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ABSTRACT

Written by a group of English teachers in elementary and secondary independent schools, this second volume of the English notebook is divided into three sections: "Evaluations of Compositions Written in Class," "Tests on Comprehension of Prose," and "Tests on Comprehension of Poetry." Focusing on grades five through nine, these tests and evaluations are also widely adaptable for grades ten through twelve. Samples and detailed analyses of student responses comprise an important part of this volume. (LL)

A TEACHER'S NOTEBOOK: ENGLISH, 5-9 VOLUME II

NAIS

National Association of Independent Schools
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FOREWORD

This second volume of the English Committee's two-volume English Notebook is intended as a very practical guide to the teaching of English in grades 5 through 12, even though the major focus is on grades 5 through 9. Many of the examples and comments involving 9th-grade material will be found fully applicable to grades 10 through 12. Moreover, we believe that teachers of the elementary grades will also find the material useful. We therefore urge administrators and department heads to make this Notebook available to teachers of English at all levels, K through 12.

This volume contains not only samples of in-class composition assignments and reading comprehension examinations that have been prepared and pretested by the English Committee, but especially a detailed analysis of student responses to these assignments and examinations. We have followed the pattern developed by the Commission on English for the College Entrance Examination Board in the famous End-of-Year Examinations in English for College-Bound Students, Grades 9 - 12, and we have attempted to produce here a volume that will be as useful for grades 5 through 9.

We have been especially fortunate in having had, as we did for the first volume, the advice and wisdom of Winifred L. Post to guide us through the preparation of this volume. Winifred Post was a member of the Commission on English, and her experience has been of extraordinary help to us. We are also especially indebted to Charles W. Appel, Jr., who prepared the composition sections for this volume. His insights,

always intended for the encouragement of students and their teachers rather than for the disapproval of sometimes clumsy efforts, should be very helpful to experienced teachers as well as new teachers.

Finally, I must express gratitude to all my colleagues. Their perceptive, conscientious, utterly selfless devotion to this task has been an inspiration to each of us and a source of friendships that are a lasting bond.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Few episodes are more dismaying for the beginning teacher, or more unpredictable for the experienced teacher, than those "moments of truth" when the successes and failures of teaching and learning are evaluated by tests. Yet evaluation is essential to responsible teaching, and in English teaching, the thoughtfully prepared essay test is one of the best devices for effective evaluation.

In this Notebook selections of answers to examination questions and composition assignments are analyzed for four purposes: (1) to indicate the wide range within which a sensitive teacher can expect to find respectable answers, (2) to test the validity of the questions and assignments, (3) to establish some standards by which a teacher may judge the worth of the student's answer, (4) to discover the success of the student's learning experiences in English.

EVALUATION OF COMPOSITIONS WRITTEN IN CLASS

One of the most difficult tasks for the English teacher is the evaluation of students' compositions. The difficulty is compounded in compositions written by younger students, for the gulf that separates the teacher's and the student's views of a good composition often causes frustration. We hope to alleviate some of this frustration by analyzing some students' responses to NAIS composition assignments. Our approach is fourfold:

1. To show the great variety with which students respond to a topic.
2. To provide a frame of reference (particularly for new teachers) in which day-to-day work can be examined.
3. To show the variety of points of view the teacher may take when evaluating students' responses.
4. To stimulate teachers to attempt new or unusual approaches to composition evaluation.

For each of the assignments examined in this composition section, students were given the topics and were allowed approximately 45 minutes to work. All their thinking, writing, and proofreading was done during that class period. No additional time was given in school or at home. All evaluative comments

made in the following pages of this Notebook take into consideration that these are, essentially, first drafts.

Behind the evaluation of students' papers lies the philosophy of the teacher and the department. Teachers of students in the middle grades discover that composition courses lend themselves especially to an inductive approach. For example, in grade 5 the course might involve much time just in writing sentences, in grouping sentences together in crude paragraphs, in stimulating interest in a wide variety of areas that might become topics for writing, and in developing composition skills in media other than the written page.

In grade 6 the approach might become more formal, with emphasis being placed on development of ideas, on searching beneath the surface, and on developing a more sophisticated sentence and paragraph structure to enable the writer to express increasingly sophisticated ideas.

In grade 7 in-depth revisions of students' papers, with the teacher's working closely with the writer, guiding and advising, can produce a writing-workshop atmosphere that recognizes the hard work of writing. During this year more and more attention can be paid to choosing words exactly, structuring sentences more precisely, punctuating and paragraphing the grouped ideas with more sophistication, and toning a composition for a particular audience. During this 7th-grade year, focus on these kinds of activities produces a more structured class environment, but one which should, if creative freedom has been allowed in earlier grades, encourage students

to mold their writing so that it truly communicates their ideas.

As students move into grade 8, they are preparing for high school and should face a more rigorous amplification of the suggestions given for grade 7. Relationships between grammar and writing and between literature and writing lead toward the study of more formal expository writing and its application to the students' other academic fields (in research papers and essay tests).

Each school will, of course, design its program in accordance with its needs and the needs of its students. Our hope is that the evaluating techniques herein explored will be applicable to any English department in any school, whether they be used as guidelines for individual teachers or as subjects for discussion in faculty workshops.

COMPOSITIONS FOR GRADES 5 THROUGH 7

"It Looked Easy"

"I Sat Very Still and Listened"

The following assignment, from an NAIS English examination, yields results that can be effectively analyzed:

> DIRECTIONS: Choose one of the sentences below for an opening sentence in a composition. Plan what you wish to say before writing. You may jot down an outline or notes before you begin. Leave time

to reread your composition and to check the spelling and the end punctuation.

1. It looked easy.

2. I sat very still and listened.

For several reasons this kind of assignment is especially good for younger students. First, each student starts with the advantage of not having to think up the beginning of a composition. Thus the problem of "I can't think of anything to write" doesn't arise. Second, because the opening first line gives to each student a solid base on which to build a composition, the teacher can more fairly compare how students formulate narrative or establish character or create some other effect. Third, it encourages the student to write a narrative, by far the most successful kind of composition for a child in grades 5-7.

The English Committee found a wide range of responses. Some were fairly elementary narratives; others were more sensitive and perceptive. The following samples are illustrations.

