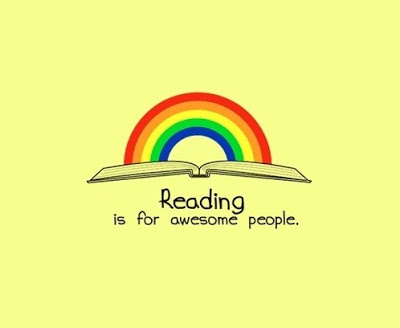
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**Fabrizio**

**Honors English 9**

**Nonfiction Reading Unit**

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**Nonfiction Vocabulary**

You are responsible for the following words and will be quizzed throughout the unit. It will be helpful to become familiar with synonyms and antonyms and practice using the words in context.

**Security:** irreconcilables, indelible, ignominy

**Life on the Mississippi:** reperusal, picturesque, ineffectual, ostentatious, pompous, turbulent, wholesome, prodigious

**Black Boy**: intuitive, conviction, naïve, strive, articulate, ultimate

**Only Daughter:** anthology, retrospect, embroider, nostalgia, fulfill, philandering

**How to Name a Dog**: defamation, incautiously, deceptive, ingenuity, spinets, disparaging, invariable, imbecile, appellations, cynical, cryptic, degenerated, countenance, perplexing, nomenclature

Directions: Fill out the “K” and “W” sections of the chart about what you know and what you want to know about nonfiction. We’ll go back to what you learned later.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| What I **K**now | What I **W**ant to Know | What I **L**earned |
|  |  |  |

**Security**

E.B. White

It was a fine clear day for the Fair this year, and I went up early to see how the Ferris wheel was doing and to take a ride. It pays to check up on Ferris wheels these days: by noting the volume of business one can get some idea which side is ahead in the world – whether the airborne freemen outnumber the earthbound slaves. It was encouraging to discover that there were still quite a few people at the Fair who preferred a feeling of high, breezy insecurity to one of solid support. My friend Healy surprised me by declining to go aloft; he is unusually cautious man, however – even his hat is insured.

I like to watch the faces of people who are trying to get up their nerve to take to the air. You see them at the ticket booths in amusement parks, in the waiting room at the airport. Within them two irreconcilables are at war – the desire for safety, the yearning for a dizzy release. My *Britannica* tells nothing about Mr. G. W. Ferris, but he belongs with the immortals. From the top of the wheel, seated beside a small boy, windswept and fancy free, I looked down on the Fair and for a moment was alive. Below us the old harness drivers pushed their trotters round the dirt track, old men with their legs still sticking out stiffly round the rumps of horses. And from the cluster of loud speakers atop the judges stand came the “Indian Love Call,” bathing heaven and earth in jumbo tenderness.

This silvery wheel, revolving slowly in the cause of freedom, was only just holding its own, I soon discovered; for farther along in the midway, in a sideshow tent, a tattoo artist was doing a land-office business, not with anchors, flags, and pretty mermaids, bit with Social Security Numbers, neatly pricked on your forearm with the electric needle. He had plenty of customers, mild-mannered pale men, asking glumly for the sort of indelible ignominy that was once reserved for prisoners and beef cattle. Drab times these, when the bravado and the exhibitionism are gone from tattooing and it becomes simply a branding operation. I hope the art that produced the bird’s eye view of Sydney will not be forever lost in the routine business of putting serial numbers on people who are worried about growing old.

The sight would have depressed me had I not soon won a cane by knocking over tree cats with three balls. There is no moment when a man so surely has the world by the tail as when he strolls down the midway swinging a prize cane.

1. What was the purpose of this essay? How do you know?
2. What is the tone of this essay? How do you know?

3) What is your impression of the author? What kind of person is E. B. White?

4) Why is this essay titled “Security”? What does the title have to do with the main idea?

