

Diaries of a 7th Grade Apache:
Stories of (Becoming) the Native Self

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Author's Note:

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Context

This is a narrative writing unit developed for 7th Grade English Language Arts - Writing students at San Carlos Middle School – San Carlos Unified School District (SCMS-SCUSD). It is anchored on the personal diary format scaffolded by the model of the National Book Awarded novel, Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. Four lesson plans are structured in segments according to the narrative writing process (pre-planning, organizing, drafting, revising, publishing). It is front-loaded/prefaced with descriptive writing and dialogue-writing mini lessons, interview, and reporting, ending in plot dioramas and character illustrations and three short personal narratives written in the informal-confessional style of diary entries on growing up “rez”, in the tradition of coming of age genres.

The ELA writing component at SCMS is taught as a separate class from the reading component during the regular school semester (32 weeks) and or 4 weeks, 4 times a day in the summer. From Monday to Friday of a regular school week, five periods of approximately 20-25 students receive an hour's worth of writing lessons/instruction. This unit straddles the last 3 weeks of the 1st quarter and the first week of the 2nd quarter, from September 11-October 6.

Original teacher-authored materials as lesson plan, objectives, strategies, activities, and assessments are created against SCUSD Safety Net Standards based off of the Arizona Education Department (AZED) standard 7.W.4, subitems d and e and 7.W.3, sub-items items a through c, as follows:

7.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

e. Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on the narrated experiences or events.

7.W.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details

structured event sequences.

a. Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.

b. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

c. Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence and signal shifts from one-time frame or setting to another.

Figure 1. Arizona Education Department Standard 7.W.4 and 7.W.3 detail set expectations for narrative writing at the seventh grade.

As a project for the Dine Institute for Navajo nation Educators and Teacher Leadership Shilgozhoo Institute (DINÉ-TLSI), this writing unit is built around the Culturally Responsive Assessment of Indigenous Schooling (CRAIS) Principles (Castagno, et al. 2021), specifically the sections on *Relationality, relationships, and communities* and *Indigenous knowledge systems and knowledge*. Developed in the summer of 2023, this writing unit is enabled by information during the seminar-workshop, *Writing the Personal Essay (the Braided Essay)* led by Dr. Nicole Walker, faculty of the Northern Arizona University (NAU).

Relationality, relationships, and communities

1. Encourages students to understand themselves within broader communities
2. Relationships within and among local/regional Indigenous community are understood and/or reflected
3. Encourages students to build and sustain relationships
4. Relationships within the classroom are strong

Indigenous knowledge systems and language

1. Traditional and/or cultural knowledge is included
2. Norms, values, traditions, interests of local/regional Indigenous community are leveraged for learning opportunities
3. Local/regional context is leveraged for learning opportunities
4. Local Indigenous language(s) is valued
5. Local Indigenous language(s) is integrated
6. Academic language is built, but not at the expense of local Indigenous language(s)

Figure 2. The CRAIS Principles developed by Castagno and Joseph, include rationality, relationships, and communities and Indigenous knowledge systems and language.

The CRAIS principles are at the crux of the TLSI program and the design of this writing unit pursues a culturally relevant teaching approach. In this approach, the focus is on the students' cultural experience. Effective instruction is dependent on the teacher's understanding and appreciation of the students' cultural background. It allows the teacher to support all students in their understanding that "different" is not "wrong". Where there is inclusion, there is support. Both teacher and student feel respected; the latter is encouraged to explore and develop his/her personal and cultural strengths. In the process I, as a Filipino cultural exchange teacher, am free to acknowledge my own cultural difference as a person of color from a culturally and linguistically different background.

Narrating from experience of my own classroom instruction, my students' indigenous identity is an avenue for introducing my own, a nuanced settler folk and Moro-Mindanaon Filipino identity. A good instance is always the matter of my "unpronounceable" name, Gonzalez-Macarambon, which helped me introduce the idea of a diverse Filipino identity and the idea of other "native-ness" from different parts of the world, unimaginable in some of my students' relatively cloistered world view. Once my students entertained the idea of other native identities, it became easy for us to share stories about tradition, find shared values in our dances, food, family, and social life. I found that my students were more likely to share and find renewed pride in their native American identities in a classroom environment where cultures are appreciated. Thus, student competence is enhanced where he/she is supported in learning from materials and ways that are culturally relevant.