Sample 1, written by a boy in grade 6, midyear:

I sat very still and listened. I heard the sound of Henry Ford's Model T rolling down a street. I heard the sound of the Wright brothers working on their plane. Suddenly I heard a gun shot, another and another. I heard men marching in perfect order. Men were dieing, guns were cracking, sirens screaming. Then there was silents. World War I had ended. I heard the sounds of homeless people. Who had lost their home when a bomb had droped on it. I heard women crying for their dead Husbands. I heard children roaming the streets for they have lost their parents. And men working to rebuild a demolished city. I heard the moans of a hospital. Men on the virge of dieing. Nurses and Doctors running through the halls; giving to their patients. But now I hear a knew sound. I hear busy highways and people walking from store to store. Women walking down store aisles look for low prices. I hear the sound of happy voices playing games. I sat very still and listened. And I was happy that people had a little love in them and not war inside of them.

Probably the most striking characteristic of this composition is the rhythmic movement from the repose in the first sentence, through the horrors of war, to the optimistic promise in the conclusion. Within the context of what seem to be unrelated incidents, the writer has forged ahead with his eyes on a goal. Writing by students at this age often lacks purpose. This student obviously has a purpose; he has learned well for his age that one must write toward an end. Compare the purpose of Sample 1 with the lack of purpose in Sample 2:

Sample 2, written by a boy in grade 6, midyear:

> *It looked easy, but as I know well it isn't. Skydiving is a hard and dangerous sport.*
>
> *Skydiving is a sport where skill is needed. Skill and technique sometimes vary bitween different skydivers.*
>
> *In skydiving many things are essential such as the jump, knowing when to pull the rip-cord, and the landing.*
>
> *At one dive I was testing a oxygen mask and at 20,000 feet I pulled the rip-cord but nothing happened. Steadily falling, I took of the parachute pack, opened it up and let the parachute out then put the pack on just in time. Three minutes later I landed.*
>
> *That was one close call I got into while skydiving. I had many other close calls in my career but my closest call was not getting a doctor's bill.*

One is not sure if this is an expository paper about skydiving or a narrative about a skydiving incident. This student has not yet learned to set a clear goal for himself. He has written a "correct" paper -- spelling, punctuation, and grammar are acceptable, and the style is readable -- but it lacks any impact because he himself does not seem to feel any real need to communicate an urgent idea or to suppress an irrelevant tidbit. Had he simply turned the paper into an exposition about skydiving, the reader would at least have learned some concrete facts about the sport. The paper as it is generates little interest. Sample 1, on the other hand, has many technical flaws, but its clear purpose would seem to outweigh these flaws in the final evaluation.

Both of these compositions can, of course, be examined for other qualities. In Sample 1 we have considerable evidence that the student has learned well that specific, concrete details make an essay come alive. The men are not simply marching, but marching "in perfect order." Not just any war has ended, but "World War I." People are not simply crying, but "women crying for their dead Husbands." Such touches add

verisimilitude, giving the work a life that engages the reader in an emotional response.

In Sample 2, also, we have evidence that the writer has learned that details are important. The listing of essentials for the skydiver, the reference to "20,000 feet," the three minutes to reach the ground lend authenticity to the paper. In comparison with Sample 1, however, these details are not ones that further develop toward a goal, but, rather, fill space between lines of action.

The writer of Sample 2 should be praised for clarity of expression. For the most part the sentences are clear, the style is varied, the ideas logically patterned. The spelling and punctuation, though not perfect; are certainly adequate for an in-class assignment. Sample 1, on the other hand, indicates that the writer needs a great deal of work on sentence fragments, quite common in the 6th grade. Capitalization skills need to be strengthened, too, and so does spelling.

To evaluate either of these samples, the teacher must ask, "Upon which set of priorities am I going to base my decision?" Is the teacher concerned with spelling or purpose or sentence structure or vivid detail or clarity of expression or total impact? What combinations of the possible priorities might one use? These choices are up to the individual instructor, but what we all forget much too often is the importance of seizing on the strengths of a 6th-grade writer and encouraging the student to develop them. Often we dwell on weaknesses with such tenacity that a student such as the one who wrote Sample 1 soon feels that there is little use in striking out creatively. Either he plays the punctuation game or he turns off.

Sample 3, which follows, offers yet other criteria for evaluation.

Sample 3, written by a girl in grade 6, midyear:

> *I sat very still and listened. I was on the shore of a small Canadian lake, going fishing, and I was afraid that the rustling leaves and cracking branches might be the warning that a hungary bear or mountain lion was approaching in search of small rodents or fish. The noise came closer, my heart was beating and bobbing like a cork under a faucet that is running full force. Then I dared to look in the direction of the noise. I saw two large eyes staring at me from the gloom of the dark forest.*
>
> *Without thinking, I grabbed for my tackel box, but instead I felt a rough bristely paw. I ran.*
>
> *When I got back to camp, I found everything in a mess. I could hear only the birds chirping and the wind rustling the treetops.*

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> *When I got back to camp, I found everything in a mess. I could hear only the birds chirping and the wind rustling the treetops.*

I ran into what was left of my tent and there, to my surprise, was a litter of tiny flying squirrels. Their eyes had not yet opened, and they were squeaking for food.

I had not been inside the tent more than thirty seconds when I heard the rustling of leaves and the cracking of twigs. I heard small feet this time. The canvas on the tent began to quiver. My spine shook. I shivered. I was scared but . . . Then a mother flying squirrel walked in. Its large eyes glowed in the darkness of the tent.

I had been scared of a small flying squirrel all this time.

This response is an excellent example of the narrative approach to composition assignments such as this. Like the writer of Sample 1, this student has a clear goal in mind. Each of the details builds suspense so that when the climax of the story is revealed, the reader senses joy at the discovery. This student shows a sophistication with grammatical constructions such as -ing forms of verbs ("the rustling leaves and crackling branches") and an ability to use figurative comparison ("my heart was beating and bobbing like a cork under a faucet that is running full force").

One temptation we have as teachers is to compare compositions for ranking purposes. It might be tempting to give Sample 1 a higher grade than Sample 3, for Sample 1 deals with such obviously abstract and earthshaking problems. Conversely, one might reward Sample 3 more generously than Sample 1 because of its facile style and nearly error-free mechanics. But Sample 1 is unique for striking out in exploration of the feelings and events that weigh heavily on the writer's mind, and Sample 3 is unique for developing a story-telling technique to its fullest. Should the teacher, then, place one higher than the other? More effective instruction might be accomplished by encouraging the two writers to learn from each other, and by allowing the entire class to learn from both. Sample 3 should be recognized, however, for probably having been from the writer's experience, while Sample 1 deals with vicaribus experience -- well handled here, but an approach less likely to lead to success.

