



# THEME Unifying Concept

## THE DEVICE THAT BINDS THE BOOK TOGETHER

### THEME MUSTS

All themes should meet four criteria for application; choose a new idea if your theme is not:

- **UNIQUE TO THE SCHOOL**

There should be an obvious tie between the two. For example, if school morale is low, don't choose a pride theme.

- **UNIQUE TO THE YEAR**

Again, the fit needs to be natural, not forced or contrived.

- **VERBAL**

The catch phrase should be memorable and flexible enough to adapt for mini-themes.

- **VISUAL**

Using type, colors, shapes and patterns that are consistent with your message, create a "theme look."

### WHERE DOES THE THEME GO?

- Cover
- Endsheets
- Title Page
- Opening
- Dividers
- Closing
- Secondary Copy Packages
- Folios/Index Letters

### WHAT GOES ON THE COVER

- Theme Statement
- Book Name
- Year

### WHAT GOES ON THE SPINE?

- Name of School
- City and State
- Volume Number
- Year
- Book Name
- Theme Statement or Logo

### Right or wrong? Good or bad? Contemporary or dated?

These questions accompany discussions of theme versus concept as the unifying device in the yearbook.

Put to rest the idea that one is better than the other. Either of these approaches to unifying a yearbook is effective and correct, as long as it is tailored to a specific school and meets four criteria for application. Obviously, the unifier you choose should fit your school. If you see a great book from a school that has opened with just sophomores and juniors but your school is 83 years old, the same theme probably won't translate to your school. And the concept needs to be specific to the year. Remember the fit needs to flow; if you have to explain and re-explain, you're forcing it.

The verbal development of a unifier is best when an easy-to-remember phrase creates multiple possibilities for sectional development. Visually, your message needs to be consistent and sufficiently high in impact so that your readers can tell when they reach the net spread in the unifying package. Regardless of whether the staff is using a concept or stated theme, these criteria should guide the decision making and planning. A realistic, meaningful unifier can tie each section into a whole and add another dimension to the book.

Many staffs want to know what the difference is between a theme and a concept. Actually, it is easier to explain how they are alike: they both work to unify the book. In recent years, some schools have experimented with unifying verbal concepts. Rather than choosing a catch phrase, the staffs have chosen one central idea to hold the book together. Then, instead of spin-offs for each section, they use other related ideas to tie the traditional sections together. And some schools using concepts go a step further and arrange their books into different sections so the concept will make sense.

Regardless of how the staff chooses to unify the book, both a theme and concept will appear in the same places. For instant recognition the unifying device(s) will first appear on the cover, usually overpowering the title and year since they are used each year. Then it/they may also appear on the endsheets, title page, and each opening spread. The look should be repeated on each division page and on the closing spreads. Readers do not see either the visual or verbal elements as unifiers unless they are repeated on these spreads. It is not excess, but insurance, to have the unifier(s) repeated often enough to tie the book together.

Without force or contriving, the theme should relate to each section. And it is the copy on each divider which should show readers the relevance and should carry the story forward with the facts about this year, events peculiar to this year, incidents which happened only this year and names of involved students and faculty. If the copy can be taken and used by another school or by that school another year, then it is too general to have significant meaning. Examples of vague phrases include, "How different we are", "As we walked our way through the year, we discovered ourselves" and "It was a great year; we had lots of fun."

Additionally, every photograph and caption used in the opening, on the dividers and in the closing should verbally and visually support what the copy says. Photographs should not be used just because they are beautiful, feature an editor's friends, or depict an editor's idea of a mood. All photographs should directly relate to the unifying idea and their captions should establish that relationship. These same pages also need headlines to draw the reader into the copy and to incorporate the typography and other graphic devices used in the unifying concept.



# THEME Unifying Concept (cont'd)

## WHAT GOES ON THE TITLE PAGE?

- Book Name
- Year
- Volume Number
- School Name
- Street Address
- City/State/Zip
- Phone/Fax # with area code
- Student Population
- Staff Population
- OPTIONAL
- Principal
- Each Class Population
- Athletic League

## IDEAS TO AVOID

- Song Titles (“We’ve Only Just Begun”, “The Way We Were”)
- Movie, Magazine, or Television Titles (“Friends”, “Life”)
- Psychological Themes (Who am I?, I am an individual, Where are we heading?)
- Sermons (We MUST all come together, We gotta reach out and touch one another, You must stand for what you believe)
- Old-Fashioned and/or Gimmick themes (Footprints in the sands of time, Clocks and/or Time, Puzzles and Puzzle Pieces, Games, Memories, Circus or Carnival, Mirrors, Reflections)
- Any Copyrighted Material

## The “R” TEST

As one final test for the theme, check to see if your idea can earn the answer “Yes” to these questions.

- **Is it RECOGNIZABLE?**  
The theme should be easy to identify and remember.
- **Is it RELEVANT?**  
Does it fit your school this year?
- **Is it REPEATABLE?**  
Can you make it work for each section of the yearbook?
- **Is it REALISTIC?**  
You don’t want your readers to think you are not credible...
- **Is it REFRESHING?**  
Give them a different book each year.

To capture the reader in the theme or concept, the staff should use detailed copy that reflects the year and its events. The story told needs to be realistic, honest, and catchy in order to recreate memories of the year in students’ minds. While theme or concept copy needs to be special, it still needs to follow some basic journalistic guidelines. Writers might include direct quotes that add color and information, specific names and events which made the year memorable and detailed facts which help show how the year is different from other years and how the school is different from other schools.

To make the theme or concept as effective as possible, the staff needs to consider what photographs to use. The importance of using photographs that support the copy cannot be overemphasized. It establishes visual reinforcement for the verbal message. The relationship of the theme and copy must be obvious, but not forced; the theme should flow from facts. When the staff prepares theme or concept well, the presentation will be polished: the copy will show an ease of writing that reflects thought, preparation and style; the captions will clearly establish the relationship of the photographs to the unifying concept and the headline(s) will visually and verbally draw readers into the copy.

Whether a staff chooses a traditional theme development or a concept approach to unify the book, an essential element is the graphic presentation to the unifier. Staffs strive to have all theme/concept pages as distinctive as possible. The style of the graphic elements in the presentation is always changing, just as the students’ taste in clothing, magazines, movies, and interests is always changing. A study of favorite magazines, commercials, and print ads will help the staff begin to close in on what might be used for the design of unifying pages.

In the past a free style design that was not limited by a specific column structure was popular for unifying designs. Today, with the increased use of the grid in yearbook design and the flexibility it provides, staffs rely less on the page structure for distinction and more on graphic and typographic techniques. Popular possibilities include the use of logos, colors, graphics, artwork, type, photographs and gimmicks.

Regardless of the theme or concept chosen and its verbal and visual presentation, each staff should remember that there should be no conflict in the reader’s mind as to what the book’s unifying idea is. When going from opening to dividers to closing, a consistency the reader can see should be established. This does not necessarily require the use of the exact same design(s), but it does mean the reader should see similarities between these pages—and that the theme/concept pages have a look of their own.

In the end, the real test of the unifying device is simple: is this an effective way to hold the book together that is easily understood by its readers? If the answer is no, the staff needs to begin again, making sure that, in the name of creativity, they do not complicate the presentation so much that it confuses readers.