

Theme and Character in a Short Story

Grade: 7 **Subject:** Reading / Language Arts **Time:** ~45 min core + ~15 min extension **Work mode:** Independent · pencil only RLA

Start Here

This is a **reading and writing task**. You will read a short story, then answer questions and write a short response using a pencil. You do **not** need a computer or any device. Work by yourself and do your best thinking. Every question about the story can be answered **from the story itself** — the answers are on the page. Write in complete sentences where you are asked to explain. If a question is hard, skip it, keep going, and come back. Reading the story aloud quietly to yourself is allowed and encouraged.

Start Notice & Predict 5 min

Look only at the title and the first two sentences of the story before you read the rest.

1The story is titled "**The Last Row**." From the title alone, write **one thing you notice** and **one thing you predict** the story might be about.

2When you read a story, a **theme** is the lesson or big idea the writer wants you to think about — not just what happens. Name **one theme** you have seen in a book, movie, or show (for example, "friendship takes work" or "honesty matters").

Build Read the Story 10 min

Words to know (from the story)

reluctant

unwilling; slow to do something.

flustered

nervous and confused, hard to think clearly.

murmur

to speak in a low, soft voice.

grudging

done unwillingly, without wanting to.

steady

calm, firm, and not shaking.

"The Last Row" — an original short story

[1] Maya always chose the last row. From the back of the choir room she could mouth the words without really singing, and no one would notice. Singing out loud felt like standing in a spotlight with the switch stuck on. She was *reluctant* even to hum, so she hid behind taller kids and let their voices cover hers.

[2] "We need one more person for the fall solo," Ms. Ortega said one Tuesday, scanning the risers. "Just eight bars. Think about it." Maya stared at her shoes. A solo meant everyone hearing exactly her — every wobble,

every cracked note. She felt her face go warm and *flustered*, and she pressed herself against the back wall as if it might swallow her.

[3] That afternoon she found Dario, a quiet seventh grader, practicing alone at the old piano near the band closet. He wasn't very good. His fingers stumbled, and he kept starting the same measure over. But he didn't stop. "I'm going to try out for jazz band," he said, not looking up. "I'll probably be terrible at first. That's kind of the point." Maya laughed before she could help it. "The point is to be terrible?" Dario shrugged. "The point is to start. You can't get better at something you never do."

[4] Maya went home and thought about the last row. She had spent two years there, safe and silent, and she was no better a singer than the day she started. Hiding hadn't protected her voice — it had frozen it. That night she opened her window, faced the dark backyard, and sang the eight bars once, quietly, just to hear what her own voice sounded like out loud. It shook. She sang them again. It shook a little less.

[5] On Wednesday, Maya waited until the room had emptied except for Ms. Ortega. "I'll try the solo," she said. The words came out in a *murmur*, but they came out. Ms. Ortega only nodded, as if she had been expecting it. "Second row, then," she said. "Soloists don't hide in the back."

[6] The first rehearsal was rough. Maya's voice broke on the highest note, and a few kids glanced over. Her old instinct was to shrink, to give a *grudging* apology and slide backward toward the last row. Instead she took a breath and tried the note again. It still wasn't perfect. But her voice, when it came, was *steady* — and it was, at last, her own. She did not look back at the last row. She had decided she no longer lived there.

3In paragraph [1], why does Maya choose the last row of the choir room? Answer using details from the story.

Apply Read Closely 20 min

Every answer in this section is in the story. Point to the paragraph in your head before you write.

4Comprehension. What does Dario say is "the point" of trying out for jazz band, even though he expects to be terrible at first? (paragraph [3])

5Inference. In paragraph [4], Maya thinks that "hiding hadn't protected her voice — it had frozen it." What does this tell you about how she now sees her two years in the last row? Explain what she has realized.

6Character change (before & after). Maya is a character who changes. Fill in the chart with a detail from the story **and** the paragraph number where you found it.

Maya at the BEGINNING

What she does / how she feels (with paragraph #):

Maya at the END

What she does / how she feels (with paragraph #):

What caused the change?

Name the person or moment that pushed her to change:

7Author's craft. The writer never says "Maya was shy" directly. Instead the writer shows it with word choices like *reluctant*, "hide behind taller kids," and "pressed herself against the back wall." Explain **how** these word choices help you understand Maya without the writer stating it plainly.

8Evidence selection. Which quote **best** supports the idea that Maya has truly changed by the end of the story? Fill in the circle for ONE choice.

- "From the back of the choir room she could mouth the words without really singing."
- "She was reluctant even to hum, so she hid behind taller kids."

- "She did not look back at the last row. She had decided she no longer lived there."
- "A solo meant everyone hearing exactly her — every wobble, every cracked note."

8b. In one sentence, explain why the quote you chose shows a change.

Explain State a Theme & Support It 5–10 min

Question 9. A **theme** is the big idea or lesson of the story — stated as a full sentence about life, not just a topic word. (Topic: "courage." Theme: "Growth means doing the thing that scares you.") Write **one theme** of "The Last Row" and support it with **two pieces of text evidence**, then explain your thinking.

Sentence stems you may use: "One theme of the story is..." · "Evidence from the story is... (paragraph ____)." · "A second piece of evidence is... (paragraph ____)." · "This shows the theme because..."

Theme (your claim)

Text evidence (two pieces, with paragraph #)

Reasoning

Close ACE Wrap-Up 5 min

Articulate

Say the **theme** of "The Last Row" in your **own words**, in one sentence, as if telling a friend the point of the story.

Connect

Point to **one moment** in the story (name the paragraph) where you can see that theme happening.

Extend

Describe a **different situation** — in real life or another story — where this same theme would fit.

Continue Early Finisher optional · ~15 min

If you finish early (no new materials needed):

Rewrite the ending to change the theme. On the back of this page, rewrite paragraph [6] so that the story teaches a **different** lesson — for example, "playing it safe is the wiser choice" or "some fears are worth respecting." Then, in one sentence, name the **new theme** your ending creates and underline the words in your rewrite that carry it.

Turn in: Hand in this whole packet with your name, class period, and date filled in. Make sure questions 1–9 and the ACE box are answered. The early-finisher rewrite is optional but turn it in too if you did it.

G07_RLA_Theme_01 — Theme and Character in a Short Story Student Packet