

Answer Key: Theme and Character in a Short Story

Grade: 7 **Subject:** Reading / Language Arts **For teacher use only** RLA

How to use this key

Answers are grouped by section and question number. Many items are open-ended; accept any response that shows correct reasoning and cites the story, even if the wording differs. Notes flag where more than one answer is defensible and list common misconceptions to watch for. Paragraph numbers below refer to the bracketed markers [1]–[6] in the story. Estimated grading time: ~5–7 min per packet.

Start Notice & Predict grade for effort · ~2 min

1 Notice / predict from the title "The Last Row."

Full credit for any reasonable notice + prediction. Examples — Notice: "the title points to a place, maybe seats or a row of chairs." Predict: "someone likes to sit or hide in the back," or "the last row matters to the main character." Any on-topic prediction is acceptable; no single answer is required.

2 Name one theme from any story/movie/show.

Accept any reasonable theme stated as an idea about life (e.g., "friendship takes work," "honesty matters," "hard work pays off"). If a student writes only a topic word (e.g., "friendship"), it still earns effort credit here, but note it — Q9 will require a full theme sentence.

Build Read the Story ~1 min

3 Why does Maya choose the last row? (paragraph [1])

From **paragraph [1]**: she can "mouth the words without really singing" so no one notices; singing out loud "felt like standing in a spotlight," and she hides behind taller kids. **Ideal**: she sits in the back to hide because she is afraid/embarrassed to be heard singing. Accept any answer naming that she wants to avoid being noticed or heard.

Apply Read Closely ~2 min

4 Comprehension — Dario's "point." (paragraph [3])

"The point is to start. You can't get better at something you never do." Accept any answer that captures: you have to begin / practice even while bad, because you can't improve at something you never do. Reject "the point is to be terrible" as the final answer — that is Maya's joke, which Dario corrects.

5 Inference — "hiding... had frozen it." (paragraph [4])

Maya realizes that hiding in the last row did **not** keep her voice safe — it kept her from ever improving ("she was no better a singer than the day she started"). **Ideal**: she now sees her two years of hiding as wasted or

harmful, not protective. Accept any inference that hiding held her back / stopped her growth. This is an inference because the story does not state it as a plain fact; she reasons it out.

6 Character change chart (before / after / cause).

Beginning (paragraph [1]–[2]): Maya hides in the last row, only mouths the words, is reluctant/flustered, presses against the back wall to avoid being noticed.

End (paragraph [5]–[6]): Maya volunteers for the solo, sings from the second row, keeps her voice "steady," tries a hard note again instead of shrinking, and decides she "no longer lived" in the last row.

Cause of change: her conversation with **Dario** (paragraph [3]) — "the point is to start" — plus practicing at her window (paragraph [4]). Accept either Dario or the window-practice moment, or both, with a paragraph number cited. Award full credit if before + after + a valid cause are each supported by a detail.

7 Author's craft — showing shyness through word choice.

The writer **shows** Maya's shyness with actions and word choices instead of naming it: *reluctant*, "hide behind taller kids," "pressed herself against the back wall," "felt her face go warm and flustered." **Ideal answer:** these words let the reader picture and feel her fear, making it more vivid and believable than simply being told "Maya was shy." Accept any answer explaining that showing (through actions/word choice) creates a stronger, more convincing picture than telling. More than one wording is defensible.

8 Evidence selection — best quote showing change.

8a — C. "She did not look back at the last row. She had decided she no longer lived there." This is the only quote showing Maya *after* she changes.

Why the others are wrong: **A** and **B** describe her old hiding behavior (before); **D** describes her fear of the solo (before). Only **C** shows the changed Maya.

8b: Accept any sentence explaining that quote C shows she has moved on from hiding / chosen not to return to the back / grown past her old fear.

Explain Theme Response (Q9) ~1–2 min

9 State a theme and support it with two pieces of text evidence.

Acceptable theme statements (any one, or similar, stated as a full sentence about life):

- "Growth means doing the thing that scares you."
- "You can't improve at something you never try."
- "Hiding to stay safe can keep you from growing."
- "Courage is trying again even when you're not perfect."

Evidence locations (accept any two that fit the theme):

- Paragraph [3] — Dario: "The point is to start. You can't get better at something you never do."
- Paragraph [4] — "Hiding hadn't protected her voice — it had frozen it," and she practices at the window.
- Paragraph [5] — Maya volunteers: "I'll try the solo."
- Paragraph [6] — she tries the hard note again; her voice is "steady... her own"; "she no longer lived there."

Reasoning should connect the evidence to the theme (e.g., Maya only improves once she stops hiding and starts trying, which is exactly the lesson the theme states). Full credit for a defensible theme sentence + two relevant, correctly located pieces of evidence + reasoning that links them.

Theme-response scoring rubric (3 points)

Score	Theme (claim)	Text evidence	Reasoning
3	Clear, defensible theme stated as a full sentence about life (not a topic	Two accurate, relevant quotes/details, each tied to the	Clearly explains how the evidence supports the theme.

Score	Theme (claim)	Text evidence	Reasoning
	word).	correct paragraph.	
2	Theme present but partly a topic or slightly off.	One solid piece, or two with a minor error or vague location.	Some correct linkage but incomplete.
1	Only a topic word, or a plot summary instead of a theme.	Evidence weak, off-topic, or not from the story.	Little or flawed reasoning; evidence not connected to a theme.
0	No theme / incorrect.	No evidence.	No reasoning.

Close ACE ~1 min

ACE Articulate / Connect / Extend.

Articulate: accept any accurate one-sentence theme in the student's own words (see Q9 list).

Connect: the cited moment must actually match the stated theme (e.g., paragraph [5] volunteering for the solo, or paragraph [6] trying the note again → "doing the thing that scares you").

Extend: any reasonable new situation where the theme fits (e.g., trying out for a team despite fear, speaking up in class, learning to swim). More than one answer is defensible.

Watch Common misconceptions

- **Summary vs. theme.** A summary retells what happens ("Maya sings a solo"). A theme states the *lesson* ("Growth means facing what scares you"). If the response only retells the plot, it is a summary, not a theme.
- **Topic vs. theme.** A topic is a single word or phrase ("courage," "growing up"). A theme is a full sentence that says something *about* that topic. Push students from "courage" to "Courage means trying again even when you fail."
- **Evidence that isn't tied to the claim (Q8, Q9).** A quote must actually support the point. Quotes A, B, and D in Q8 show the old Maya, not her change.
- **"Telling" mistaken for "showing" (Q7).** The story never says "Maya was shy"; students should notice it is shown through actions and word choice.
- **Character change vs. change of setting.** The last row changing to the second row is a sign of Maya's *internal* change, not just a seat change.

Teacher follow-up based on likely errors

If many students write topic words or plot summaries on Q9, run a 5-minute mini-lesson turning topics into theme sentences ("courage" → "Courage means trying again even when you're scared"). If Q8 reveals trouble matching evidence to a claim, model reading each option and asking "before or after the change?" The character-change chart (Q6) is a fast formative check of who can locate and cite text evidence by paragraph.

G07_RLA_Theme_01 — Theme and Character in a Short Story Teacher Answer Key