Rationale

THE SAN CARLOS APACHE SCHOOL DISTRICT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1965 AND HAS 1,550 STUDENTS. WE HAVE ONE OF THE FEW DISTRICTS IN THE STATE OF ARIZONA THAT HAS A RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE, WHICH IS ESSENTIAL TO THE WAY OF LIFE FOR THE APACHE.

Mission Statement

We exist to educate and empower students to become culturally responsive, global N'nee.



Vision Statement

To be an effective student focused learning community graduating culturally confident citizens.

Click the image to Read About the Logo

Figure 3. The rebranded Braves logo published on the SC Braves website (2021) was designed by SCUSD students with input and approval from community stakeholders.

This unit is designed for the 7th grade writing students of San Carlos Middle School-San Carlos Unified School District (SCMS-SCUSD) where cultural relevance is key to instructional planning and teaching. SCUSD was established in 1965. As a reservation school, it has a long history of underperformance due in large part to the colonial educational system which suffered native culture as its biggest casualty. It is important for the reservation teacher therefore to understand this “underperformance” in the context of not just the socio-economic but also the deeply ingrained traumas from colonial history and resulting emotional inferiorities among his/her students. A culturally compatible writing unit that promotes both cultural and self-awareness is key to effective writing instruction.

In 2020, a massive rebranding project was instigated by the research team led by District Superintendent Dr. Deborah Denison in partnership with the San Carlos Apache community stakeholders, including tribal community agencies, leaders, and elders. Through a systemic reform approach originally targeted at repairing the damage of colonial history where the education system in reservation schools was weaponized against native American culture. The systemic reform approach aimed at “refining and developing processes and procedures ... for ‘Empowering Our N’nee People the Brave Way’” (SCUSD, n.d). An accountability model was established to ensure student success, which includes a trauma sensitive and informed approach, practice, process, and design within the district. In this model, classroom instruction is effective only when students are emotionally connected to culturally relevant material (SCUSD, 2023). A large part of teaching work therefore is designed around content, examples, and stories that resonate with the students’ personal experiences as Apache youth, reservation life, and social issues experienced by Native Americans. It supports the mission of producing culturally

responsive citizens and empowered Nnee, in the spirit of Shilgozhoo, an Apache term to mean a state of joy and emotional stability.



Figure 4. Culturally relevant approach includes genuine enthusiasm and participation in the students' cultural activities. Image on the left is of me at the Heard Museum after collecting my students' artworks at the end of the youth art exhibit. On the right, I am wearing a camp dress (and accessories, not visible in photo) gifted by students for the last day of culture week.

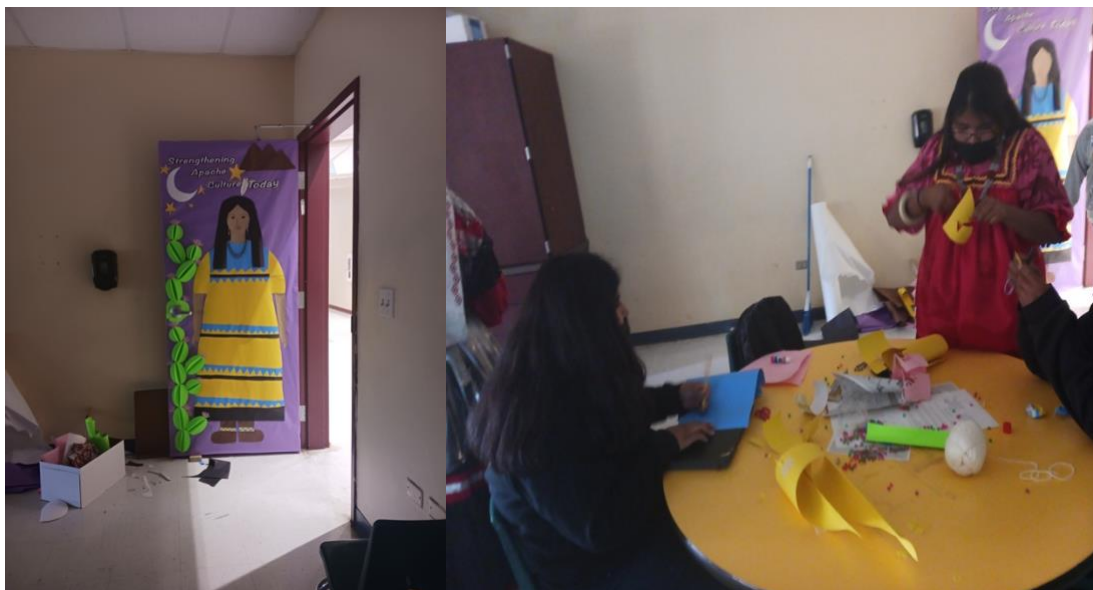
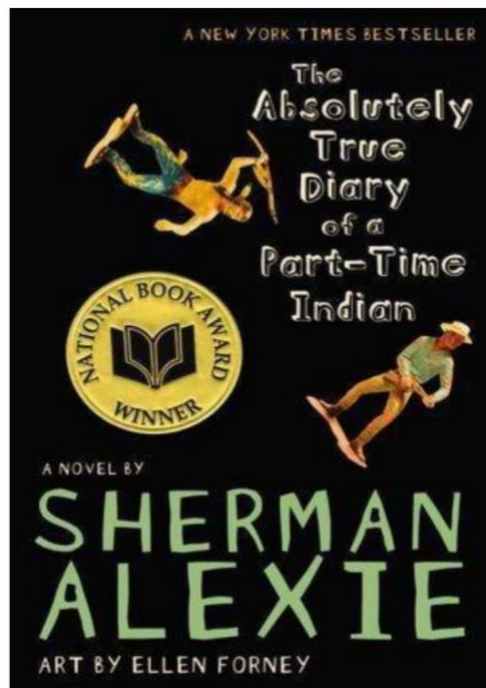


