

In Common: Effective Writing for All Students
Collection of All Student Work Samples, K-12

By The Vermont Writing Collaborative, with Student Achievement Partners and CCSSO

Eleventh Grade
Range of Writing - Narrative Writing
Writing Samples

File Name: N11-12R All the Roads to Kansas

Narrative

Grade 11

Range of Writing

All The Roads to Kansas

I was six years old when my mother ran off with the pizza delivery boy. She sent a note in the mail to my grandmother that read, “Katie’s at home. Needs food and clothing. Jane.” Gramma drove the one-thousand-seven-hundred-twenty miles from Kansas to pick me up, pulling into the trailer lot in her blue, wood-paneled station wagon, slamming the car door behind her. I was sitting in a rusty hubcap on the front lawn, my chin cupped in my palm and my heart thundering wildly when she said, “Well, I’m here.”

She wore a pink silk handkerchief around the beehive of her blue-tinted hair, a paisley mu-mu and orange scuffs on her feet. Red, plastic-rimmed glasses hung from the chain around her neck and a cigarette dangled from the corner of her pink-painted mouth. She was terrifying.

She was perfect.

She crossed the front lawn without saying a word, opening the door to the trailer as she looked back, once, for me to comply. I followed her, remaining stubbornly, apprehensively, at the front door. She bustled around the house, bundling up all my clothes and tying them with a piece of twine she found heaped in the back of her Buick. Before she decided it was time to leave, she trussed me up in my snow gear, explaining tersely, “It’s cold in Kansas this time of year.”

I had been sitting inside the trailer, alone, for three days. Leaving for Kansas was the most spectacular adventure I could imagine, so wondrous I could barely believe it was real. She hauled me into the Buick, grunting at the dead weight of my tense body, and we sat on the leather bench seat of her car as

Engages and orients the reader by setting out a situation and its significance, establishing a point of view, and introducing a character:
The writer succinctly sets the context and focus (the mother running off, the child waiting for the grandmother) for the story to follow. The narrative is told from the perspective of a third person

Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the character of the grandmother from the child's perspective

Uses a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome—leaving home behind and going to Kansas

she let it idle in the lot. She was flicking cigarette ashes out the open window when I mustered up the nerve to pinch her, just to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

"What--?" she narrowed her gaze at me, dragging on the cigarette so the tip gleamed in a bright orange "O" between her lips.

"You're real," I whispered in wonder.

"As much as you are," she huffed, tossing the cigarette from the car and cranking up the window. "Just don't make a habit of pinching people to test out that theory, 'kay, Sugar?" She rammed the car into reverse and sped away from the lot. The pieces of my childhood were fading as fast as the scenery, and yet I was filled with a sense of bone-deep elation. For the first time in three days, I smiled.

I saw Gramma cut a look at me out of the corner of her eye, and nod. She glanced back at the road when she pulled the slip of paper from her pocket, and said, "It's all you've got of your momma, so I figured you'd want to keep it."

I was six, and I couldn't read the words my mother had hastily scrawled on a grocery receipt, but I kept that piece of paper fisted in my hand all along the roads to Kansas. "Gramma," I whispered after a few hours, barely awake and suddenly terrified, "are you ever gonna bring me home?"

I could see her eyes in the passing lights of oncoming cars, watching them fill up with giant, watery tears, saw them go soft and achy. "Oh, Katydid," she murmured gently, reaching out in the darkness to clutch the fist that held my mother's letter. "We're getting there."

Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, and characters

Creates a smooth progression of events

Provides a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is resolved over the course of the narrative: the grandmother recognizing the sadness and importance of this moment for the child, whose old home and mother are now gone

In this narrative, the writer tells the story of a young child who has just been abandoned by her mother, 677 and whose grandmother has come from far away to claim her. The narrative is told from a third person point of view, the young child, but the grandmother is the most significant character in the story.

The writer uses some dialogue and descriptive detail, which capture the hardscrabble existence of the child (“*sitting in a rusty hubcap on the front lawn*”) and the commanding presence of the grandmother (“*She was terrifying. She was perfect.*”).

