lessons did this book, this film, teach?” Students can return to the same chart of starter phrases.

Students will love the invitation to watch a TV show, each of them, thinking, ‘What does this character learn? What can the character teach?’ You can help students ask this question using other phrases or terms as well, which is a wise thing to do as eventually standardized tests will ask them this same question, and there are a lot of different ways to work the question. The attached chart from *The Art of Teaching Reading* offers alternate ways to talk about interpretation.

Alternately, students could be invited to think about the people in their families who are always drawing life lessons from things that happen. Perhaps it is a grandparent who comes from an event saying, “See what I mean? I always tell you—families gotta stick together.” That’s interpretation.

Assessments:

As you do this work, you may see that this whole way of thinking is alien to your students. You may find that the majority of them are retelling or summarizing— “*The Giving Tree* is about a tree who gives away everything til he is just a stump”—or generating literal statements (not yet generalizing) when asked to think about meaning— “This story teaches me you shouldn’t ski the black diamond, you should ski blue”—instead of interpreting.

If your kids have a lot of trouble interpreting, you will want to do a lot more work reading aloud, and show them how you begin to think interpretively. We recommend you watch Kathleen Tolan’s work with *The Giving Tree* on the DVD that accompanies *Units of Study for Reading*, Grades 3-5, and watch the active moves Kathleen makes as she demonstrates and supports kids to move from reading actively to reading interpretively. Notice that she slows down the process of thinking interpretively, saying, “Hmmm....I’m just wondering...what COULD this be teaching me?... Hmmm...I’m thinking about...” (Then she recalls, rereads.) “What COULD that mean....Could it maybe mean....Or could it mean....?” You can do similar work, stretching out and slowing down the process of interpreting so that kids begin to climb up on their knees,

saying, “I know! I got an idea!” And then, if their ideas are not too great, try to accept them anyhow, listen to them, and find better ideas within those flawed ones.

If your kids are having trouble interpreting, you can begin doing this across the whole day. What lessons can be learned from the story of Columbus discovering America, or from the Revolutionary War? When the ragamuffin Colonists, lying belly down in the leaves of the woods in the manner of the American Indians, won against the proud rows of uniformed British soldiers marching in unison down the street, this can become a lesson in how the little guy can topple the mighty, or how we can learn lessons from all people, which may help us against great foes, or inventiveness can be stronger than mere muscle, or even in Don’t give up—try, try, and you might succeed.”

If the class experiences an event together—the roof leaks and people’s stuff gets ruined—this, too, can be an occasion for interpretation. “It is better to fix things when they are small problems than to let them become big problems.” “A stitch in time saves nine.”

As you and the class engage in shared interpretive work, you will be building up a library of interpretations. You may want to collect them, perhaps noting their source. The leak in the roof: A stitch in time saves nine. The Battle of Concord: Sometimes what seems to be strength is really just a show—real strength is often hard to see. In time, your students will come to realize that these interpretations actually apply to a great many texts and instances—but don’t rush that discovery, as it will give kids a tremendous rush when they stumble upon it.

Then readers can ask themselves, “What does this particular book seem to be saying about this social issue, versus this other book?”

Session II: Readers Pay Attention When Characters Have Strong Feelings or Make Big Decisions, Knowing These Parts Convey Life Lessons

(This is probably a book club day, with the club meeting the last 15 minutes.)

Connection

“Yesterday we realized that readers don’t just read to learn what the character does, we also read to learn what the character teaches us. Reading is not just about following the plot, it is also about learning life lessons—life lessons that help us in our own lives.”

“Sometimes, when we are actually flying through the pages of a book, we get so consumed with ‘what’s going to happen next?’ questions that we don’t pause to think, ‘What life lesson can I take from this book? What can this character, this book, teach me about how to live my life?’”

Name the teaching point.

“So today I want to teach you that sometimes it helps to pause as we’re reading, or after we’ve read a book, and to think, ‘What was that book really really about? What life lessons was that book trying to teach me?’ To do this, it helps to go to particular parts of the book, and either reread those parts, or rethink those parts. And specifically, it helps to go to parts where people had really strong feelings, or to parts where characters made big decisions.”