Figure 5. Students decorating the door with images for the theme: "Strengthening Apache Culture Today"

The importance of a culturally compatible writing unit, of cultural awareness in self-awareness, or self-representation cannot be emphasized enough. Self-representation in coming of age stories can be very empowering and the award-winning work by renowned Spokane author, Sherman Alexie provided a model for narrating stories about growing up "Indian" in predominantly white America.

Like its author, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has had its share of controversies. As a banned book, I am well aware of some of its questionable content. However, the book's literary achievements and embedded politically progressive message took precedence over its supposed faults. *True Diary*, for one, spoke directly about the more current and common issues among reservation youth. The narration is peppered with dry humor that does not skirt around topics of poverty, race, colonial history, alcoholism, tradition, and family including the more common coming-of-age discomforts like hormonal sexuality and depression. It is also written in the narrator-character's familiar, therefore, accessible 14-year old urban-rez slang and illustrated in youthful doodles by Ellen Forney. For this and reasons of availability - one other title in the middle school's YA collections is the Scott O'dell classic *Island of the Blue Dolphins* - *True Diary* is the bolder but better choice in this pursuit of a culturally relevant writing unit.

Figure 6. The *Part-Time Indian* pages of models for this



Absolutely True Diary of a by Sherman Alexie provided inspiration and writing narrative writing unit.

Content Unit Objectives and Procedures

1. Students will write descriptive paragraphs about an experience at a local grocery store, i.e. San Carlos Bashas. For lesson 1, I aligned the CRAIS Principle 3. Indigenous Knowledge System ... local regional context is leveraged for learning opportunities.

MAIN LESSON

UNIT 6 LESSON 1: SENSORY DETAILS
CRAIS PRINCIPLE 3. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: Local/regional context is leveraged for learning opportunities.

STANDARD:

7.w.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

LEARNING GOAL:

I can write 2 paragraphs describing an experience at the local Bashas.




Figure 7. A screen capture of the lesson presentation for writing about local spaces.

- a. In a pre-writing classwork activity, students will look for sensory words in an example paragraph about an experience at a megastore.

NAME _____

Chapter 1

Lesson 1 Sensory Details

In a description, a writer's goal is to help readers see, hear, smell, feel, or taste what is being described. Writers use **sensory details**, or details that appeal to readers' senses, in their descriptions.

I went to one of those mega-stores the other day. You know, the kind that has groceries on one side and everything else ever invented on the other. In spite of the fact that neon signs hang from the ceiling about every five feet, I was lost the minute I stepped in. I wandered around so long looking for a yellow wastebasket for my bathroom that I got hungry. Fortunately, a spicy scent led me to the café. After a grilled chicken sandwich and a tall, cold glass of sweet iced tea, I was ready for more wastebasket hunting. A whining, whirring sound told me an employee was approaching on a scooter. As she changed her mind, though, her back-up beeps faded down aisle 37, and there was my wastebasket. Success at last, and it took only three hours!

The sensory words, *whining* and *whirring*, for example, help you hear the scooter. What other sensory details does the paragraph contain? List them here, according to whether the detail helps you see, hear, smell, feel, or taste what is being described. Some details might fit into more than one category.

