



DREAM YOUR THEME

Each year, your yearbook has a new theme/concept. In addition to the verbal phrase you use to establish the book's personality, you'll be creating a visual look to set it part from other volumes. There's no one right way to make these important decisions. Some staffs choose a tone and look for words that fit—this might be the case if you've had several serious books in a row and have already decided that you want the next book to be more playful. Others select a verbal message and then work to create a visual look that reiterates the concept.

These questions and exercises should help your staff (or your editorial team if that's who does preliminary theme development at your school) with selecting and developing your unifier. Once you have some thoughts, work through the various steps; you'll want to make sure the theme will work before you commit to it.

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS TO JUMP-START THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Describe your school using one adjective.

Describe the people who attend your school in one word.

List catch phrases and expressions used by the students at school.

What's the first thing people notice when they come to campus?

What do you enjoy most about school?

What event will be most important to your school in the coming year?

What physical changes will be noticeable?

Will the school be smaller, larger or the same?

Can you predict the mood of the students next year? What will it be like?

What changes have occurred since the previous year?

What outside influences have affected the students or school?

CONSIDER THESE TYPES OF UNIFIERS

For years, a catch phrase was a given for great yearbook themes; a memorable slogan that related to both the specific school and the coverage year provided a theme that fit. Many great yearbooks continue to use traditional themes because they are so high in reader appeal and impact.

- **Anniversary themes** can be tricky. Make sure you don't abuse the "party/celebration" concept and remember that the anniversary of the school is probably not as important to the average student as it is to a staff that has been assigned to come up with a theme that fits the school and defines the year.
- **School initials** might be a possibility for a fun concept if you are lucky enough to be able to make a play on words.
- **School colors** are a favorite with many readers, but that does not mean you have to be boring or traditional.
- **Mascot themes** give the students a fresh look at a familiar figure on campus.
- **Wordplay with the name of the school** can be fun and these themes are often listed among reader favorites, but it only works if the play is obvious.
- **Location themes** are limited to schools with obvious ties to street names or major geographic landmarks.
- **Event themes** are based on a specific happening that truly affected the school.
- **"Fun" themes** make use of contemporary graphics and/or fun phrases.
- **Pride themes** focus on spirit and student or school accomplishment.
- **Reaction themes** provide the students with a chance to be heard, and typically make use of lots of quotes and first person stories.
- **Unity/diversity themes** examine the school's population and explain affects on the various aspects of school life.
- **Change themes** need to be tied to the year with specific major changes in the school or its programs.
- **Double-edged themes** provide a compare and contrast format with a serious side and a lighter approach.
- **Contemplative themes** ask the reader to think about school or life.
- **Concept themes** use a mix of catch phrases or ideas based around one central idea. The sections may not be named with direct spin-offs from the main idea. In fact, there may be fewer or more sections than normal if the concept suggests that the book be divided some way other than into the traditional sections of student life, academics, sports, organizations and people.

By considering each type of theme, you may decide that some are more or less appropriate than others. Sometimes a great theme will evolve from a discussion of a certain type of unifier. If you need more information, ask your Herff Jones representative about educational materials on theme and/or the Teaching Yearbook Journalism curriculum. Discussing the various kinds of themes may also help you focus in on or eliminate certain kinds of ideas. This is one way to get the entire team on the same page.

HOW YOUR UNIFIER IS USED

It's time for a couple more reminders about the theme. In addition to fitting the school and the year, it's important that you can list of some specific photo and copy possibilities for the opening and the closing. The theme unifies the book inside and out and creates a unique personality for the year and the yearbook.

The theme should be developed on:

- Cover & endsheets
- Title page
- Opening spread(s)
- Divider spreads
- Closing spread
- Last page of the book
- Theme magazine
- Folio/page numbers

The theme should be developed in these ways:

- Photographs that tell the story
- Design that is distinctive
- Easily identifiable type
- Copy and captions that tie the theme to your school and the specific year
- Colors and textures

THEME BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- Decide whether you'll be involving the entire staff or an editorial team. Some staffs have the editors do preliminary work and then the staff works in teams to develop the top 2-4 possibilities before the whole team votes to choose a favorite. In other schools, this work is all done by editors who present the theme to the staff after a decision has been made.
- Determine whether you want those involved to answer school-specific questions on paper in advance or not.
- Discuss types of themes, making note of favorites and those you'd prefer to avoid
- Choose a first method for your brainstorm and begin. Establish guidelines that allow everyone to contribute and have someone record all suggestions on a computer, the whiteboard or a flip chart.
- Print out and distribute pages from Herff Jones' master theme list (<http://bit.ly/hjmasterthemelist>). Have each individual or team mark five favorites and suggest five additional ideas that are adaptations from other themes on their page(s).
- Bring in magazines and have staffers shout out possibilities as they read headlines, ad copy and more.
- Revert to free association and use either the list of school-specific questions or type of themes as prompts when ideas stop flowing.

DEVELOPING THE THEME ACTIVITY

Once you think you have the right theme for this year, you'll want to test it by listing the following:

Our theme/concept for this year is:

It feels like it will really work because:

Our photo/copy ideas for the opening and closing include:

We think this unifier would affect coverage in the following ways:

Sections in the book

Likely coverage strategies

Concept-related layers of coverage

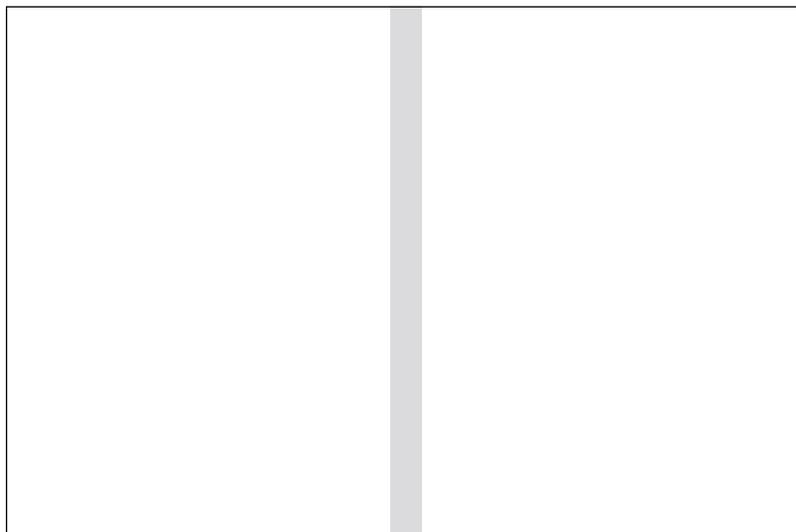
We imagine the following section titles:

- Student Life:
- Academics:
- Sports:
- Clubs & Organizations:
- People:
- Ads & Index:

Our visuals would include:

- Colors (palette):
- Fonts:
- Patterns/Textures:
- Shapes:
- Other:

A sketch of our cover idea:



CONFIRM THE IMPACT OF YOUR THEME/CONCEPT

Once you have worked through these steps, you can test your theme by asking the following questions:

Is it **recognizable**?

- Does it make sense as the framework for the entire book?

Is it **repeatable**?

- Will it still have impact if it's been used on the opening, dividers and closing?

Is it **relevant**?

- Does it reflect the attitudes and opinions of your school and student body?
- Can it be logically linked to each section of the book?

Is it **refreshing**?

- Is there enough of a difference between this idea and the past three or four books?

Is it **realistic**?

- Does it relate to your school and the specific coverage year?

If you answer no to any of these questions, you need to keep working. A cohesive, high-impact theme does all five of the above.