MORE COMPOSITIONS FOR GRADES 5 THROUGH 7

"The Small Craft Settled Mysteriously on the Sand"

In evaluating students' compositions, teachers will want to keep in mind that whatever objective criteria they employ, their ultimate judgments are subjective. No two teachers evaluate writing by the same criteria, nor do they rank a set of papers in the same order. In this section, in analyzing student responses for the reasons given on page 1 we shall also attempt to show the wide variety of acceptable subjective judgments that teachers can make.

IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENT: Using the following sentence as a first line in a composition, construct a story or essay, using your best writing style: The small craft settled mysteriously on the sand.

This assignment usually evokes a variety of responses from 6th and 7th graders. The wording of the starter sentence can, however, produce a series of derivative science-fiction stories. The teacher may therefore wish to change the word mysteriously to gently or silently or to some other adverb that does not seem to suggest a Twilight Zone adventure. Different groups of students, of course, will react differently to any given assignment, as will each teacher. The teacher must experiment with the selection of writing assignments or examination questions, changing and molding the assignments in such a way as to draw out the very best from the students. An advantage to this kind of assignment (in addition to those listed on page 5) is that it allows the teacher to choose words calculated to stimulate a variety of valid responses. In this particular assignment the words craft, settled, and sand are just general enough and intriguing enough to afford students of varying abilities the raw material for creating a composition suited to their talents. For one student the "craft" might become a flying saucer, the "sand" a stretch of desert. For another student the "craft" might be a canoe, the "sand" a stretch of beach.

This kind of assignment will also help teachers to evaluate their own teaching. For instance, the greater the variety of interpretations in any class, the greater the likelihood that the students were encouraged during the year to see many possibilities in any situation, certainly a prerequisite to

creativity. Following are four students' responses to the assignment:

Sample 1, written by a boy in grade 6, midyear:

A small craft settled mysteriously on the sand. I ran back to the village and reported it to the bewildered people. Someone said we ougt to protect ourselves and the others agreed.

Silently they strode toward their huts and each came back with a large spear, with the points so sharp and shiny that they glistened in the moonlight.

Each man ran to the beach and hid in the tall grass. Everone looked at the craft, it was large and shaped like a bottle that a woman might keep her spices in. It was also very weather beaten.

Then it happened, something on the thing moved and went up and came to a sudden stop.

Something white walked out and then another.

Our chief walked up to them and greeted them the did not say anything. They just glared at each other.

Suddenly something blew over head. It made a loud noise. It came down softly. The white things got in and we never saw them again. We all got up and walked back slowly to our huts.

Sample 2, written by a boy in grade 8, the beginning of the year:

A small craft settled Misterous on the sand. The villagers from the village looked suspicious at the big and dirty craft. The villagers did not get near because it was very hot so hot that if you get 100 feet from the hot aircraft you will die. So the villagers did not take there chances. Next morning the villagers went to see the craft that came out of the blue sky. The aircraft was cool so villagers inspected the aircraft. All of a sudden the door of the aircraft open slowly the villagers back away. Then all of sudden big and long steps came out of the aircraft and then hit the dirty ground. Then people came out and looked misterious to the villagers and vis versa to the people in the air craft. The people in the air craft had no ears and no hair. The villagers were so stunned what they never saw anythings like they saw now. But then, all of a sudden the people in the air craft steped down and meet the villageger and they like each other, they shook hands. Then time came for the people leave the villagers.

Sample 3, written by a boy in grade 6, midyear:

A small craft settled mysteriously on the sand, its silver skids blowing up clouds of smoke as its engines cooled of.

A tiny hatch opened and out stepped six reptilian creatures, then a strange sound issued from the Venusian commanders toothy mouth.

It was surely strange, for none who heard could understand its meaning.

Then, with a quick movement two of the Venusians pulled tiny weapons, and the humans laughed in disbelief of the tiny creatures standing before them. Suddenly all present knew the meaning of the unearthly sounds.

It was a very good likeness that the Venusians had thought upon themselves, very good indeed for they looked exactly like the humans which once stood before them, but stood there no more, for they were but tiny piles of matter on the sand.

Then the Venusians left to meet other ships which would soon be coming, for there were many ships, many ships indeed.

mple 4, written by a boy in grade 7, midyear:

The mysterious craft gently settled in the moist spring grass. It was a small, round, metallic object with a row of small bumps protruded from its silvery sides. A hatch opened up and a green glow shone out from this opening. A ramp rolled out and three little glowing green balls rolled out and stopped short at the end of the ramp. Out of each ball came a pair of metal-like arms which each picked something up. One clutched a rock, one clutched a blade of grass, and the third clutched a small red ant. The arms and what they had in them were pulled back into the little balls. The balls then rolled up the ramp and back into the craft. The ramp was pulled back in, and the door closed, leaving no trace of ever being there on the strange craft. The craft slowly lifted off of the ground and landed on the branch of a tree.

The English Committee's responses to these samples were as varied as the samples themselves. One member of the Committee praised Sample 1 for its point of view; another condemned it for its vagueness and faulty pronoun reference. Examining a composition from the points of view of several evaluators may help teachers to see into a student writer's purpose and thus better judge the writer's work.

Careful inspection shows that the writer has established and maintained throughout this composition a point of view quite alien to his own. In addition, he has resisted the temptation to indulge in derivative science fiction. By repeating the word something and by referring to "something white" and "something on the thing," the student effectively describes a phenomenon beyond the narrator's experience.

Several evaluators felt that the student showed little paragraphing sense. This seems clearly evident half-way through, where the paragraphs are single sentences. It is possible, although not likely, that the writer purposely shifted to such a choppy manner at the point when "it happened," in order to express the utter confusion of the tribe after that moment (note, for instance, that the paragraphing once again becomes more systematic when the danger has been dealt with, as in the final paragraph). Perhaps the writer intuitively, rather than purposefully, adopted this paragraphing style. Perhaps, on the other hand, he did not know any better. While the majority of the Committee held the latter view, one of the evaluators marked the fourth paragraph (the first choppy one) as exhibiting a real "flair for the dramatic paragraph." Here again the teacher's judgment must be especially subjective and take into consideration the individual being judged.

Most of the Committee members were impressed with the student's word choice and his detail, particularly his authentic metaphor in reference to the shape of the craft (third paragraph) and his vivid words (e.g., "bewildered," "strode," "sharp and shiny," "glistened").

A teacher will call this student's attention to the run-on sentences and the several misspellings, but to land too heavily on such technical errors in a composition which, as a whole, is above average in content, in sophistication, and in establishment and maintenance of point of view would be stifling rather than corrective.