See: _____

Hear: _____

Smell: _____

Touch: _____

Taste: _____




Figure 8. A screen capture of a page from the Spectrum Writing 7 workbook 2015, p. 16.

- b. To scaffold the students' brainstorming, as they prepare to write their own descriptive paragraphs about their own experience at a local store, I showed them photos of Bashas. I also supplied them with a sensory word bank to help their own first drafts.

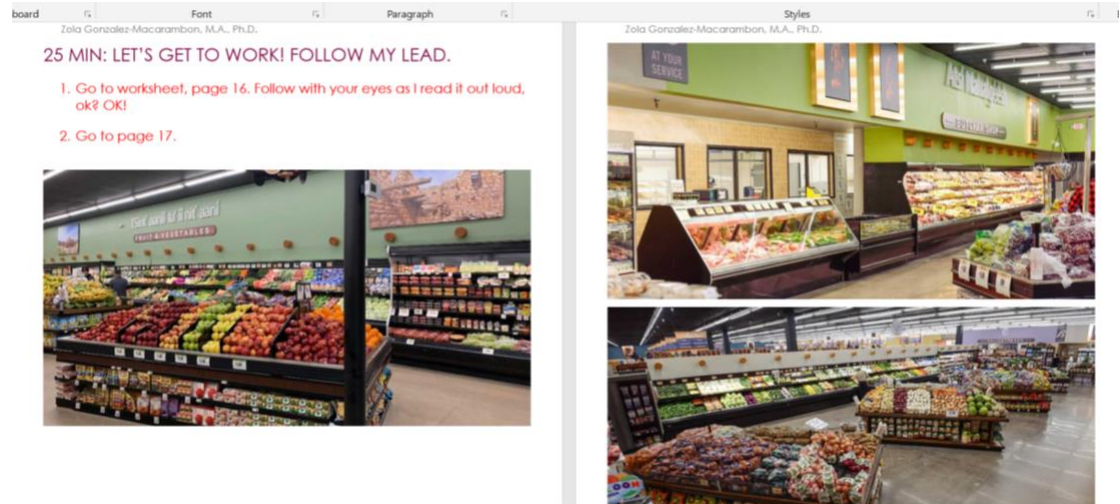


Figure 9. Photos of Bashas to help with visualization.

DO YOU NEED IDEAS ON WHAT SENSORY WORDS TO WRITE? HERE YOU GO...

- **Sight.** bleary. blurred. brilliant. bright. colorful. dazzling. shiny. polished. flashy. gleaming.
- **Sound.** bellow. blare. buzz. cackle. cheer. clamor. clang. buzzing, gargling, humming, roar, hush
- **Touch.** balmy. biting. bristly. bumpy. chilly. coarse. feathery, smooth, hairy, lumpy, slimy
- **Taste.** appetizing. bitter. bland. creamy. delectable. delicious. sweet, salty, bland, sugary
- **Smell.** acrid. aroma. aromatic. fetid. foul-smelling. fragrant.

Figure X. Sensory word bank to scaffold descriptive vocabulary.

- c. To help students think back on a memorable experience at a grocery store, I showed them an excerpt from the chapter "Dance, Dance, Dance" about the main character in *True Diary*, where Arnold Spirit went to an after-prom party with his white friends and girlfriend, with only \$5.00.

An hour later, about twenty of us were sitting in a Denny's in Spokane.

Everybody ordered pancakes.

I ordered pancakes for Penelope and me. I ordered orange juice and coffee and a side

order of toast and hot chocolate and French fries, too, even though I knew I wouldn't be able to pay for any of it.

I figured it was my last meal before my execution, and I was going to have a feast.

Figure 10. Excerpt from Dance, Dance, Dance, True Diary 2007, p. 125.

NAME _____

Lesson 1 Sensory Details

Think of a store in which you have shopped. Was it a huge grocery store? Or was it a small shop full of scented candles? What was it like? Imagine yourself in the store. Can you describe the experience so that a reader feels as if he or she is right there?

First, record the sights, sounds, smells, textures, and flavors (if there were any) you experienced at the store.

Sights: _____

Sounds: _____

Smells: _____

Textures: _____

Flavors: _____

Now, put your words to work. Describe what it is like to be in this store. Appeal to all five of your readers' senses.

Figure 11. Draft organizer page from Spectrum 7 workbook.

- d. Students write down their first draft on the organizer and draft page. They finalize their drafts on their composition books and type it out on google classroom.



Figure 12. Google classroom submission form for the descriptive paragraph/s.