Teaching

“So, for example, if I wanted to think back about the life lessons that I can learn from Willy in *Stone Fox*, I will want to skim through the book and find (or remember) places where Willy made big decisions.”

“Remember, I’m going to look back on that chart of phrases that readers use when we interpret, when we think about life lessons.”

Active Involvement

“Readers, do you think that one life lesson is THE theme for this book? Or do you think that in this book, there are a bunch of big ideas, and that we could think again about that one part of the book, and think about other parts as well, and grow other big ideas?”

(The students agreed that a book holds more than one big idea.)

“So let’s turn to another part of the book where one is apt to find life lessons...and remember, those are the parts where the characters felt strong feelings and the parts where characters made decisions. I’m going to reread this next part, and will you use this chart of phrases, if you want, and do some writing...will you try (here is a REAL challenge)...will you try to list a few different life lessons that can be learned for this part of the story.”

(Reading the ending)

Link

“Readers, today, let’s practice this special kind of thinking that really good readers do by returning to all of our read aloud books, and to a bunch of the independent reading books. Let’s reread parts of those books where the characters had strong feelings...and if you can’t find those parts, reread the ending, because usually that will be one place where the characters have strong feelings, and where you’ll learn a big life lesson. Let’s put our ideas about the life lessons that we’ve learned from a book on a Post-it inside the back cover of a book. Don’t peek at what other readers write until you have had a chance to write YOUR life lessons...and then you can look at what others have written as well. If you see evidence in the book of a life lesson that someone else has found, will you initial the Post-it that another reader has left in the book—as a sign of , ‘Yep, I see that too’?”

MWTP (a possibility): “So and so just found that it is also helpful to look at times in a story when the character responds to big trouble. It may be true for some of you, in your families, that during the times when really hard things happen—like you lose someone, a grandparent, say—you end up learning life lessons from those events, lessons that stay with you always. The same happens in stories. Really hard times often lead a character to learn a huge life lesson.”

MWTP (another possibility): “So and so just had another discovery. Another place where the ideas in a book shine through are the places in the story when the author seems to tap us on the shoulder and do some author-to-reader interpreting...almost telling us, or giving us a big clue to what this book might really be about.”

Teaching Share/Book Clubs:

“Readers, today let’s get together in clubs, not just partnerships, and will you put a book at the center of your club, and talk together about a life lesson that the book has taught you? You can draw on our chart of ‘Phrases Readers Use When Interpreting Books’ if you want.”

Phrases Readers Use When Interpreting Books:

Sometimes people....but instead, people should....

I learned from (the character, the event) that in life, it is important to....

Even if you...., you should....

Don’t forget that even if you...., you should....

This story teaches us not only about...., but also about....

When I first read this story, I thought it was just about...., but now that I think deeper about it, I realize that really, it is also about....

“Only here is the thing. You’ll be listening for a club mate to say an idea about the book that could be a thesis statement, that could be ‘a box.’ IF one of your club mates says, ‘I think the book is teaching us that...’ and that reader names what he or she thinks is the big idea of the book, then your job as club members will be to say to that club member, ‘What you just said is the box for an essay’ and then you and the rest of the club need to work together to re-state the big idea, and THEN go on to ‘say an essay.’ After you name the life lesson, the big idea, on paper, then take a few minutes of quiet writing and research time. Look through the book for places that go with that big idea, being sure to draw from passages that come throughout the book. Once you have each jotted an essay (or you can do that in partners), as a club, you can SAY an essay. One of you should know to say, ‘One place in the book where this happens...’ or ‘This was true early in the book when...’ And then you retell that part.”

As students engage in this work, coach into their work. If they select passages from the text that seem tangentially related to the main idea, then say, “Does the connection between that and the main idea hit you over the head, seem totally obvious, or is it a bit hard to see? If it is not hit-you-over-the-head obvious, usually it helps to think of another example from the text.”

“After you retell that part that connects, you need to say, ‘This shows...’ and now talk between the part you’ve just told and the big ideas.”

