The First Stack

Trace how a character's choices develop a theme

8.RL.2 "Determine a theme or central idea(s) of a text. Analyze its development over the course of the text including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot. Identify key textual details to support the analysis."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three moments that show how Mara's thinking changes from the beginning to the end, then number them 1 to 3.

The Dry Journals

1 The rain found the town library before the volunteers did. Water slipped through a crack in the ceiling and dripped onto a shelf of handwritten journals. Mara, the youngest library volunteer, slid a bucket under the leak. She had promised the librarian she could handle the evening shift alone. When her brother Eli arrived with his muddy boots, Mara blocked the doorway. Last week he had dropped a box of donated books. "I don't need another accident," she said. Eli stayed by the door while the bucket filled.

2 A gust rattled the windows, and a second leak opened above the journals. Mara dragged a heavy cart toward the shelf, but its wheel caught on a loose floorboard. She pulled harder, scattering books across the wet floor. Eli pointed to a dry storage room down the hall and offered to carry the journals there. Mara nearly refused. Then she saw water spreading beneath the oldest journal, its ink already feathering at the edges. She handed Eli the first stack and took the next one herself.

3 They made three trips down the narrow hall. Eli held the storage door open with his foot while Mara set the journals on a high table. When the librarian arrived, Mara admitted that she had tried to move the cart alone. She also told her about Eli's idea. The librarian brought towels, and together they dried the floor before the water reached the remaining shelves. Mara looked at Eli's muddy boots, then at the dry journals. "Next time," she said, "you can take the first stack."

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What theme develops across the story? Support it with one detail from the beginning and one from the end.

2. How does the library setting help change Mara's decision about Eli's offer?

3. How do Eli's actions change Mara's view of him between the first and last paragraphs? Use two details from the story.

4. Why is the cart getting stuck an important event in the development of the theme?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 4-5 sentence alternate ending in which the journals stay dry but Mara does not accept Eli's help. Include a new action Mara takes, then explain how your ending would develop a different theme from the original.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three moments that show how Mara's thinking changes from the beginning to the end, then number them 1 to 3. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What theme develops across the story? Support it with one detail from the beginning and one from the end.	**A past mistake does not mean someone cannot be trusted. Mara initially blocks Eli because he once dropped books, but at the end she invites him to carry the first stack next time.**
2	How does the library setting help change Mara's decision about Eli's offer?	**The leaks threaten the journals, and water begins to damage the oldest one. The urgent danger leads Mara to accept Eli's help despite her doubts.**
3	How do Eli's actions change Mara's view of him between the first and last paragraphs? Use two details from the story.	**Mara first expects Eli to cause another accident. He suggests the dry storage room and helps move the journals safely, so she trusts him with a future task.**
4	Why is the cart getting stuck an important event in the development of the theme?	**Mara's attempt to move the cart alone fails and puts more books on the wet floor. That setback leads toward her decision to work with Eli.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Mara left Eli by the door and found an empty plastic bin behind the desk. She carried the journals to the dry storage room in the bin, one load at a time, while the bucket caught the leak. By the time the librarian arrived, every journal was safe, but Mara was exhausted. This ending would develop a theme about finding creative solutions under pressure rather than learning to trust someone who once made a mistake.

Accept other defensible themes, such as the value of working together, when students trace them through specific details. For the alternate ending, look for a changed action and an explanation of how it shifts the theme.