The second sample generated much less disagreement among the evaluators. This student shows serious weaknesses in sentence construction, use of verb tenses, and repetition of words and phrases. Probably his language experiences have been somewhat limited, but without more complete evidence one should not arbitrarily label him as "dyslexic" or "language disabled" and summarily ship him off to a reading specialist. Teachers often encounter problems like these in middle school (or even at higher levels). The task for the instructor lies in encouraging such a student, in evaluating his work fairly, and in broadening his language experiences.

A close inspection of this selection reveals that in spite of the student's handicap with tenses, he does have a good

sense of time sequence. He moves quite logically from the beginning to the end of the story with little difficulty on a narrative level. In addition, the writer reveals a good deal of sensitivity in his realization that "we" would look alien to the aliens: "Then people came out and looked misterious to the villagers and vis versa to the people in the air craft." Also an awareness of the mysterious and a sense of plot development, however elementary, are shown in his writing; for example, he has the villagers forced to wait until morning before examining the craft, thus heightening the reader's suspense. His visual imagination is also promising. His description of the villagers backing away could easily be translated into a piece of film and be quite effective in building suspense: " . . . the door of the aircraft open slowly the villagers back away."

So the question remains, "What do I do with this student?" A great deal of red ink on his paper will not help him at all. The first step might be to set up testing and remedial work for him, but this still does not answer the question of evaluating his work. Here, again, is where the subjective judgment of the teacher is so critical.

Obviously, the writer should first be praised for his sincere effort (amounting to 170 words) in spite of the difficulties in his writing style. Second, many of the positive aspects of his writing, discussed above, should be shared with him (on his level, of course). Third, one or two of the most common errors in his writing (for example, repetitious words or faulty verb tenses) should be discussed with him. A second draft that corrects these types of errors would result in much improved writing style. Certainly, this little story is good enough to warrant some rewriting and then some form of publication. This student could be given the opportunity to read his story to his own classmates, in a receptive atmosphere, and then, perhaps, to younger students in the school, where his audience would probably be even more receptive. In addition, this student's revised work should be included on the classroom display board for students' works. It might also be published in a school or class newspaper.

All of these approaches are designed, of course, to strengthen those skills that the student possesses and to help keep his attitude toward composing healthy. But what about specific techniques for working on his weaknesses? Several techniques might serve the purpose. The teacher might tape comments about the writer's mechanical problems on a cassette that the student could take home and use as a guide while he revises his work. A dictionary assignment might be initiated, with the teacher's underlining the misspelled words and the student's looking them up and correcting them. Most important, the student should be taught to read his compositions aloud to himself. This technique often helps a very weak student writer to spot errors. Whatever tack is taken, a sense of positivism

and good humor must prevail if the student's enthusiasm is to be maintained and his skills improved.

Compositions 3 and 4 are examples of competent, facile writing styles. Both pieces of writing show imagination, precise vocabulary and usage, and some sophisticated sentence structures. Compositions like these are so slick that teachers might let the style mask the faults, place an A+ at the top of the paper, and neglect to instruct the student in how to make the writing even better.

The Committee observed that Sample 3 was heavily influenced by the writing of Ray Bradbury. While this in itself is not worthy of condemnation, especially for a paper prepared in class, the teacher must be aware that because much of the style and irony is based on the works that the student has recently been reading, undue credit should not be given for apparent creativity. Several of the evaluators, however, reacted quite favorably to the composition, even with the Bradbury influence, citing the mature vocabulary, the unusually competent sentence structure (especially the first and fifth paragraphs), and the student's ability to adapt his writing to tone and purpose, notably in the opening and closing sentences. The ironic twist at the end, though inspired by a variety of sources, is nonetheless executed effectively, with the " . . . many ships, many ships indeed" adding a dramatic, thought-provoking conclusion. Upon closer inspection of the work, one also notices the ironic contract between the tininess of the Venusians and their awesome power.

This student will be greatly aided in his development if the teacher points out how confusing the story becomes near the middle, mostly because of the faulty pronoun references in the central event. The third paragraph, especially, has a great number of dangling pronouns (it, none, who, its). With care and work on precision, the student could clean up this paragraph and make it convey its meaning much more clearly to the reader.

Considerable disagreement arose over the transition between paragraph four and five, with half the Committee insisting that the meaning was not clear and half insisting that the sharp break in transition helped make the meaning even clearer. A good case can be made that with the demise of the humans at the end of paragraph four a sharp break in transition helps to emphasize their total destruction, even though the reader must struggle a bit to follow the flow of the idea. Again, subjective opinion must be the deciding factor in judging this device, perhaps after the teacher has ascertained if the student made the break purposefully or by accident.

Finally, in Sample 4 the Committee found much to disagree

about. One member praised it for having an excellent build-up to the ending where the craft is revealed as being quite tiny, while another member condemned it as not really getting anywhere. "All the apparatus for breath-taking action is here, but nothing much happens," said one of the Committee members. On the other hand, another praised it for its mysterious ending, in which "the reader is left to ponder the meaning of this tiny ship nestling in the leaves of a tree. (Perhaps it is still there, watching you!)"

Mechanically, this piece of writing is the best of the four presented. The Committee agreed that the sentence structure and wording are advanced for a seventh grader, citing particularly the excellent use of parallelism (e.g., "One clutched a rock, one clutched a blade of grass, and a third clutched a small red ant."). One member of the Committee chose this sample as the most imaginative of the four, in that the central idea, though subtly stated, shows the earth as an extraordinary place being examined by automated objects. In discussing this composition with the student, however, the teacher should certainly call attention to the changes in the wording of the starter sentence. Although this in itself did not alter the excellence of the work, the student should be advised to follow instructions.

The main weakness in this sample lies in its anticlimax or lack of climax, however one chooses to read it. And again, the subjective opinion becomes extremely important in judging this "weakness." The teacher should first try to elicit from the student whether the ending was meant to be mysterious (in making us wonder) or ironic (in making us shudder at the tininess of this machine), or whether he simply could think of nothing else to write. From there the instructor can praise, suggest to, and aid the student in either improving the situation as it stands or finishing the story in some thoughtful way.

These four examples, then, and the variety of responses to them, should remind us all how subjective is this business of evaluating compositions. For every evaluator who chose Sample 1 as best, two others chose Sample 4. Still others chose Sample 3. Lest we forget, the main reason why we evaluate compositions is not to rank them, not even to grade them, and surely not to red-ink them until they become obscured. Rather, our job is to talk with the students, clarifying their purposes in the choices they make, helping them to ascertain their purposes when they don't know them. Our job is to encourage students and aid them in communicating their purposes and ideas daily more clearly and more effectively than they might have the day before.