**Life on the Mississippi**

Mark Twain

*Before turning to a career as a writer, Samuel Langhorne Clemens worked as a Mississippi river pilot. In 1863 he chose the pen name Mark Twain – adopting the leadsman’s call on Mississippi riverboats. “By the mark, twain,” indicated a depth of two fathoms, or twelve feet, a safe depth for riverboats. In this excerpt, Twain draws and analogy – an extended comparison – between reading a book and reading a river. What does the “language” of the river consist of? What does Twain feel he sacrifices for mastery of this language?*

The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book – a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day. Throughout the long twelve hundred miles there was never a page that was void of interest, never one that you could leave unread without loss, never one that you would want to skip, thinking you could find higher enjoyment in some other thing. There never was so wonderful a book written by man; never one whose interest was so absorbing, so unflagging, so sparklingly renewed with every reperusal. The passenger who could not read it was charmed with a peculiar sort of faint dimple on its surface (on the rare occasions when he did not overlook it altogether); but to the pilot that was an *italicized* passage; indeed, it was more than that, it was a legend of the largest capitals, with a string of shouting exclamation points at the end of it; for it meant that a wreck or a rock was buried there that could tear the life out of the strongest vessel that ever floated. It is the faintest and simplest expression the water ever makes, and the most hideous to a pilot’s eye. In truth, the passenger who could not read this book saw nothing but all manner of pretty pictures in it, painted by the sun and shaded by the clouds, whereas to the trained eye these were not pictures at all, but the grimmest and most dead-earnest of reading matter.

Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had make a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river! I still keep in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous, in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall a clean-stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough that glowed like a flame in the unobstructed splendor that was flowing from the sun. There were graceful curves, reflected images, woody heights, soft distances: and over the whole scene, far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it, every passing moment, with new marvels of coloring.

I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me, and I had never seen anything like this at home. But as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river’s face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them. Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture, and should have commented upon it, inwardly, after this fashion: The sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it; that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody’s steamboat one of these nights, if it keeps on stretching out like that; those tumbling “boils” show a dissolving bar and a changing channel there; the lines and circles in the slick water over yonder are a warning that the troublesome place is shoaling up dangerously; that silver streak in the shadow of the forest is the “break” from a new snag, and he has located himself in the very best place he could have found to fish for steamboats; that tall dead tree, with a single living branch, is not going to last long, and then how is a body ever going to get through this blind place at night without the friendly old landmark?

No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty’s cheek mean to a doctor but a “break” that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn’t he simply view her professionally, and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn’t he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?

1. What does Twain mean by the “language” of the river? What specific examples does he give of “reading” the river?
2. What similarity does Twain see between his own experience and that of a doctor?
3. Compare the passage in which Twain describes the wonderful sunset on the river with the passage in which he views the sunset scene from the pilot’s viewpoint. What differences are there in the tone of the two passages? In your answer consider the connotation (what you think of) of the words Twain uses.
4. Give an example from your own life of when increased experience changed your point of view on a subject.

**How to Name a Dog**

James Thurber

*Thurber is a master of the informal essay. One of his methods as an essayist and satirist is to focus on a subject or area of experience, and to range freely, introducing ideas and experiences not always closely related to the subject he began with. This is the method of the conversationalist. Thurber shares with the reader his amusement over human foibles – the comic oddities of character rather than its faults. As you read, note that Thurber reveals as much about himself as he does about his subject.*

Every few months somebody writes me and asks if I will give him a name for his dog. Several of these correspondents in the past year have wanted to know if I would mind the use of my own name for their spaniels. Spaniel owners seem to have the notion that a person could sue for invasion of privacy or defamation of character if his name were applied to a cocker without written permission, and one gentleman even insisted that we conduct our correspondence in the matter through a notary public. I have a way of letting communication of this sort fall behind my roll-top desk, but it has recently occurred to me that this is an act of evasion, if not, indeed, of plain cowardice. I have therefore decided to come straight out with the simple truth that it is as hard for me to think up a name for a dog as it is for anybody else. The idea that I am an expert in the business if probably the outcome of a piece I wrote several years ago, incautiously revealing the fact that I have owned forty or more dogs in my life. This is true, but it is also deceptive. All but five or six of my dogs were disposed of when they were puppies, and I had not gone to the trouble of giving to these impermanent residents of my house any names at all except Shut Up! and Cut That Out! and Let Go!

