

2-1-1993

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### Recommended Citation

Sippola, A. E. (1993). When Thematic Units Are Not Thematic Units. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 33 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol33/iss3/3](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol33/iss3/3)

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# **When Thematic Units Are Not Thematic Units**

**Arne E. Sippola**

Thematic units are omnipresent in today's elementary classrooms. We theme in our units on bears. We theme in our units on monsters. We even theme when we present a unit of study featuring the children's novels of Beverly Cleary. Or do we? The practice of having children systematically studying a topic, a recurring literary phenomenon, or an author's collective works is worthwhile and laudable. It helps children organize their world by providing experiences that are connected by some central focus. However, I contend that educators are using the term thematic unit too broadly. A majority of thematic units developed and presented by teachers are really not thematic units at all. They are centrally focused, but on something other than a literary theme.

## **Literary themes**

A theme is the underlying idea of a story. It is what remains after the details of the characters, the plot, and the setting have faded away. It is also a unifying phenomenon. Supporting these contentions, Norton (1991) has written that a theme "is the underlying idea that ties the plot, characters and setting together into a meaningful whole" (p. 98). A theme may address specific issues or human conditions. It is the response to the question "what does this story mean?" It is not a concrete object that can be seen. A theme is an abstraction. Stewig (1988) has written:

*After all the details of which people, what places, and when the story happens are stripped away, what a reader is left with is the theme. The theme is the underlying idea, the foundation upon which particular information rests. Theme deals with major issues, such as the importance of standing up for what one believes. Specific details may set the story in the sixteenth or the twenty-first century; the main character may be a young woman or an old man; the environment may be here or in another world. But when these particulars are set aside, the theme of two apparently diverse books may in fact be the same (p. 19).*

It should be clear that neither bears, monsters nor Beverly Cleary are themes. Their systematic study involves something other than a theme. An analysis of the types of centrally focused units used by elementary teachers reveals eight different categories of focus. Although there is bound to be a minor amount of overlap in some of the categories, recognition of these categories should assist elementary educators in discussions of what we are using to foster literacy in children. These categories are presented below.

**The topical unit.** The topical unit is found with great regularity in kindergarten and primary-level classrooms. The topic unit focuses upon a specific concrete phenomenon in nature. Our unit on bears would fit nicely within this category. So would a unit of study on dinosaurs, rocks or weather. A teacher using a topical unit approach would read aloud Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* and Ward's *The Biggest Bear*, write stories about bears, and integrate the topic of bears into other curricula. The topical unit is perhaps one of the easiest types of unit for teachers to construct. Materials abound for use. A topical unit shows children how literacy resources can contribute to their knowledge of a specific topic. Through this exploration, children should become aware that they can explore books to answer questions they

might have about a specific topic. However, it should be noted that an appreciation of character, genre, theme or author in the topical unit is ancillary at most. A topical unit teaches about just that: a topic. Literary understanding and appreciation are of secondary concern.

**The form unit.** Teachers may develop and guide children's explorations of the different forms or genres found in literature. Children are guided through traditional forms of literature such as the folktale, fable, myth and legend, or they might explore poetry, fantasy, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fictions, or tall tales. After hearing, reading and discussing stories such as Bowman's *Pecos Bill, the Greatest Cowboy of All Time* and Kellogg's detail-packed *Paul Bunyan*, children apply what they have learned to write their own form stories. The form unit can identify and clarify the different kinds of literature that exist. This is important in discussions of literature, but can be limited to the extent that grouping literature for study by form may result in reading a number of texts that share nothing in common *other than* genre.

**The structural unit.** Children may experience literature containing recurring literary structures. Johnson and Louis (1990) have written:

*The appeal of a structural approach to literature comes from a delight in rhythm and pattern — particularly when the underlying structures aren't immediately evident. Why do so many folk stories have handsome princes and fearsome forests? Why does the Rule of Three appear in folk tales and resurface again and again in modern stories? Why do so many stories involve quests? Why do so many protagonists experience exploration, oppression, struggle, and victory? (p. 95)*

The teacher organizes the literature program around such motifs as quests, heroes, underdogs, evil forces, or family dynamics. Young readers exploring literature about families can compare the Moffats with the Quimbys, or develop an understanding of different family configurations by reading and discussing the problems facing Carlie in Byars' *The Pinballs*. The structural unit can offer readers an historical perspective of literary components. Structures of literature recur from the heroic quests of Ulysses to the travels of Bilbo Baggins. An understanding of these recurring literary phenomena allows the reader to recognize and appreciate important elements in literature.