2. Students will write descriptive paragraph/s about a traditional object. In keeping with the CRAIS principles, for lesson 2 (describing objects), I chose a traditional attire typically worn when the female students go through their rite of passage to womanhood. Most of my students have had their sunrise dance or are about to undergo their own. They are familiar with the object (buckskin or camp dress) and the experience.

5. TURN IN YOUR WRITING FOLDERS. GET READY FOR NOTE-TAKING.

MAIN LESSON
 UNIT 6 LESSON 1: SENSORY DETAILS
 CRAIS PRINCIPLE 3. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: Local/regional context is leveraged for learning opportunities.

STANDARD:

7.w.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

LEARNING GOAL:

I can write 2 paragraphs describing a traditional Apache camp dress/buckskin dress.




Figure 13. Screen capture of the lesson presentation about describing objects.

- b. Students write about either a) the camp dress I have hanging on the wall or b) a picture of a buckskin dress from the internet. This other object is more expensive than the traditional camp dress – I opted not to borrow one from the students for safety reasons. Alternatively, because I have 2 Filipino students, I hung a traditional Filipino *baro at saya* (blouse and skirt) next to the camp dress and gave them the option to write only about the Filipino dress or make a comparison and contrast.

with Ms. Zola
 Zola Gonzalez-Macarambon, M.A., Ph.D.



Figure 14. Alternative to the actual camp dress hanging on the board, students are encouraged to write about the buckskin regalia.

- a. Students read an excerpt from *True Diary*, the chapter called “Wake” as model for writing about the traditional attire.

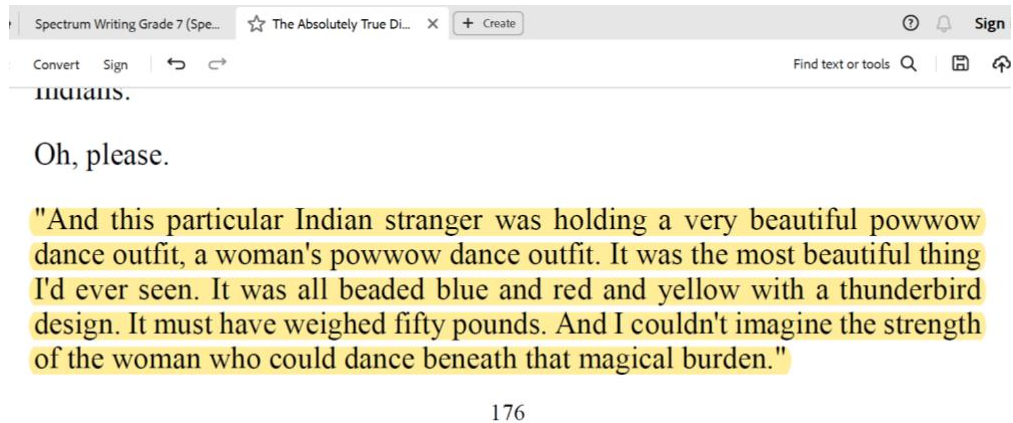


Figure 15. Students model after the description of a buckskin from the *True Diary*.

- b. Students draft their paragraphs using the organizer worksheet from the Spectrum workbook.

Lesson 2 Describing Objects

When a writer describes an object, readers should be able to see, hear, smell, feel, and perhaps taste it. Can you describe something so vividly that your readers feel as if they are right there seeing it or holding it?

Take a close look at a familiar object that is nearby. Perhaps it's a pen, a pencil sharpener, or a classroom poster. Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Write its details here. Use descriptive adjectives.

Color: _____

Shape: _____

Size: _____

Texture: _____

Smell: _____

Other details: _____

Now, write a paragraph in which you describe the object. Again, describe it as if you are not familiar with the object. Remember to appeal to as many of your readers' senses as you can.

Figure 16. Describing objects organizer worksheet from Spectrum 7

- c. Students redraft on their composition books and finalize online through the google classroom submission.



- Figure 17. Students turn in their final paragraph/s through a google form.
3. Students will write descriptive paragraphs about the local San Carlos landscape.
 - a. As homework, students take pictures of the rez, from sunscapes, landscapes, skylines, among other possibilities. They email these photos to themselves as the middle school has a no phone policy.
 - b. In prewriting, students take inspiration from the final chapter of the *True Diary*.

Talking About Turtles

The reservation is beautiful.

I mean it.

Take a look.

There are pine trees everywhere. Thousands of ponderosa pine trees. Millions. I guess maybe you can take pine trees for granted. They're just pine trees. But they're tall and thin and green and brown and big.