Names of dogs end up in 176th place in the list of things that amaze and fascinate me. Canine cognomens should be designed to impinge on the ears of dogs and not to amuse neighbors, tradespeople, and casual visitors. I remember a few dogs from the past with a faint but lingering pleasure: a farm hound named Rain, a roving Airedale named Marco Polo, a female bull terrier known as Brody because she liked to hump from moving motor cars and second-story windows, and a Peke called Darien; but that’s all.

Well, there is Poker, alias *Fantome Noir*, a miniature black poodle I have come to know since I wrote the preceding paragraphs. Poker, familiarly known as Pokey, belongs to Mr. and Mrs. J. G. Gude, of White Plains, and when they registered him with the American Kennel Club they decided he needed a more dignified name. It wasn’t easy to explain this to their youngest child, David, and his parents never did quite clear it up for him. When he was only eight, David thought the problem over for a long while and then asked his father solemnly, “If he belongs to that club, why doesn’t he ever go there?” Since I wrote this piece originally, I have also heard about a sheepdog named Jupiter, which used to belong to Jimmy Cannon, journalist, critic, and man about dog shows. He reported in a recent column of his that Jupiter used to ear geraniums. I have heard of other dogs that ate flowers, but I refuse to be astonished by this until I learn of one that’s downed a nasturtium.

The only animals whose naming demands concentration, hard work, and ingenuity are the seeing-eye dogs. They have to be given unusual names because passers-by like to call to seeing-eyers – “Here, Sport” or “Yuh, Rags” or “Don’t take any wooden nickels, Rin Tin Tin.” A blind man’s dog with an ordinary name would continually be distracted from its work. A tyro at naming these dogs might make the mistake of picking Durocher or Teeftallow. The former is too much like Rover and the latter could easily sound like “Here, fellow” to a dog. Ten years ago I met a young man in his twenties who had been mysteriously blind for nearly five years and had been led about by a seeing-eye German shepherd during all of that time, which included several years of study at Yale. Then suddenly one night the dog’s owner began to get his vision back, and within a few weeks was able to read the fine print of a telephone book. The effect on his dog was almost disastrous, and it went into a kind of nervous crackup, since these animals are trained to the knowledge, or belief, that their owners are permanently blind. After the owner regained his vision he kept his dog, of course, not only because they had become attached to teach other but because the average seeing-eye dog cannot be transferred from one person to another.

Speaking of puppies, as I was a while back, I feel that I should warn inexperienced dog-owners who have discovered to their surprise and dismay a dozen puppies in a hall closet or under the floor of the barn, not to give them away. Sell them or keep them, but don’t give them away. Sixty percent of persons who are given a dog for nothing bring him back sooner or later and plump him into the reluctant and unprepared lap of his former owner. The people say that they are going to Florida and can’t take the dog, or that he doesn’t want to go or they point out that he ears first editions or lace curtains or spinets, or that he doesn’t see eye to eye with them in the matter of housebreaking, or that he makes disparaging remarks under his breath about their friends. Anyway, they bring him back and you are stick with him – and maybe six others. But if you charge ten or even five dollars for pups, the new owners don’t dare return them. They are afraid to ask for their money back because they believe you might think they are hard up and need the five or ten dollars. Furthermore, when a mischievous puppy is returned to its former owner it invariably behaves beautifully and the person who brought it back is likely to be regarded as an imbecile or a dog-hater or both.