**The concept unit.** Concept units focus upon developmentally relevant concepts. For example, the teacher presents a unit on the concept of changes. Second graders might read and listen to books such as Peet's *The Wump World* and Cooney's *Miss Rumphius* and discuss the different ways change takes place. Fifth graders discover how Sarah not only changes herself, but affects the lives of all of the characters, in MacLachlan's *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. Other types of focus might include time, space, exploring, sensing and creating. The concept unit's focus is upon conceptual elaboration and not necessarily upon literary appreciation. This type of unit is, however, useful for children. As changes occur within themselves, for example, they can read related literature revealing that changes are, in fact, normal. They are not odd; all people go through changes. Well-chosen literature can facilitate this understanding.

**The picture book unit.** The picture book unit is another heavily-used focus of study used by primary school teachers. A trade book, such as Galdone's *The Gingerbread Boy* is introduced to, and read by, participating students. The teacher provides follow-up activities such as

writing an alternative ending to the story, taking advantage of the repetitive refrain in the story by having the children engage in choral reading, or cooking gingerbread cookies. The picture book unit is perhaps the simplest of all of the units presented. It can be, however, a pleasant experience for young children. It can be a very positive first experience with the study of literature. In isolation, however, it does not assist children in seeing the connections that do exist in literature. Preferably, teachers will use a particular picture book along with other picture books that share common topics, concepts or structures.

**The novel unit.** A teacher may select a particular children's novel as a focus of study. Children are guided through a book such as *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean George. Since the novel unit is a lengthy undertaking, teachers involve children in extension activities throughout the unit. Children discuss the theme of humans, with the help from an unlikely source, overcoming the hazards of nature, or they may explore the myths about wolves. Children can experience the art and music of the Innupiat. Traditional Innupiat customs and traditions rediscovered by Miyax can be investigated and discussed. Survival stories can be written by the children. The novel unit can be a rewarding experience for mature primary and intermediate students. As students read a novel, they can discover more about themselves and about life. They can learn different perspectives when they hear different interpretations as shared by their literature group peers. Additionally, meaningful engagement with a substantive work in itself is a worthy objective.

**The author unit.** A teacher can foster appreciation of a particular author by developing literature units based upon the works of that author. The teacher may involve

children in the guided reading of several books written by Bill Peet while reading aloud to the class other selections written by that author. The teacher informs the children about the life of Bill Peet by providing information and reading excerpts from *Bill Peet: An Autobiography*. A “Bill Peet station” is located in the classroom reading center containing a collection of Bill Peet books, book jackets, and illustrations of favorite Peet characters. Self-selection and reading of Peet’s books is encouraged. The cultivation of love of author is an important literacy objective. If we are able to “hook” children on a particular author, we can stand back and allow the delightful transaction between reader and author to take place.

**The thematic unit.** The true thematic unit will focus on a literary theme — an underlying idea that ties the characters, the setting, and the plot together. Children might explore the theme that “friendship assists individuals in overcoming obstacles” by listening to and reading books such as Marshall’s *George and Martha*, Lobel’s *Frog and Toad are Friends*, and Steig’s *The Amazing Bone*. Extension activities might include independent selection and reading of an additional book having the same theme and involving children in composing stories about how friends have assisted them in overcoming obstacles. The concept of theme involves substantial abstractions (Johnson and Louis, 1990). It is important for teachers to consider the amount of abstraction inherent in a particular theme. The theme of “friendship assists individuals in overcoming obstacles” discussed above can be made relatively concrete to younger children because it’s likely that they have experienced such a phenomenon. It is less likely that young children will understand the theme of “cooperation is necessary for a society to survive.” Care

must be taken, therefore, in matching children with age-appropriate thematic material.

## Conclusions

Educators are busy developing and implementing units of literary exploration and calling them thematic units. However, few of these units are truly thematic in nature. Eight different types of units involving literature are described here. Each type of unit has a different focus, age-appropriateness, and inherent worth. This descriptive framework may assist teachers in categorizing and discussing the types of literature units they develop and present. It may also assist them in clarifying the central focus of their literature units.

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