This same topic when assigned to girls reveals an interestingly different response. Instead of fantasizing science fiction, girls seem more drawn to life-like yet equally imaginative situations. Here are two examples, both of better-than-average quality:

Sample 5, written by a girl in grade 7, midyear:

> *The small craft settled mysteriously on the sand. It had drifted in from deeper waters. This green, flat, glistening raft-like object, could very well have come from outer space. But how did it come to be in the water, with its strange cargo? Seated on the craft, this Martian-like creature, had green mottled skin, and rather long legs. Upon reaching the shore, this U.F.O. (unidentified floating object) gracefully skiped off his craft. He then proceeded down to the water's edge to get a drink of water. His manners could have been better, as he slurped up the water. When done, he turned around, and unfortunately noticed me, quietly observing him. Obviously frightened, this frog hopped back on to his lily pad and drifted away.*

Sample 6, written by a girl in grade 7, midyear:

> *The small craft settled mysteriously on the sand. The tide was low and brushed over what the tide before it had left, star fish, sand dollars, shattered driftwood, a few tools and parts of a ship. The color of the sky was changing from grey to orange, and with the new sky a new day was starting, leaving behind the previous night's typhoon. The small craft with four passengers had taken a short voyage when the winds started to blow from the southeast, and the tremendous waves lashed against the side of the boat, fell in, flooding it. The boat drifted farther off course than it had intended because of the unexpected typhoon. The boat was sent up by a huge wave and came smashing down onto a group of rocks, splintering the hull and heaving the bodies of the passengers out of the boat and into the ferocious jaws of the sea, its fingers waiting to grab them.*
>
> *But now, the sun was rising over an orange sky, shining over calm, crystal blue waters, and leaving the scattered remains of a boat, on a deserted island.*

The author of Sample 5, seizing on the science-fiction tone of

the opening sentence, plays a sophisticated game with the reader. She leads the reader through one science-fiction cliché after another, yet skillfully describes the details so that they could -- as seen in the end -- have been interpreted as being of this earth or from outer space. Indeed, the inherent honesty in her deception is underscored by her amusing play on the UFO as an "unidentified floating object."

Accurate word choice is especially important in this composition. In keeping with the deception, the writer describes the creature as gracefully skipping off the craft; in keeping with the revelation, she describes the frog as hopping back onto the lily pad. Both descriptions are honest, accurate, and fully effective in context. An especially nice touch is the incongruity of the graceful skipping and the slurping that "could" have been better mannered. The judgments are clearly the observer's.

Aside from a too-liberal sprinkling of commas, the only major flaw is in the repeated use of this: "this green, flat, glistening raft-like object," "this Martian-like creature," "this U.F.O.," and "this frog." A common characteristic of untrained vocal narration among adults as well as children, the repeated use of this can most easily be reduced when the teacher, in consultation with the student, points out that this should refer to an object that has already been clearly introduced and which needs the special this identification afterwards only to distinguish it from some other object.

Sample 6 is, of course, the kind of composition that teachers hope for but rarely receive. The writer has an exceptional eye for detail, and she has a large vocabulary that she draws upon with extraordinary accuracy (notice, by the way, that the island is "a deserted island," not a desert island). She also has a fine sense of organization, ending with an effective elaboration on, and progression of, the details that she has carefully selected for the first three sentences.

Even more admirable than that in Sample 5 is this writer's use of vivid participles and verbs: "brushed," "shattered," "lashed," "flooding," "smashing," "splintering," "heaving." This skill is to be encouraged among all students, and the teacher should certainly use this paper as an illustration of the effectiveness of such word choice.

The teacher is faced with a subtle problem, however, in dealing with a paper so well written as this! No writing is so good that it cannot be better, yet the writer who has written well, and knows it, should not be too deflated by criticism. With Sample 6 the teacher must be especially careful to seek an encouraging mixture of praise and criticism in hope of pointing out successfully that there is too much repetition of subject/verb structure in the sentence beginnings, that the personification

at the end of the first paragraph needs attention, and that there should be a questioning of whether "lashed" or lashing is preferable for the sentence structure involving the "tremendous waves."

One approach is simply to start off by saying, "Your composition is so good that I'm going to criticize it on a high level, the way an editor of a publishing company might." A little flattery of that sort won't hurt the exceptionally talented student.

COMPOSITIONS FOR GRADES 8 AND 9

DIRECTIONS: Accurate, vivid detail, properly organized, can reveal interesting qualities in people and situations. Describe in accurate and vivid detail the appearance of a breakfast or dinner table before the dishes have been cleared away. Select and organize your details in a way that will reveal something about one or two of the people who had been sitting at the table.

This type of assignment is more directive than the two previously discussed, inasmuch as it prescribes for the student a specific writing skill to be demonstrated. Such assignments are useful throughout a unit on a particular skill. This one, for example, might be part of a literature unit on revelation of character through written detail, or part of a composition unit emphasizing the use of concrete details in building interesting writing.

In evaluating responses to an assignment whose purpose is so clearly stated, the teacher may choose to concentrate exclusively on a particular assigned skill, in this case "accurate, vivid detail . . . that will reveal something about one or two of the people" who ate at the table. In focusing on this one aspect, both the teacher and student can concentrate their efforts on a definable goal, something we as

teachers all too often neglect. Such concentration will enable the teacher to grade papers in a way that clearly reflects the development of students during the span of the unit presented, with no extraneous criteria (mechanics, paragraphing, for instance) to cloud the evaluation. Certainly, the other criteria would be taken up later, perhaps during revision, but we are concentrating here mainly on evaluation of the students' success in meeting the stated demands of the topic.