Names of dogs, to get back to our subject, have a range almost as wide as that of the violin. They run from such plain and simple names as Spot, Sport, Rex, Brownie to fancy appellations such as Prince Rudolph Hertenberg Gratzheim of Darndorf-Putzelhorst, and Darling Mist o’Love III of Heather-Light-Holyrood – names originated by adults, all of whom in every other way, I am told, have made a normal adjustment to life. In addition to the plain and fancy categories, there are the Cynical and the Coy. Cynical names are given by people who do not like dogs too much. The most popular cynical names during the war were Mussolini, Tojo, and Adolf. I never have been able to get very far in my exploration of the minds of people who call their dogs Mussolini, Togo, and Adolf, and I suspect the reason is that I am unable to associate with them long enough to examine what does on in their heads. I nod, and I tell them the time of day, if they ask, and that is all. I never vote for them or ask them to have a drink. The great Coy category is perhaps the largest. The Coy people call their pets Bubbles and Boggles and Sparkles and Twinkles and Doodles and Puffy and Lovums and Sweetums and Itsy-Bitsy and Betsy-Bye-Bye and Sugarkins. I pass these dog-owners at a dogtrot, wearing a horrible fixed grin.

There is a special subdivision of the Coys that is not quite so awful, but awful enough. These people, whom we will call the Wits, own two dogs, which they name Pitter and Patter, Willy and Nilly, Helter and Skelter, Namby and Pamby, Hugger and Mugger, and even Wishy and Washy, Ups and Daisy, Fitz and Startz, Fetch and Carrie, the Pro and Connie. Then there is the Cryptic category. These people select names for some private reason or for no reason at all – except perhaps to arouse a visitor’s curiosity, so that he will explain, “Why in the world do you call your dog *that*?” The Cryptic name their dogs October, Bennett’s Aunt, Three Fifteen, Doc Knows, Tuesday, Home Fried, Opus 38, Ask Leslie, and Thanks for the Home Run, Emil. I make it a point simply to pat these unfortunate dogs on the head, ask no questions of their owners, and go about my business.

This article has degenerated into a piece that properly should be entitled “How Not to Name a Dog.” I was afraid it would. It seems only fair to make up for this by confessing a few of the names I have given my own dogs, with the considerable help, if not, indeed, the insistence, of their mistress. Most of my dogs have been females, and they have answered, with apparent gladness, to such names as Jennie, Tessa, Julie, and Sophie. I have never owned a dog named Pamela, Jennifer, Clarissa, Jacqueline, Guinevere, or Shelmerdene.

About fifteen years ago, when I was looking for a house to buy in Connecticut, I knocked on the front door of an attractive home whose owner, my real-estate agent had told me, wanted to sell it and go back to Iowa to live. The lady agent who escorted me around had informed me that the owner of this place was a man named Strong, but a few minutes after arriving at the house, I was having a drink in the living room with Phil Stong, for it was he. We went out into the yard after a while and I saw Mr. Stong’s spaniel. I called to the dog and snapped by fingers, but he seemed curiously embarrassed, like his master. “What’s his name?” I asked the latter. He was cornered and there was no way out of it. “Thurber,” he said, in a small frightened voice. Thurber and I shook hands, and he didn’t seem to me any more depressed than any other spaniel I have met. He had, however, the expression of a bachelor on his way to a party he has tried in vain to get out of, and I think it must have been this cast of countenance that had reminded Mr. Stong of the dog I draw. The dog I draw is, to be sure, much larger than a spaniel and not so shaggy, but I confess, though I am not a spaniel man, that there are certain basic resemblances between my dog and all other dogs with long ears and troubled eyes.

Perhaps I should suggest at least one name for a dog, if only to justify the title of this piece. All right, then, what’s the matter with Stong? It’s a good name for a dog, short, firm, and effective. I recommend it to all those who have written to me for suggestions and to all those who may be at this very moment turning over in their minds the idea of asking my advice in this difficult and perplexing field of nomenclature.