Some of the pines are ninety feet tall and more than three hundred years old.

Older than the United States.

Some of them were alive when Abraham Lincoln was president.

Some of them were alive when George Washington was president.

Some of them were alive when Benjamin Franklin was born.

Figure 18. Model description of a scene from the True Diary chapter, Talking about Turtles.

The screenshot shows a Google Form titled "Describing a Scene" with a decorative header of various trees. The form is for the user z.macarambon@scusdaz.org. It includes a privacy notice: "The name, email, and photo associated with your Google account will be recorded when you upload files and submit this form." Below this is a red asterisk indicating a required question. The "Email" field is required, and there is a checkbox to "Record z.macarambon@scusdaz.org as the email to be included with my response". The main question is "1. Upload the picture of a San Carlos scenery here." with a value of "5 points" and an "Add file" button.

Figure 19. The final scenery description will be uploaded to this google form.

4. Students will write a descriptive-narrative essay about a family member. Students will pick one of three of their closest family member and brainstorm this family member's qualities in a web map.

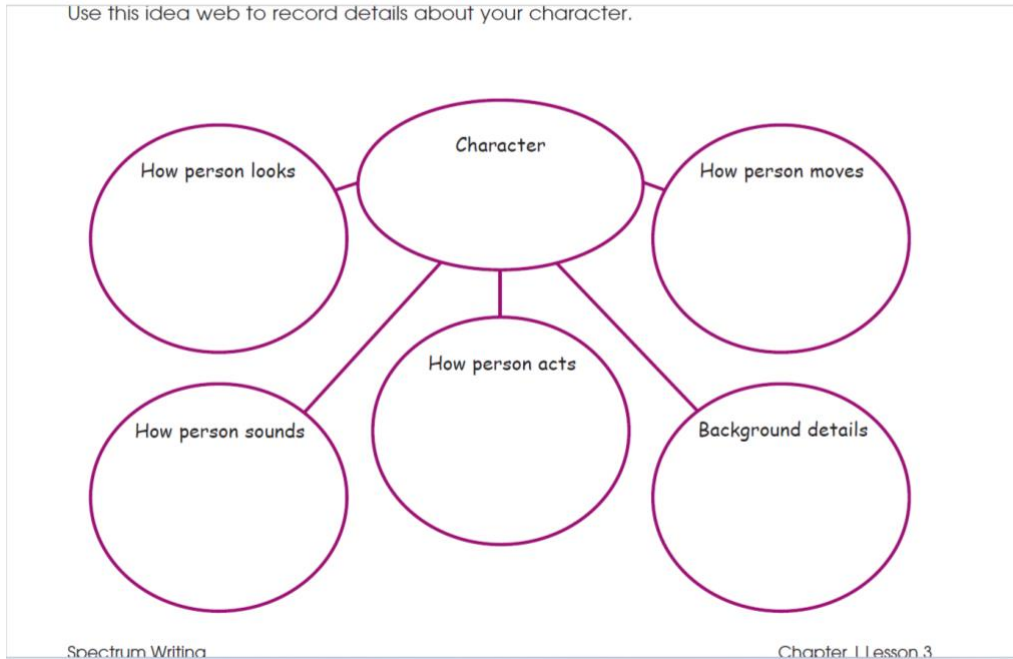


Figure 20. Students pick one family member to write about and plan how they will describe them as characters.

- a. Students will look at examples of character illustrations from *True Diary* and work on one for the character of their choice.

