

Substitute Guide: Theme and Character in a Short Story

Grade: 7 **Subject:** Reading / Language Arts **Time:** ~45 min core + ~15 min extension RLA

Learning goal (plain language)

Students read a short original story, "The Last Row," and figure out its **theme** (the big idea or lesson), track how the main character **changes** from beginning to end, and notice how the writer's **word choices** shape meaning. They finish by writing a short response that states a theme and backs it with two pieces of text evidence. **You do not need an English or reading background to run this.** Everything students need — including the whole story — is printed in their packet, and every question can be answered directly from that story.

Standards alignment

Framework: 19 TAC §110.23 (Grade 7 English Language Arts and Reading).

- **Theme:** analyze how a theme or central idea is developed across a literary text.
- **Character:** analyze how a character's qualities and responses change and shape the plot.
- **Author's craft:** analyze how word choice and structure contribute to meaning and tone.

Provisional — pending educator verification against the current official TAC source.

(Standards are paraphrased here, not quoted. Please confirm codes and wording against your official source.)

Setup Before class (5 min)

- Count and hand out one **student packet** per student.
- Confirm each student has a **pencil**. No devices or other materials are needed.
- Write the date on the board and remind students to fill in the name line.
- Keep the **answer key** with you — it is a separate file and is **not** in the student packet.

Materials What's needed

- Printed student packet (4–6 pages) per student.
- Pencil per student.
- This guide and the separate answer key (teacher only).
- No technology, no calculator, no special materials.

Timing Suggested pacing (~45–60 min)

Segment	Time	What students do
Start — Notice & Predict	5 min	Q1–Q2 warm-up
Build — Read the story	10 min	Read "The Last Row," word bank; Q3

Segment	Time	What students do
Apply — Read closely	20 min	Q4–Q8 (comprehension, inference, character change, craft, evidence)
Explain — Theme response	5–10 min	Q9 theme + two pieces of evidence
Close — ACE	5 min	Articulate / Connect / Extend
Continue — early finishers	optional ~15 min	Rewrite the ending to change the theme

Script Read aloud to start

"Today's assignment is a reading and writing activity called *Theme and Character in a Short Story*. You will work by yourself with just a pencil — no computers. First read the short story called *The Last Row*. Every question can be answered from the story, so if you're unsure, go back and reread. Answer the questions in order; if one is tricky, skip it and come back. Write in complete sentences where it asks you to explain. You may quietly read the story aloud to yourself. Put your name, class period, and date at the top now. You have about 45 minutes; raise your hand if you need a word read to you or explained."

Support When students ask for help

- **You may read any part aloud** — the story or any question — to a student or the class.
- If they are stuck, point them to the **paragraph numbers** [1]–[6]; every answer is in the story.
- Remind them a **theme** is a full sentence about life (a lesson), not a single topic word — the packet gives an example.
- Encourage the printed **sentence stems** and the **word bank** for Q9 and ACE.
- Do **not** give answers; prompt with "Which paragraph shows that?" or "How is Maya different at the end?"
- It is fine if a student cannot finish the optional early-finisher task.

Access Accommodations & language support

- **Read-aloud** of the story or any question is allowed for all students.
- Point students to the **sentence stems** and the **word bank** (definitions provided).
- Extended time is fine; the core can stop after Q9 if time runs short.
- Students may answer in phrases if writing full sentences is a barrier, as long as the idea is clear.
- The packet is grayscale-safe — it prints and reads clearly in black and white.

Tools Allowed & not allowed

Allowed: pencil, the printed packet, quiet self-read-aloud. **Not needed / not allowed:** phones, computers, outside sources (everything is in the story).

Collect at the end: Collect every packet, whether finished or not, with names on them. Stack them for the teacher. Note on a sticky how far most students got and any questions that caused confusion.

Answer key: The **answer key is a separate file** (answerkey.html) and is for the teacher only. Please do not hand it to students.

Teacher follow-up (for the returning teacher)

Watch for the common mix-ups of *summary* vs. *theme* (retelling the plot instead of stating a lesson) and *topic* vs. *theme* (writing "courage" instead of a full sentence about courage). A quick next-day mini-lesson turning topic

words into theme sentences would reinforce this well. The character-change chart (Q6) and the evidence item (Q8) quickly show who can locate and use text evidence; the Q9 responses show who can state a defensible theme and support it.

G07_RLA_Theme_01 — Theme and Character in a Short Story Substitute Guide