Since I first set down these not too invaluable rules for naming dogs, I have heard of at least a dozen basset hounds named Thurber, a Newfoundland called Little Bears Thurber and a bloodhound named Tiffany’s Thurber. This is all right with me, so long as the owners of Thurbers do not bring them to call on me at my house in Connecticut without making arrangements in advance. Christabel, my old and imperious poodle, does not like unannounced dogs visitors, and tried to get them out of the house as fast as she can. Two years ago a Hartford dog got lost in my neighborhood and finally showed up at my house. He hadn’t had much, if anything, to eat for several days, and we fed him twice within three hours, to the high dismay and indignation of Christabel, who only gets one big meal a day. The wanderer was returned to its owner, through a story in the Hartford *Courant*, and quiet descended on my home until a handsome young male collie showed up one night. We had quite a time getting him out of the house. Christabel kept telling him how wonderful it was outdoors, and trotting to the door, but the collie wasn’t interested. I tried to pick him up, but I am too old to pick up a full-grown collie. In the end Christabel solved the problem herself by leading him outside on the promise of letting him chew one of the bones she had buried. He still keeps coming back to visit us from time to time, but Christabel has hidden her bones in new places. She will romp with the young visitor for about twenty seconds, then show her teeth and send him home. I don’t do anything about the situation. After all, my home has been in charge of Christabel for a great many years now, and I never interfere with a woman’s ruling a household.

1. What impressions do you get of Thurber from his comments in the opening paragraphs?
2. Is Thurber tolerant or intolerant of people’s quirks and foibles? Explain your answer using examples from the text.
3. How would you characterize Poker’s owners? Why?
4. Thurber digresses from his point several times. Choose one of these and explain how he makes a return to the subject.
5. What do the names Thurber chose for his own dogs tell you about him? Would you consider him a genuine dog-lover?

**Only Daughter**

Sandra Cisneros

Once several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor's note for an anthology I was part of, I wrote: "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. That explains everything."

Well, I've thought about that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader's sake I should have written: "I am the only daughter in a Mexican family of six sons." Or even: "I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother." Or: "I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine." All of these had everything to do with who I am today.   
  
I was/am the only daughter and only a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a girl in public. But that aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer - it allowed me time to think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself.   
  
Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed. But when I was in fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, "Que bueno, mi'ja, that's good." That meant a lot to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls - for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.   
  
In retrospect, I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice profession eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a, "What's that you're writing?"   
  
But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as "My only daughter, the writer." Not as "This is my only daughter. She teaches." Es maestra - teacher. Not even profesora.   
  
In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words, even though my father's only reading includes the brown-ink Esto sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody ?Alarma! magazines that feature yet another sighting of La Virgen de Guadalupe on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering husband by bashing his skull in with a molcajete (a kitchen mortar made of volcanic rock). Or the fotonovelas, the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the characters' mouths in bubbles.   
  
My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is disinterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for, and privately trying to woo.   
  
When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered periodic bouts of nostalgia. Then we'd have to let go our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches, and head south. To Mexico City.   
  
We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school. Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: "I have seven sons."   
  
He meant siete hijos, seven children, but he translated it as "sons". "I have seven sons." To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-andeggs breakfasts. "I have seven sons." As if he deserved a medal from the state.   
  
My papa. He didn't mean anything by that mistranslation, I'm sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper, "Not seven sons. Six! and one daughter."   
  
When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father's dream that we study hard and use this - our heads, instead of this - our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. "Use this," my father said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.   
  
Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor.   
  
Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.   
  
At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always; hot tamales and sweet tamales hissing in my mother's pressure cooker, and everybody - my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts, cousins - talking too loud and at the same time, like in a Fellini film, because that's just how we are.   
  
I went upstairs to my father's room. One of my stories had just been translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano writing, and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally. And that's how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante movie on Galavision and eating rice pudding.   
  
There was a glass filmed with milk on the bedside table. There were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock and a plastic urinal that I didn't want to look at but looked at anyway. Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing.   
  