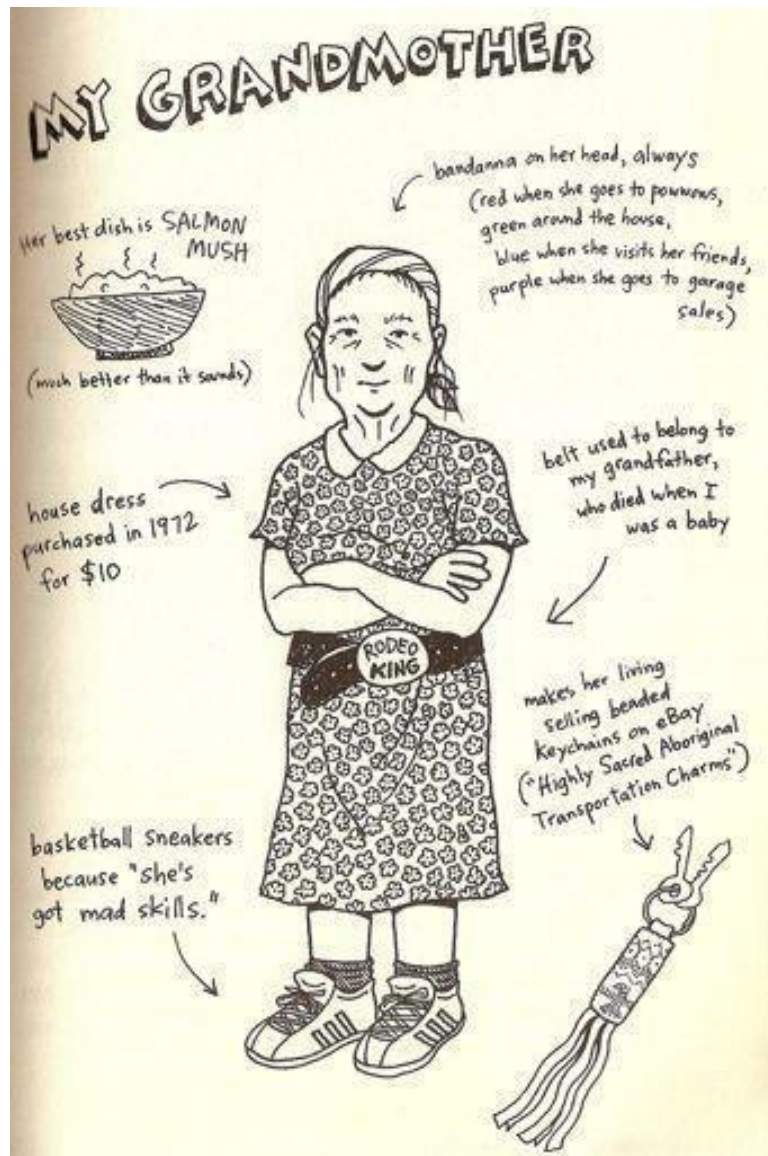


Figure 21. Character illustration from True Diary, "Grandmother Gives me Advice"

WHO **MY PARENTS** WOULD HAVE BEEN

IF SOMEBODY HAD PAID ATTENTION TO THEIR DREAMS:



Figure 22. Character illustration from True Diary, Why Chicken Means so Much to Me

