

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

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



TEACHER ANSWER KEY FOLLOWS

Do not copy the pages after this divider for students.

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