Bend II - Reading with the Lens of Meaning: When Readers Expect to Grow Interpretations, This Changes How We Approach and Read a Book

Dear Teachers,

We encourage you to progress in high gear through the main points of this bend in the road, moving on to cross-text work fairly soon as that work will, in turn, feed back on this work. We realize that this bend in the road could last a very long while, especially if you continue to weave some of the literary essay work into the book club conversations and into students’ homework for this unit. We suggest, then, that rather than do that, you think of this as a three day bend in the

road. and then progress to Bend III, but while in bend three, continue to teach some of the points listed here.

Session 3: Teaching Point

“Today I want to teach you that when readers expect to read not just for the plot, but also to learn life lessons, this changes even how we approach a book—right from the start. Before we read a single page, we can think, ‘What might this book be really, really about? What ideas or life lessons might this book teach me?’ Readers generate several possible ideas, reading and thinking, ‘Could it be....?’ Or ‘Could it be....?’ We don’t have to wait until the end of the book to ask ourselves these questions.”

Teaching

“So let’s do this. With our book, let’s look back on the write up on the back cover, reread the first few pages carefully, and think, ‘What other books have I read that seem to go a bit like this one? Does that give me any ideas for what this might really, really be about?’ As we read on, we will expect the book will surprise us.”

Dear Teachers,

You might show students that at first Because of Winn-Dixie seems to be the story of a lonely girl who makes friends with a dog—teaching us, perhaps, that a dog can be a best friend. But then the story takes a new turn, and it tells about how Opal’s relationship with her dog seems to change her relationship with her father, leading one to think that the story may be about how learning to love a dog can help people learn to love people, too. Readers can learn to talk about how the book’s message unfolds over time by saying, ‘First when I started to read this, I thought that deep down, it was maybe about...but now as I read on, I’m finding that it is also about....’”

Session 4:

“Once a reader begins to have some possible ideas for what a book is trying to teach, it is almost as if the reader puts on a new pair of glasses to do the rest of the reading. Now the reader views the upcoming story through the lens of, ‘Is this story teaching me about....?’ The reader finds places in the story that are important and thinks, ‘Does this go with the idea that the story is REALLY about...or does this change my idea?’ The reader’s first idea changes, and often readers grow more than one idea.” (This is reminiscent of p. 68 in Vol II, Historical Fiction. Please refer to that.)

Teaching Share:

“Before you go to your clubs, will you spend some time thinking and writing, ‘What’s this book teaching me?’ Jot a claim, a main idea, and make it into your box, and then list some bullet points, some places in the text which support your claim. Your notes should look like this (a rough outline, in boxes and bullets form).”

“Once in your club, will you let one person talk—and what that one person will be doing is ‘Saying an Essay.’ He or she will say, ‘I think this story is teaching us....’ Or ‘Some people think that.... But this book teaches us that....’”

Possibilities for Upcoming Minilessons, mid-workshops, shares, small group work, in no special order

-Readers read with pencils in hand, jotting down ideas, putting Post-its to mark places in books where the themes are visible, and using notebooks to make time-lines or charts or to free-write.

-Readers know that sometimes there are objects or moments in a story that almost stand for bigger meanings, like a wedding ring stands for the marriage between two people. When we encounter an object that recurs in a story and seems to have undo importance, we often say to ourselves, “This object seems to mean more than meets the eye. Why might the author have had that object recur? What could it represent, like a wedding ring represents a marriage, and a flag represents a country?”

-Sometimes when we are reading, we come to those passages where there are really strong feelings, or where characters are making a big decision, and we sense, ‘This is important’ so we push the pause button. It is almost as if the passage was written in bold font, and it asks us to pay attention. We ask, “What could this part have to do with the message the author is trying to convey in this book?” We think, “How does this part fit with the beginning of the book, and what does this make us think the book is really, really saying?” Sometimes it helps to say to ourselves, “When I first read this, I thought it was teaching me the lessons that....but now, as I read on and think more deeply, I realize the book is teaching me....” (This is reminiscent of p. 26, Historical Fiction, Vol II.)

Bend III - Cross Text Work (towards more interpretation and compare and contrast essays): Readers Can Look at Stories and Texts That Address Similar Themes and Think, “How are these similar? How are they different?” We Can Compare and Contrast Books, Thinking How Authors Advance the Same Theme in Unique Ways.