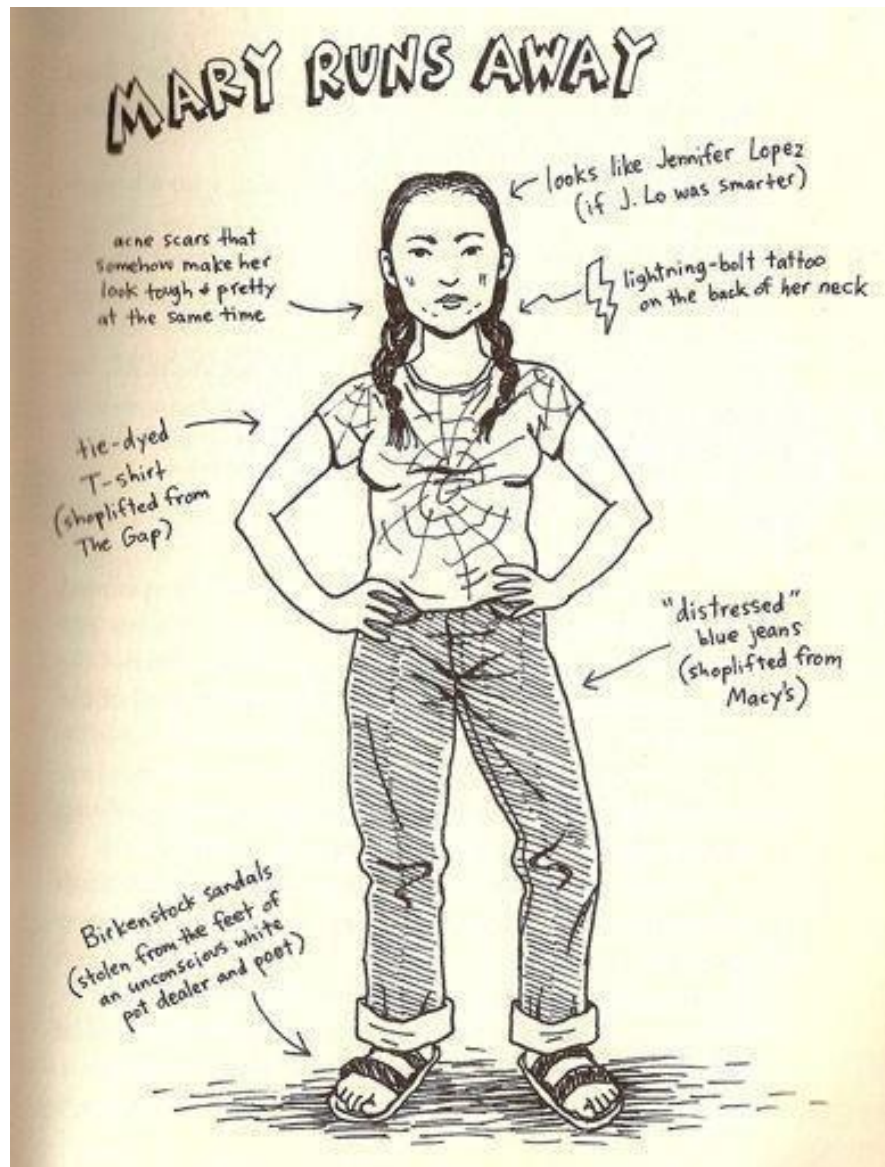


Figure 23. Character illustration from True Diary, Because Geometry is not a Country Somewhere Near France

- b. Students will draft and revise at least four paragraphs in a descriptive narrative essay.
- c. Students will turn in a final version of the character description on google classroom.

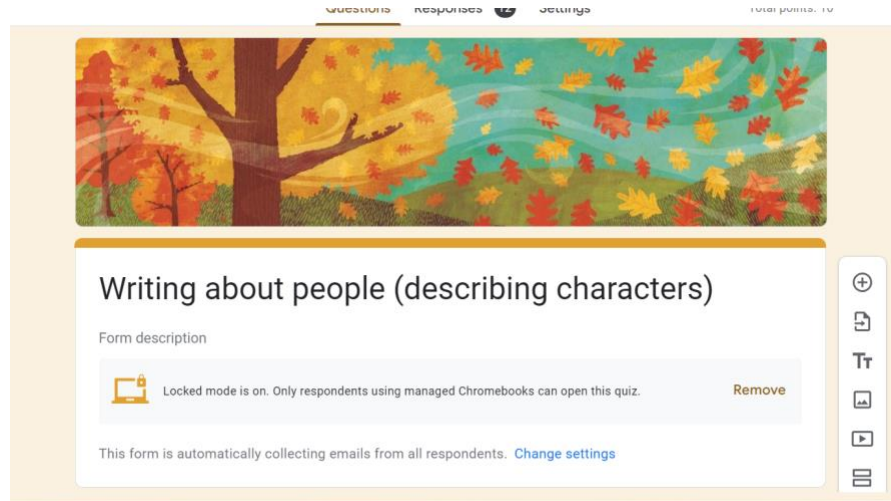


Figure 24. The describing characters turn-in form on google classroom

Teaching Strategies

1. **Scaffolded Writing Projects.** I established a predictable writing routine for all four of the writing projects above. Smaller teacher-modeled tasks begin with (a) Cornell note-taking for new information, new vocabulary (sensory words, most useful transition markers most suited for the writing objective and output. Note-taking is followed by (b) teacher-led analysis of example text, solely for demonstrating how new information applies to the type of writing expected at the end of the unit. After this, (c) teacher-led brainstorming with graphic organizers help students visualize the components expected of the writing task. In this step of the process, students are given verbal stimuli, directions and redirections as I monitor their progress. Some students are able to work completely independently during this time; others require steady prompts, spelling, and vocabulary help. The final step, the drafting stage of the writing process requires minimal overseeing. Students are given the option to use the sentence starters and paragraph frames or not.
2. **Modelling.** Most of my students still require step-by-step instruction as we move from prewriting with graphic organizers to writing the first draft. I begin modeling from top to bottom of the expected writing project, explaining the expected structure and content of the introductory paragraph, how each sentence coheres with the next, down to the middle paragraphs, how each paragraph works to support earlier mentioned thematic idea and subtopics. Through to the end of the writing project, I model the conclusion, explaining every part of the final paragraph and how it ties up with the rest of the essay parts.
3. **Writing Workshop.** At the end of a writing cycle, as in strategies 1 and 2 above, the students would have achieved a trusting relationship with me and among each other as peers. In the writing workshop, I block out the students' names in the byline, then pass around a peer review checklist with a small box for positive comments/constructive criticism. Everybody

gets a turn to say the best things they like about the output. The writer is revealed at the end of the peer review turn.

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