Sample 1, written by a girl in grade 9, midyear:

> *It is 8:00 and breakfast is over. The cat is up on the table and moving about between the dishes and silverware.*
>
> *At the foot of the table, a crumpled napkin lay on the floor. On the table, a half-empty glass of orange juice, a cigarette butt floating in the orange-juice and a plate with dried egg-yolk, swirled around on it by pieces of toast. The silverware of this place-setting was distributed across the table. The knife that was used for spreading the jelly onto the toast was now in the margarine. The spoon was coated with a thick, creamy residue of chocolate ice cream. Only the fork remained on the plate.*
>
> *At the other end, the head of the table, the plate was neatly pushed back from the edge of the table; and the knife and fork rested parallel to each other in the middle of the plate. The spoon rested on a saucer with an empty cup that once held coffee. In the right corner was a cut-glass ash-tray with a cigar butt in it. Immediately behind the ash-tray was a small plate with the empty skeleton of half a grape-fruit and a grape-fruit spoon sitting on it. The napkin had been thrown in the trash basket, and the cat was now trying to get it out again.*
>
> *The sunlight shone on the table and gave it a look of tranquility, peace and as if an earthquake had hit half the table.*

Sample 2, written by a boy in grade 9, midyear:

> *After everybody has left the breakfast table, their plates remain with scraps of food scattered on them. The pitcher of milk is in the middle of the table, becoming warm and sour, as the leftover food becomes cold.*
>
> *At one side of the table there are two plates*

which are smaller than the rest. There is more food on the two small plates than there is on the larger ones. Next to one of the small plates is a pile of wet napkins which were probably used to clean up some spilled milk. There is also a glass, smaller than the others around the table, next to the plate.

The plastic placemat has creamcheese smeared all over one bottom corner, and has fish bones scattered along the side. There is one spoon on the placemat which is covered with small fingerprints. A fork, stuck into a piece of a partialy eaten bagel is half on the plate, and half on the placemat.

The leftover pieces of food have all been mixed together, and put in a pile in the middle of the plate. On top of the pile is an olive pit which is still half covered with the black olive.

At the head of the table is a plate which has only a few small bones at the edge. Some juce, from a tomato, has formed a small puddle at one end of the plate.

The silverware is neatly piled on the placemat, and there is a napkin which is dirty, but has been neatly refolded and placed next to the silverware.

There is also a coffee cup, on its saucer, which is empty. On the saucer there are cigarette ashes and a cigarette butt which has absorbed the few drops of coffee which were spilled on the saucer.

Around the plate and placemat there are no scraps of food or dirt of any kind.

Sample 3, written by a girl in grade 9, midyear:

Relatives

Eight cluttered places set, eight napkins on the seats of eight chairs, pushed out of place by their owners; this, and the fact that the scene takes place in a dining room, prove that company has come and gone.

One place seems to stand out, it's the only one with red lipstick on the half-filled wine glass. The only ashtray on the table stands next to this glass. A lone cigaret lies in the ashtray, smashed and battered, bearing the same red marks. The plate is so clean, that it seems as if it were not used at all. One chicken bone and half a biscuit are all it contains.

Across the table, there is another place. Whoever ate there left their pink, moist, chewing gum underneath the plate. This glass is clouded with fingerprints, which seems strange, since the milk inside looks almost untouched. On this plate too, like the one across the table, there is an absence of vegtable remains. But this plate shows evidence of less refined tastes. The rice spills over the

edge of the plate, and is left to dry on the table cloth, and there must be half a dozen different pieces of chicken with most of the meat still on them.

These two people's places may be different, but their tastes could seem almost the same.

Sample 4, written by a boy in grade 9, midyear:

The plate of remains was near the almost empty glass of water. The mashed potatoes stood as swirls and spires rising from the marsh of gravy. A few fragments of beef lay strewn like a jigsaw puzzle that was far from completion. The napkin had been thrown on top of the spoon and except for the corner that slipped into the gravy, it remained spotless. The knife remained poised on the side of the plate and the fork rested innocently inside it, despite the marks all the leftovers bore.

Sample 1 reveals that its author has a good idea of how to respond to a composition assignment. The writer has sensed the reason behind the assignment and has attempted to respond to that purpose. The description of two opposite places and the nearly equal development of each indicate that the author has correctly interpreted the teacher's goal (i.e., to evaluate the student's ability to reveal character through detail) and has provided a well-balanced example of just that skill.

Most of the details in Sample 1 are excellent: "the half-empty glass of orange juice," "the thick, creamy residue of chocolate ice cream" (a curious item to be included without comment), and "a cut-glass ash-tray with a cigar butt in it." In addition to these, the writer has also introduced more complex details, which allow the reader not only to see the scene, but to speculate about the action that went before: "a plate with dried egg-yolk swirled around on it by pieces of toast" and "The napkin had been thrown in the trash basket . . ."

What makes this composition a particularly good response to the assignment is the choice and grouping of details to form accurate pictures of the diners. The choice of two extreme types gives the author a chance to reveal stereotypes familiar to the reader. Each set of details in the second paragraph, from the napkin on the floor to the coated spoon, moves toward the identification of a sloppy eater. There are no extra details or conflicting data. Paragraph three, likewise, drives on toward a single image, a neat eater. Every word, every phrase develops this idea: "neatly," "parallel," "empty cup," the cut glass of the ash tray, the napkin in the trash basket rather than on the table or floor.

Only the details in the last paragraph fail, and then only because of difficulty in expressing them. Perhaps this writer might better have ended the work at the word tranquility. Although the beginning and the ending might not be subjected to close evaluation, inasmuch as they deal with introduction and conclusion rather than with revelation of character, they should be noted as reflecting, together, the two basic types described in the composition: the wandering cat and the earthquake representing the sloppy element; the sunlight, tranquility and peace describing the neat element. Whether intentional or not, this kind of integrity, expecially the cat's presence at the beginning and end, lends coherence to a composition.

Sample 2, in addition to the stated limitation of criteria for evaluations, provides an excellent basis for instructing the writer in paragraphing; the descriptive details suffer from the faulty choice of paragraph breaks. A first reading of this composition suggests a scattering of details with little or no relevance to each other. More careful inspection, however, shows clearly that paragraph three is an extension of paragraph two. Joining the two paragraphs would avoid the apparent lack of cohesion. Likewise, the final four paragraphs, when united, provide a more unified presentation of details. So though we are evaluating use of detail, we can show students how mechanics or style may affect performance in that skill.

Although this paper, like Sample 1, abounds in details, the approach is quite different from that in Sample 1. The introductory paragraph concentrates on the entire table. Details about the pitcher and food scraps and the lead-in to the children's plates reveal much about the table (note the neat contrast between the milk warming and the food cooling), but they bypass the individual diners. A teacher may deal with this potentially faulty emphasis in a number of ways, either praising the technique as a good device for entering the main assignment smoothly, or suggesting that the student get to the main assignment more directly. The lack of an ending, however, suggests either that this student had a less complete picture of the goal of the assignment than did the first writer, or that he ran out of time.