To develop the story, the writer uses a clear sequence of events beginning with the grandmother coming to pick up the narrator, to create a cohesive whole by the end of the narrative.

Beginning with the first sentence (“*I was six years old when my mother ran off with the pizza delivery boy*”), the writer builds carefully toward the outcome that this child will not see her mother or her home again, and that the grandmother is in fact rescuing her.

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File Name: N11-12R Playing Me

Narrative

Grade 11

Range of Writing

Playing Me

In the real world, I am insecure. I walk down the halls of my high school trying to project an image of confidence and self-respect. Despite my concentrated attempts, I feel neither of these. Like everyone else, I want to be liked, admired, and respected, the kind of person that everyone thinks well of. This desire to be accepted taints my personality, causing an aspect of me to emerge that is not anything close to the reality of my character. Sometimes I can talk to a person and laugh with that person for a long time, but that person still has no idea of who I am. They haven't even scratched the surface, but it's not their fault. I can't expect anyone to become acquainted with me when insecurity urges me to put on the face that I know they want to see. In my life of lies, I have one truth. It is something I can never lie about how much I love, no matter whom I talk to. I can never ignore the fact that it and it alone pulls me out and makes me real. When I am on stage I may be playing a character that isn't myself, but I, for once, am living the truth.

My head is bent down, concentrating on the slippery, uncooperative strings of the hoop tied around my waist. I suck my stomach in, trying to avoid the inevitable moment when the safety pin that holds the thin fabric together will pop open and stab my belly button. The hoop flares outward from my waist, just brushing the ground at my feet. It is a pale gray, with irregular white splotches scattered throughout. The tissue paper thin fabric holds its hoop shape with the aid of three wicker circles glued to the inside. My corset sucks my torso in and pushes it up in all the right places, making me feel feminine in the old-fashioned way. My bare shoulders display a faint bathing suit line, partially covered by the wavy tumble of pale hair across my face. My arms are bent at the elbow, my hands a faint blur as I struggle with my hoop skirt. The outline of my body stands out clearly from the dark of the risers stacked behind

Engages and orients the reader by establishing context and focus for narrative to follow—the tension between the way the writer feels and the way she presents herself. The reflection / narrative will be from the point of view of the writer.

Establishes the significance of the observation.

Uses precise words, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the costume that means so much to the writer.

me. A gaudy assortment of costume pieces are sprinkled across the top of the risers, awaiting attention or use. My beat-up sneakers are visible a few feet away, unwelcome reminders of the tenth grader in jeans and a sweatshirt who had first reached for the hoop skirt and corset ten minutes ago. The rest of my costume is draped carefully behind me, almost slipping to a puddle of silk on the carpet. In a moment, I will emerge from behind the curtain and, arms in the air, wiggle the cool, smooth dress over my head, completing the physical transformation to my character. But for the moment, I am engaged in the difficult task of securing my hoop, the most integral aspect of my costume.

Uses precise words, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the costume that means so much to the writer.

Uses a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome—the writer’s transformation on stage

I loved the costume more than anything. In my opinion, it was the best thing to ever come out of the U-32 costume closet. I loved the feeling of the swishy layers of skirts swaying back and forth as I stalked across the auditorium, and the smooth touch of the satiny cloth against my back and arms. I felt as though I had become the six-year old version of me, playing dress-up in my best friend’s attic. I used to find the most glamorous, beautiful outfits I could, and then prance downstairs and find some adoring grown-up to show off for. My friends and I would have costume parades, and if we were at my house, I’d beg my mother to take pictures of us posing together. As a little six-year-old, I would have killed for this costume, and let’s just say that ten years later, nothing had changed.

Uses narrative technique to move from one time setting to another and back again

Uses description and reflection to develop experiences and character

The hour before each show is filled with a high concentration of pre-show adrenaline, the imminence of the performance causing a delicious tension that hangs in the air. The cast and the crew rush madly around, trying to accomplish a thousand things that all seem to be, at the last minute, the deciding factor in the quality of the play. Costumes are pinned or sewed, makeup is slathered on by the spongefull, and props are set in their places or searched for. Everything combined created chaos, but in the beautiful way you only appreciated after it’s over. As we all try to do warm-ups in our crazy and uncooperative costumes, I stare around the auditorium, visualizing the people that will soon fill it’s seats. My gaze flickers up to the stage, the beautiful stage, and I picture our story unfolding across it’s face. I smile as I bend first to the right and

Builds a tone of keen tension / anticipation towards the outcome of the story—the actual performance on stage.

the then to the left, wishing that the pure excitement and nervous anticipation I was experiencing could be bottled and saved for later enjoyment.