Dear Teachers,

In this bend, you will help readers look across texts, thinking, “Might the life lessons that I’m learning in this book that I’m reading be the same—or similar to—lessons that another book I’ve read also taught?” Because students will have done lots of interpretive work with the whole class read alouds (both novels and picture books) and they will have generated a handful of themes for each of those familiar books, and because students in a book club will already have been progressing through multiple copies of a book, thinking about the bigger messages that the book is teaching, they’ll be prime to make the realization that wow!—the life lesson that this book is teaching is one that another book we know also taught.

You will not want to take away the moment of surprise by pre-teaching kids that life lessons are also called Universal Themes because in fact they are usually very applicable to lots of stories and lots of lives. Let one of your book clubs see a connection between just two books and be enthralled with that discovery. Then another book club will see that lo and behold, for them as well, the book they are reading is teaching lessons that are important to one of the class’s read aloud books.

Before emphasizing the true breadth of this, help students explore the connections they discover, thinking and talking about how the two books teach this one lesson in similar ways, and in different ways. Don't push for them to make T-diagrams or to be too structured in this thinking right away. Instead, help them to enjoy this, to all participate in it, to feel at home with this work. You'll essentially be issuing a generous invitation for them to participate in compare and contrast work around books that address similar themes, just as earlier you invited them to feel at home with interpretation work.

Remember that as students find similar themes in different books, they may start by saying, "These books are both about friendship" or "These books are both about loss." That is a fine start, but you will want students to talk about themes as claims—that is, to talk about the theme not as 'friendship,' but as, "Friends can help us through tough times" or "True friends forgive each other."

*As students think about ways that books address the same theme differently, their themes will become more generalized. For example, readers who at first paused in reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to say, "This is about how Lucy, Peter and Susan save their brother Edmund who went off with the Evil Queen" will now see that if the idea itself becomes more universal, then it becomes applicable across books—and to their lives. Their initial idea might now become, "Family members don't give up on each other, even when one does something really bad—like betraying the family—the family members stay loyal."*

By figuring out ideas that live in many books, readers become more fluent thinking in ideas. If students are having difficulty making thematic connections across texts, try this shared experience with a small group. Start by putting all your previous read alouds in the middle of the rug and have the students sit on the edges with their book club books from the unit in their laps. Have one child start by saying what one of his interpretations of one of his books was. For example, he might say, "My book was really, really about how you have to lose something to grow." Then all the other students look at their books or the class read alouds. If one reader finds another book about that theme, he or she can talk about this with another reader, sitting to the person's right or left. This continues for a few rounds. Think of what the big lesson is here. We are illustrating what we have been trying to teach, that is, themes live in many books because they live in the world. They are views on life or how people behave. And that part of being an active reader is to constantly seek those.

Coaching into Clubs:

A Big Question for readers to ask in club conversations is, "How do two or three different books advance the same theme differently?" These conversations will help when you have readers writing multiple fast-draft "Compare and Contrast" essays on books that seem to address similar themes. Authors may send their characters on strikingly (or at least somewhat) different journeys toward addressing and resolving a similar issue, or have them (and readers through them) learn variations of the same life lesson. In both *Those Shoes* and *Fly Away Home* the main characters must learn to go without something they desperately want. Both belong to families that struggle financially. And both boys learn to give up—at least for now—the dream of having something.

For one boy it's a pair of designer shoes, for the other it's a home. The latter may seem much larger a want, but to Jeremy, those shoes mean so much more than a pair of shoes. And yet the paths these two boys follow toward dealing with not having what others around them have diverge. Jeremy comes close to getting what he wants, only to discover that it isn't really possible to use the shoes himself (they are a size too small), and instead, gives them to his friend, for whom the shoes are a perfect fit. We might say that Jeremy learns (and we learn, too) that making someone else's dream come true may not take away our own longing but can fill something else inside of us. Meanwhile, in *Fly Away Home*, Andrew never comes close to getting out of the airport; he and his dad scrape together money for small things, like food, but aren't anywhere near to having the money to rent an apartment. But Andrew finds hope in a little bird that manages, after many tries, to free itself from the airport, and he begins to take small steps toward helping his dad save. One lesson here might be that working toward a dream is sometimes enough to keep you going. The point is that both of these stories address some of the same themes, but the journeys each character goes on differ.