Once into the main section (the description of the children's plates and the plate at the head of the table), the teacher finds that the writer has a keen eye for details and what they reveal: the two small plates to indicate children, the "pile of wet napkins" and what they suggest, the "small fingerprints" which are not only on the spoon but cover it. This author has a tendency to rely less on stereotypes. Instead of the succinct lists given us by the first author, which suggest immediately a "type" of person, the second author seems to delight in playing with the items at the table to encourage us to see the characters come alive. The leftover pieces mixed and piled; the fork still stuck in a bagel, its position half on and half off; the half olive pit perched atop

the pile of leftovers -- these details, though not necessarily more perceptive than those in Sample 1, are presented in a livelier, more immediate manner.

The style of Sample 3 is different from that of either 1 or 2. It seems more expository than narrative. Such wording as "this, and the fact that," "prove that company has come and gone," and "shows evidence of" lends a less convincing tone to the paper.

Some of the details turn into editorial comments, which, instead of revealing the characters of the diners, are used to prove what kinds of people sat there. "One place seems to stand out," "which seems strange," and "evidence of less refined tastes" are phrases typifying this editorializing technique.

Many of the details are good, however. The red lipstick, carried through three lines in paragraph two, subtly suggests an overdressed woman, perhaps nervous and unsure of herself, an impression intensified by the "smashed and battered" cigarette in the ash tray. The touches about the "pink, moist, chewing gum underneath the plate" and the strangely clouded glass also make subtle points -- perhaps the woman's spoiled son, perhaps two people involved in an unpleasant conversation.

However simple or complicated our interpretation of the scene, the writer's details do suggest the tone of conversation or action at the meal and the types of characters involved.

The final sentence, unfortunately, detracts from the effect. First, its editorial comment about the difference and sameness of the people is a weak attempt at a conclusion to an otherwise adequate work. Second, the misuse of the word tastes, which seems to be a relatively insignificant matter of diction in the next-to-last paragraph, creates a disconcerting ambiguity in the final paragraph.

The weakness of the final paragraph should lead teacher and student to a thorough exploration of effective conclusions and of the uses and abuses of editorializing. The teacher could refer to the final paragraph in evaluating the entire composition, pointing out that the editorial style might be misunderstood to imply that the reader is not intelligent enough to discover the character of the diners through the selected descriptive details. Then the teacher could suggest that the editorializing more probably indicates the writer's lack of confidence in her ability to develop ideas through the use of specific details. At the end of the conference, the teacher might encourage the student to revise and rewrite the piece, eliminating the editorializing and strengthening the details, or the teacher might simply praise the student for the good details already used. As always, the individual involved will determine the teacher's approach.

In Sample 4 a familiar problem arises. The rest of the class has worked the full forty-five minutes to write a well-developed page or page and a half, conscientiously attempting to fulfill the assignment. One student, however, with an eye toward brevity, writes a composition that fills no more than a third or a half of a page.

One hopes that English teachers are not judging any work purely on its length. Gone, one hopes, are the days of "Write a 450-word essay . . . " Still, length may reflect the student's ability and commitment to develop a paper. What, then, does one do when one paper is so much shorter than the others? Perhaps the answer lies in rereading the assignment and the response. Does the short piece fulfill the assignment in terms of the single skill being evaluated? The answer in the case of Sample 4 is "partially."

Indeed, the details have the tone of a still life: "swirls and spires rising from the marsh of gravy," "fragments of beef strewn like a jigsaw puzzle," and that neatly-drawn napkin, with only its corner in the gravy, are examples of the student's artistic eye for detail. Certainly, this writer-artist has given the reader a terse, vivid description, but this is only half the assignment.

Has the author revealed the character of the diner? Fulfilling that requirement is the second half of the assignment. In Samples 1, 2, and 3 the characters revealed are recognizable: neat and sloppy eaters, children and adults, a nervous woman and her frustrated companion. But in Sample 4 no clear character emerges; at least none is developed consistently: "Swirls and spires" of potatoes and a spotless napkin seem to be opposing characteristics, and the knife that is "poised" and the fragments of beef that are "strewn" reflect a similar incongruity. Only in the innocence of the fork and the battle scars on the leftovers do we have evidence that the inconsistencies may be intentional.

The teacher must decide, probably in discussion with the student, whether the student attempted to portray a character with conflicting traits or simply failed to plan and develop the details consistently. If the latter is true, the teacher has an excellent opportunity to show the student how further planning and development of the details may produce a more coherent and unified composition, regardless of the length.

The length of this composition is, alone, of little real concern; the development of the idea is. If the development suffers from the brevity of the piece, the composition is too short. If, on the other hand, the inconsistent character revelation and the questions it raises are the result of intent and careful planning, the length may be adequate.

Finally, one might be concerned about the lack of an

introduction and a closing to the piece. This composition does not seem to stand as a complete work, a point that might be brought to the student's attention in illustrating how an introduction and conclusion would improve the over-all tone of the response. In evaluating this paper from the single-skill point of view, however, the teacher would not take the lack of introduction and conclusion into consideration; the assignment asks only for a description, not a fully polished composition.

All four samples presented in this section are respectable responses to the assignment. How the teacher comments on them in a classroom situation or in private conference depends on the teaching moment, for in that moment, as the creative urge of the student and the disciplining guidance of the teacher interact, a sense of challenge and growth emerges -- and perhaps a true writer and a better teacher are in the making.

TESTS ON COMPREHENSION OF PROSE

In the lower grades, 5 and 6, the teacher begins to select texts that go beyond a direct level of communication and into the level of implied meanings. Now the teacher is concerned not only with students' comprehension of a piece of literature in its entirety, on a basic level, but also with their sensitivity to subtle undercurrents that imply deeper meanings or that raise unanswered questions. The tests and sample answers that follow may encourage teachers to seek the best possible anthologies or individual literary works appropriate to a particular grade level, and may be useful in encouraging students to discover layers of meaning that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. They also show the higher levels of sophistication that teachers can, and should, expect from students in grades 7 and 8 and in grades 9 and beyond. Equally important, these tests and answers should be a helpful guide to the preparation of essay tests and to the evaluation of students' answers.

Essay answers to tests on comprehension of prose provide teachers with an excellent opportunity to evaluate skills in comprehension and in expository writing. Since so-called objective tests (typically, questions with predetermined multiple-choice or true-false answers) give little latitude for a student's intellectual probing of a literary passage and no opportunity for expository writing, we strongly encourage the use of the time-consuming but far more effective essay test.