I'm not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish, or because it was published in Mexico, or perhaps because the story dealt with Tepeyac, the colonia my father was raised in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote control and read my story.   
  
I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: "Is this so-and-so?" "Yes," I said. He kept reading.   
  
When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked, "Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?"   
  
Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful.

1. Explain how being the only daughter, and only a daughter, has proven to be both a positive and a negative experience for Cisneros.
2. What was the father’s attitude toward a college education for his daughter? His sons? How was Cisneros affected by her father’s attitude? Use textual examples to back up your answers.
3. By writing “My father represents…the public majority,” what might Cisneros be saying about her father – and about society?
4. In your opinion, what is Cisneros’s purpose for writing? Explain.
5. This work was published in *Glamour* magazine, which is read almost exclusively by women, many of whom are young and single. How might this information help you understand the author’s purpose?
6. In your opinion, do all children face adversity because of their family’s expectations of them?

**Black Boy**

Richard Wright

The eighth grade days flowed in their hungry path and I few more conscious of myself; I sat in classes, bored, wondering, dreaming. One long dry afternoon I took out my composition book and told myself that I would write a story; it was sheer idleness that led me to it.

What would the story be about? It resolved itself into a plot about a villain who wanted a widow’s home and I called it *The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre.* It was crudely atmospheric, emotional, intuitively psychological, and stemmed from pure feeling. I finished it in three days and then wondered what to do with it.

The local Negro newspaper! That’s it…I sailed into the office and shoved my ragged composition book under the nose of the man who called himself the editor.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“A story,” I said.

“A news story?”

“No, fiction.”

“All right. I’ll read it,” he said.

He pushed my composition book back on his desk and looked at me curiously, sucking at his pipe.

“But I want you to read it *now,*” I said.

He blinked. I had no idea how newspapers were run. I thought that one took a story to an editor and he sat down then and there and read it and said yes or no.

“I’ll read this and let you know about it tomorrow,” he said.

I was disappointed; I had taken time to write it and he seemed distant and uninterested.

“Give me the story,” I said, reaching for it.

He turned from me, took up the book and read ten pages or more.

“Won’t you come in tomorrow?” he asked. “I’ll have it finished then.”

I honestly relented.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll stop in tomorrow.

I left with the conviction that he would not read it. Now, where else could I take it after he had turned it down? The next afternoon, en route to my job, I stepped into the newspaper office.

“Where’s my story?” I asked.

“It’s in galleys,” he said.

“What’s that?” I asked; I did not know what galleys were.

“It’s set up in type,” he said. “We’re publishing it.”

“How much money will I get?” I asked, excited.

“We can’t pay for manuscript,” he said.

“But you sell your papers for money,” I said with logic.

“Yes, but we’re young in business,” he explained.

“But you’re asking me to give you my story, but you don’t give your papers away.”

He laughed.

“Look, you’re just starting. This story will put your name before our readers. Now, that’s something,” he said.

“But if the story is good enough to sell to your readers, then you ought to give me some of the money you get from it,” I insisted.

He laughed again and I sense that I was amusing him.

“I’m going to offer you something more valuable than money,” he said. “I’ll give you a chance to learn to write.”

I was pleased, but I still thought he was taking advantage of me.

“When will you publish my story?”

“I’m dividing it into three installments,” he said. “The first installment appears this week. But the main thing is this: will you get news for me on a space rate basis?”

“I work mornings and evenings for three dollars a week,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. “Then you better keep that. But what are you doing this summer?”

“Nothing.”

“Then come see me before you take another job,” he said. “And write some more stories.”

A few days later my classmates came to me with baffled eyes, holding copies of the *Southern Register* in their hands.

“Did you really write that story?” they asked me.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to.”

“Where did you get it from?”

“I made it up.”

“You didn’t you copied it out of a book.”

“If I had, no one would publish it.”

“But what are they publishing it for?”

“So people can read it.”

“Who told you to do that?”

“Nobody.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“Because I wanted to,” I said again.