My performance energy carries me to my spot backstage where I attentively list to the audience commotion as I squeeze the clammy hands of my fellow cast members. Then the moment comes when the lights dim and the audience falls into a unanimous hush, just in time for the best sound of all, the opening of the curtain. The stage lights up and the reality of the audience world gives way to focus on the set and the actors that enter our new world of the play.

I stand perfectly still backstage, my eyes tightly closed, listening attentively for Tamsen's line to bring me on. I am silently mouthing the words along with her, but I jump a little when I hear it anyway. "And now for something a tad delightful, a bit decadent, and a little devilish...the Duchess of Dressing Up!" The Duchess of Dressing Up raises her chin, ignoring the momentary was of butterflies and the goosebumps that cover her arms as she moves onto the stage. I eagerly soak up the bright lights and the knowledge that everyone is watching me. I revel in this awareness, allowing the audience presence to enhance my acting. I shut of all access to my ***ness and become someone else. My alter ego. My other half. My stage self. Each moment I spend on stage pulls more out of my character, forcing me to focus and perform as hard as I can. I am in heaven.

Being on stage infuses me with a special feeling that I have grown o love fiercely over the years. It lends me the confidence and the self-respect that I constantly seek whenever I'm offstage, out of the light. I feel like a fish in water; I am in my element. If I am on stage, I am happy, whether I'm front and center or somewhere out in the distant downstage right. When I say a line, people listen to me, and I can do whatever I want because it's not me. It's someone else. With that feeling of becoming another person, I can get away with anything. Only then am I truly confident.

As I stand behind the curtain, my fingers fumbling with my skirt and my hair cascading over my face, I am not on stage, but I am still happy. I am myself,

Continues to build a tone of keen tension / anticipation toward the outcome of the story—the actual performance on stage. Uses sensory language, telling details, and pacing to slow down the action and focus reader attention on the bia moment that is comina

Provides a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative: In the long reflection / conclusion, the writer begins to **reflect on** the meaning of the onstage

caught in a moment of unawareness, caught in a moment of pure existence and not of performance.

In this piece of blended writing from a language arts class, the student was asked to write a reflective essay on an aspect of her life that was significant to her. This reflective essay is not a story, but it does use elements of story and narrative techniques. The writer chooses to write about the tension she experiences between herself as an actor offstage, and who she becomes onstage.

In the reflection, the writer uses a chronological structure in which the event sequences unfold naturally and logically. The writer uses precise words and phrases and sensory details to tell the story of what she experiences as she prepares to go onstage. She controls the pacing carefully, which helps to build toward the final outcome of the essay—going onto the stage.

The reflection builds to a conclusion, where the writer reflects on the sense of being “caught in a moment of pure existence”, which is clearly more significant to her than performance.

Narrative**Grade 11****Range of Writing****Playing Me**

In the real world, I am insecure. I walk down the halls of my high school trying to project an image of confidence and self-respect. Despite my concentrated attempts, I feel neither of these. Like everyone else, I want to be liked, admired, and respected, the kind of person that everyone thinks well of. This desire to be accepted taints my personality, causing an aspect of me to emerge that is not anything close to the reality of my character. Sometimes I can talk to a person and laugh with that person for a long time, but that person still has no idea of who I am. They haven't even scratched the surface, but it's not their fault. I can't expect anyone to become acquainted with me when insecurity urges me to put on the face that I know they want to see. In my life of lies, I have one truth. It is something I can never lie about how much I love, no matter whom I talk to. I can never ignore the fact that it and it alone pulls me out and makes me real. When I am on stage I may be playing a character that isn't myself, but I, for once, am living the truth.

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