Many years ago there was an Emperor who loved new clothes so much that he spent all his money on them. He cared nothing about his soldiers, or for the theater, or for driving in the woods except if it gave him a chance to show off his new clothes. He had a costume for every hour in the day. Instead of saying as most subjects might of their king, “He is in his council chamber,” the people here always said, “The Emperor is in his dressing room.”
Life was very happy in the great town where he lived. Hosts of strangers came to visit it every day, and among them one day were two swindlers. They said they were weavers and knew how to weave the most beautiful fabrics imaginable. Not only were the colors and patterns unusually fine, but the clothes that were made of this cloth had a peculiar quality. They would remain invisible to anyone who was not fit for the office he or she held, or to anyone who was a fool.

“Those must be splendid clothes,” thought the Emperor. “By wearing them I should be able to discover which people in my kingdom are unfit for their jobs. I shall distinguish the wise from the foolish. Yes, I certainly must order some of that stuff to be woven for me.”

The Emperor paid the two swindlers a lot of money in advance, so that they might begin their work at once. They also asked for a quantity of the finest silk and the purest gold thread, all of which they put into their own bags.

They did put up two looms and pretended to weave, but they had nothing whatever upon their shuttles. Every day they worked away at the empty looms far into the night.
“I wonder how those weavers are getting on with their cloth,” thought the Emperor. But then he realized that anyone who was not fit for his position would not be able to see it. He certainly thought that he need have no fears for himself, but still he thought it best to send somebody else first to see how the work was going. Everybody in the town knew what wonderful power the stuff possessed, and everyone was anxious to see how stupid his neighbor was.

“I will send my faithful old minister to the weavers,” thought the Emperor. “He will be best able to see how the stuff looks, for he is a clever man and fulfills his duties better than anyone.”

So the good old minister went into the room where the two swindlers sat working at the empty loom.

“Heaven help us,” thought the old minister, opening his eyes very wide. “Why, I can’t see a thing!” But he took care not to say so.

Both the swindlers begged him to be good enough to step a little nearer, and asked if he did not think it a good pattern and beautiful coloring. They pointed to the empty loom. The poor old minister stared as hard as he could, but he could not see anything, for
of course there was nothing to see.

“Good heavens,” he thought. “Is it possible that I am a fool? I have never thought so, and nobody must know it. Am I not fit for my position? I must never admit that I cannot see the stuff.”

“Well, sir, you haven’t said anything about our weaving,” said one of the weavers.

“Oh, it is beautiful—quite charming,” said the minister, looking through his spectacles. “Such a pattern and such colors! I will certainly tell the Emperor that it pleases me very much.”

“We are delighted to hear you say so,” said the swindlers, and then they named all the colors and described the peculiar pattern. The old minister paid great attention to what they said, so as to be able to repeat it when he got home to the Emperor.

Then the swindlers went on to demand more money, more silk, and more gold, to be able to proceed with the weaving. But they put it all into their own pockets. Not a single strand was ever put into the loom. They went on as before, weaving at the empty loom.

The Emperor soon sent another faithful official to see how the stuff was getting on and if it would soon be ready. The same thing happened to him as to the
The Emperor’s New Clothes

minister. He looked and looked, but as there was only the empty loom, he could see nothing at all.

“Is it beautiful?” said both the swindlers, showing and explaining the beautiful pattern and colors that were not there to be seen.

“I know I am no fool,” thought the man, “so it must be that I am unfit for my good post. I must not
admit that I see nothing.” So he praised the stuff he did not see, and assured them of his delight in the beautiful colors and the originality of the design.

“It is absolutely charming,” he said to the Emperor. Soon everybody in the town was talking about this splendid stuff.

The Emperor thought he would like to see the weaving while it was still on the loom. So, accompanied by a number of selected courtiers, among whom were the two faithful officials who had already seen the imaginary stuff, he went to visit the crafty impostors. They were working away as hard as ever at the empty loom.