They were convinced that I had not told them the truth. We had never had any instruction in literary matters at school; the literature of the nation or the Negro had never been mentioned. My schoolmates could not understand why anyone would want to write a story; and, above all, they could not understand why I had called it *The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre*. The mood out of which a story was written was the most alien thing conceivable to them. They looked at me with new eyes, and a distance, suspiciousness came between us. If I had thought anything in writing the story, I had thought that perhaps it would make me more acceptable to them, and now it was cutting me off from them more completely than ever.

At home the effects were no less disturbing. Granny came into my room early one morning and sat on the edge of my bed.

“Richard, what is this you’re putting in the papers?” she asked.

“A story,” I said.

“About what?”

“It’s just a story, Granny.”

“But they tell me it’s been in three times.”

“It’s the same story. It’s in three parts.”

“But what is it about?” she insisted.

I hedged, fearful of getting into a religious argument.

“It’s just a story I made up,” I said.

“Then it’s a lie,” she said.

“Oh, Christ,” I said.

“You must get out of this house of you take the name of the Lord in vain,” she said.

“Granny, please…I’m sorry,” I pleaded. “But it’s hard to tell you about the story. You see, granny, everybody knows that the story isn’t true, but…”

“Then why write it?” she asked.

“Because people might want to read it.”

“That’s the Devil’s work,” she said and left.

My mother also was worried.

“Son, you ought to be more serious,” she said. “You’re growing up now and you won’t be able to get jobs if you let people think that you’re weak0minded. Suppose the superintendent of schools would ask you to teach here in Jackson, and he found out that you had been writing stories?”

I could not answer her.

“I’ll be all right, mama,” I said.

Uncle Tom, though surprised, was highly critical and contemptuous. The story had no point, he said. And whoever heard of a story by the title of *The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre*? Aunt Addie said that it was a sin for anyone to use the word “hell” and that what was wrong with me was that I had nobody to guide me. She blamed the whole thing upon my upbringing.

In the end I was so angry that I refused to talk about the story. From no quarter, which the exception of the Negro newspaper editor, had there come a single encouraging word. It was rumored that the principal wanted to know why I had used the word “hell.” I felt that I had committed a crime. Had I been conscious of the full extent to which I was pushing against the current of my environment, I would have been frightened altogether out of my attempts at writing. But my reactions were limited to the attitude of the people about me, and I did not speculate or generalize.

I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me. But where had I got this notion of doing something in the future, of going away from home and accomplishing something that would be recognized by others? I had, of course, read by Horatio Alger stories, my pulp stories, and I knew my Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford series from cover to cover, though I had sense enough not to hope to get rich; even to my naïve imagination that possibility was too remote. I knew that I lived in a country to which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked-off. Yet I felt that I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive.

I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation’s capital had striven to keep out of dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo.

Had I been articulate about my ultimate aspirations, no doubt someone would have told me what I was bargaining for; but nobody seemed to know, and least of all did I. My classmates felt that I was doing something that was vaguely wrong, but they did not know how to express it. As the outside world grew more meaningful, I became more concerned, tense; and my classmates and my teachers would say: “Why do you ask so many questions?” Or: “Keep quiet.”

I was in my fifteenth year; in terms of schooling I was far behind the average youth of the nation, but I did not know that. In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed. Somewhere in the dead of the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air.

1. What do Wright’s words and actions at the newspaper office tell you about his personality?
2. In your opinion, why did Wright’s classmates, family, and principal react as they did to his story? How were their reactions different from what he had hoped for?
3. Why was Wright “more concerned, tense,” as he became more aware of his environment in the South?
4. What does Richard Wright do in the face of adversity? What does this reveal about him?
5. About Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy,* one critic writes, “Along with his accounts of mistreatment by whites, Wright describes the complicity of southern blacks in their own oppression.” Do you think that this statement is true of the excerpt you had read? Use examples from the text to support your answer.