“It is magnificent,” said both the honest officials. “Look, Your Majesty, what a design! What colors!” And they pointed to the empty loom, for each was certain that the others could see the stuff.

“What?” thought the Emperor, “I see nothing at all. This is terrible! Am I a fool? Am I not fit to be Emperor? Why, nothing worse could happen to me!”

“Oh, it is beautiful,” said the Emperor. “It has my highest approval.” And he nodded his satisfaction as he gazed at the empty loom. Nothing would make him say that he could not see anything.

All the officials gazed and gazed, but saw nothing
more than all the others. However, they all exclaimed with His Majesty, “It is very beautiful.” And they advised him to wear a suit made of this wonderful cloth on the occasion of a great procession that was just about to take place. “Magnificent! Gorgeous! Excellent!” went from mouth to mouth. They were all equally delighted with this idea.

The swindlers sat up the whole night before the day on which the procession was to take place, burning sixteen candles, so that people might see how anxious they were to get the Emperor’s new clothes ready. They pretended to take the stuff off the loom. They cut it out in the air with a huge pair of scissors, and they stitched away with needles without any thread in them.

At last they said, “Now the Emperor’s new clothes are ready.”

The Emperor with his grandest courtiers went to weavers, and both swindlers raised one arm in the air, as if they were holding something. They said, “See, these are the trousers. This is the coat. Here is the mantle,” and so on. “It is as light as a spider’s web. One might think one had nothing on, but that is the very beauty of it.”

“Yes,” said all the courtiers, but they could not see
anything, for there was nothing to see.

“Will Your Imperial Majesty be graciously pleased to take off your clothes?” said the impostors. “Then we may put on the new ones, here before the great mirror.”

The Emperor took off all his clothes, and the impostors pretended to give him one article of dress after the other of the new ones. They pretended to fasten something around his waist and to tie on something. This was the train, and the Emperor turned round and round in front of the mirror.

“How well His Majesty looks in the new clothes! How becoming they are!” cried all the people round. “What a design and what colors! They are most gorgeous robes.”

“The canopy is waiting outside which is to be carried over Your Majesty in the procession,” said the master of the ceremonies.

“Well, I am quite ready,” said the Emperor. “Don’t the clothes fit well?” Then he turned round again in front of the mirror, so that he should seem to be looking at his grand things.

The chamberlains who were to carry the train stopped and pretended to lift it from the ground with
both hands, and they walked along with their hands in the air. They dared not let it appear that they could not see anything.

Then the Emperor walked along in the procession under the canopy, and everybody in the streets and at the windows exclaimed, “How beautiful the Emperor’s new clothes are! What a splendid train! And they fit to perfection!” Nobody would admit there was nothing to see.

None of the Emperor’s clothes had been so successful before.

“But he has got nothing on,” said a little child.

“Oh, listen to the innocent,” said the child’s father. And one person whispered to the other what the child had said. “He has nothing on—a child says he has nothing on!”

“But he has nothing on!” at last cried all the people.

The Emperor writhed, for he knew it was true. But he thought, “The procession must go on now.” So he held himself straighter than ever, and the chamberlains held up the invisible train.
As the definition above says, theme is the major idea of a story. But here are the wonderful catches:

- Though there are exceptions, authors seldom state their intended theme directly in so many words. So . . .

- It’s usually up to the readers to discover the theme for themselves. But keep in mind that . . .

- Some stories may have more than one theme, and . . .

- Different readers may find different themes in the same story. In addition . . .

- Very occasionally, readers may find themes that even the authors themselves were not conscious of while writing.

These catches—far from being confusing—are what can make group reading and follow-up discussion so exciting. For example, most students will see that the most obvious theme in “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is that pride and vanity can have embarrassing results. But many students may pick up on additional themes, such as:

- Honesty (shown by the child, in this case) is a rare virtue.

With your encouragement, students will feel free to share their different insights into the themes of the story in this lesson. In that way, the story will become richer and more meaningful for all.
Remember this one? Two swindlers convince a clothes-obsessed emperor that they can make him some gorgeous clothes that will be invisible to all except the very bright and those worthy to hold office. The swindlers proceed to weave—with great pretense—absolutely nothing! Naturally, neither the emperor nor members of his entourage will admit that they can’t see these “new clothes.” Supposedly dressed in them, the emperor—naked as a jaybird, of course!—sets off to display the “clothes” in a procession through town. The onlookers in the crowd—wanting to be included among the “bright”—say how gorgeous the new clothes are. It’s not until a little child says, “But he has got nothing on!” that the vanity of the emperor, and that of lots of other adults, is revealed. One theme here is that pride and vanity can have embarrassing results. Another is that honesty (the child’s, in this case) is a rare virtue.
This Theme’s All Right

In the right-hand column, write what you feel is the most important theme in the story named on the left. Remember to state the theme as a complete sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Emperor’s New Clothes</td>
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With some classmates, compare and discuss the themes you identified as most important.
What If...

From the story you've read, maybe you can imagine a different ending, and thus a different theme.

Think about the story you read and rewrite the ending to create a different theme.

**Story Title _____________________________**

```
Summary of Current Ending

Summary of New Ending

New Theme
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Read your revised ending to a group of classmates and ask them to identify the new theme. You may want to make some changes on the basis of this follow-up discussion.
From End to Beginning

Here’s a fact for writers:
Very often, the theme you want to develop becomes firm in your mind before you actually begin to write the story. So, in a sense, you work backwards. That is, you create a plot that will support your theme.

For example, it may occur to you that holidays are stressful times for many people.

There’s a theme! Your job:
Build and support the theme. To do so, you could create a story in which the protagonist gets stressed out by having to buy too many presents, or by having to go to too many parties, or by having a Christmas tree fall on his head.

Got it? Now here’s the challenge:
Try it! Choose one of the themes below, circle it, and then, on a separate sheet of paper, write a short story that supports the theme. And remember: (1) Do NOT state the theme in so many words in the story itself, but (2) DO make the theme clear in other ways to your readers.

Themes
1. He who hesitates is lost.
2. Look before you leap.
3. Good things come to those who wait.
4. A true friend will always tell you the truth.
5. You can’t make a good deal with a bad person.
6. Life is full of surprises.

Follow Up
Share your story with some classmates. Can they identify the theme? What do they think about your way of developing the theme? Too obvious? Not clear? Just right? Use your classmates’ comments to reassess your work on your own.
Another Way to Say It

The same theme may be used by different writers in very different stories. For example, the theme “Meets life’s challenges with courage” is found in Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, in Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*, and in Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*.

Use the graphic organizer below to outline your own original story in which the main character meets life’s challengers with courage. Share your ideas with a classmate. If you wish, ask for suggestions for developing your ideas into a complete story.

1. Character(s)  
2. Setting

**Theme:**  
Meets life’s challenges with courage

3. Challenges  
4. Resolution
Many movies are based on stories from books that have important themes. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Holes* are some examples. Movie producers and directors choose actors who will best help develop the theme of the story. The telling points could be the actors’ looks, the way they move, the way they speak, and their basic understanding of the story itself.

Imagine that you will be the producer/director of two movies, one based on “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and the other based on another book or story you have read. On the lines below, write the theme. Then name your choices for the actors. These can be famous Hollywood stars or kids in your classroom—including you!

1. **“The Emperor’s New Clothes”**
   
   Theme ____________________________________________

   **Actors**
   
   Emperor ____________________________________________
   The Two Swindlers ___________________ and ___________________
   The Minister ____________________________________________
   The Officials ___________________ and ___________________
   The People in the Crowd ____________________________________________
   The Honest Child ____________________________________________

2. **Book or Story Title:**
   
   Theme ____________________________________________

   **Actors**
   
   Great Joy ____________________________________________
   The Brahmin ____________________________________________
   The Merchant ____________________________________________
   The People in the Crowd ____________________________________________