A TEST OF PROSE COMPREHENSION, GRADES 5 THROUGH 8

Travels with Charley

Preparing young students for tests like the following one is a long process. The demands of essay answers can seem terrifyingly undefined, and unless students have had exposure to tests of this kind, they will react with a flurry of anxiety. "Practice" tests, followed by a discussion of duplicated sample answers from the best responses, are very helpful in reducing anxiety. This procedure, reinforced periodically by a similar treatment of "real" tests, eventually results in solid preparation.

TIME: Allow 30 minutes.

DIRECTIONS: Carefully read the following passage, and then answer the questions on it. (Feel free to underline or to make notes on this sheet.)

My finger was reluctant to touch the trigger, I must be getting very old and my ancient conditioning worn thin. Coyotes are vermin. They steal chickens. They thin the ranks of quail and all other game birds. They must be killed. They are the enemy. My first shot would drop the sitting beast, and the other would whirl to fade away. I might very well pull him down with a running shot because I am a good rifleman.

And I did not fire. My training said, "Shoot!" and my age replied, "There isn't any chicken within thirty miles, and if there are any they aren't my chickens. And this waterless place is not quail country. No. These boys are keeping their figures with kangaroo rats and jackrabbits, and that's vermin eat vermin. Why should I interfere?"

"Kill them," my training said. "Everyone kills them. It's a public service." My finger moved to the trigger. The cross was steady on the breast just below the panting tongue. I could imagine the splash and jar of angry steel, the leap and struggle until the torn heart failed, and then, not too long later, the shadow of a buzzard, and another. By that time I would be long gone -- out of the desert and across the Colorado River. And beside the sagebrush there would be a naked,

eyeless skull, a few picked bones, a spot of
28 black dried blood and a few rags of golden fur.
I guess I'm too old and too lazy to be a good citizen. The second coyote stood sidewise to my rifle. I moved the cross hairs to his shoulder and held steady. There was no question of missing with the rifle at that
34 range. I owned both animals. Their lives were mine. I put the safety on and laid the rifle on the table. Without the telescope they were not so intimately close.

QUESTIONS: Read all of the questions before you begin to write. The last question will count somewhat more than the others. Be sure to use complete sentences in your answers.

1. What reasons does the author give for killing the coyotes?

2. What reasons does the author give for not killing the coyotes?

3. Why is "a few rags of golden fur" (line 28) better in this passage than just "a piece of fur"?

4. Why does the author say he "owned both animals"? (line 34)

5. Does the speaker in the passage kill the coyotes, or not? Explain your answer fully, being sure to give as many clues from the passage as you can to support your position.

This test has worked best with students in grades 6 through 8. However, the arrangement of the questions makes the test

suitable also for the fifth grade. Questions 1 and 2, for instance, help students to do better on 3, 4, and 5. Indeed, they almost force students to take a second and third look at the passage. Most fifth graders grasp the conflict in the narrator's (the author's) mind, but many take quite literally the ironic excuses for not killing the coyotes ("getting very old," "ancient conditioning wearing thin," "too old and too lazy to be a good citizen"). Most understand the implied decision not to shoot the coyotes, but some are thrown off by the final sentence and read into it a suggestion that without the telescopic sight the author has given the coyotes a sporting chance before shooting them. A very few students, unfamiliar with firearms, are confused by the reference to the safety and assume that it has something to do with taking more careful aim. Given such misinterpretations as these latter two, the teacher might appropriately allow some credit to the students for attempting to make sense out of a justifiable misunderstanding. One would hope, however, that the teacher has created a classroom atmosphere that makes the students feel comfortable in asking questions about matters that puzzle them.

Most of the answers that follow are by students in grades 6 through 8. A few illustrative and interesting answers by 5th graders are also included. All were written in class within a thirty-minute time limit for reading and writing.

Answers by Student A, grade 7:

1. *The author said that coyotes were vermin. They kill chickens; quail and all other game birds. He stated them as the enemy. The author said it would be a public service.*

2. *There weren't any chickens within thirty miles, and none were the rifleman's. There were no quails in this waterless place, the coyotes weren't really as close as they seemed to be.*

3. *It shows how the buzzards would tear up and eat the coyote with the word rags, and the golden fur is helpful to show us the color of the coyote.*

4. *He owned the fate of the coyotes, he would kill them or let them go.*

5. *No, he was contemplating this question, finding, in my mind, more reasons not to than to kill the coyotes. At the end of the passage he states that they were really out of his range anyway. Another point is that he laid the rifle on the table before he noticed the long range, it says to me that his mind was made up.*

The answers by Student A illustrate mediocrity in reading comprehension but clear competence in written expression (despite some lapses in sentence punctuation).

The first answer is a succinct pre-analytical restatement of Steinbeck's own wording, selected in detail from context. Its only fault is that it does not probe beneath this level; it does not indicate that the student has sensed the uncompromising laws of society in the preservation of livestock and the protection of game. By confining the language of the answer to the language of the passage itself, the student has limited the possibility of probing the text for implications.

The answer to Question 2 is far less effective than the answer to Question 1. It does not mention the part that these coyotes would play in killing other vermin; it gives no idea of the compassion implicit in the third paragraph of the passage and it makes no reference to the author's age, either on a literal level or on a level suggesting the conflict between duty and individual judgment.

The answer to the third question is good. It certainly is explicit in showing sensitivity to the word rags. It falls short of excellence, however, in failing to explore the full significance of golden fur, either by itself or in contrast to the rags. Unfortunately, Question 3 is the kind of question that delights teachers in their anticipation of good answers but often disappoints them with inadequate answers. Perhaps the question should be rephrased as follows: Why is "a few rags of golden fur" (line 28) better in this passage than "a piece of light-brown fur"?

The answer to Question 4 is commendable for its economy and accuracy.

A full answer to Question 5, however, requires discussions of the conflicts between duty and feeling, between public obligation and private reason, between the executive being and the aesthetic being. It involves a drawing together of all the elements touched on in Questions 1 through 4. References to putting on the safety and laying the rifle on the table are not enough. The answer by Student A is almost ruined by the misinterpretation about the range (in contradiction to what the student had already written in answer to Question 4) and is made barely passable by its reference to no more than the safety and the rifle.

Student A's answers are typical of those of many seventh and eighth graders. They are the answers of a person clearly ready for more searching comprehension of literature. The teacher can best help such students by holding high expectations, by encouraging perceptive insights in classroom discus-

sions, and by asking the sort of oblique questions that lead toward a discovery of the pleasures awaiting the reader who is becoming sensitive to implied meanings.

Answers by Student B, grade 6:

1. *Coyotes are vermin. They steal chickens. They thin the ranks of quail and all other game birds.*

2. *There isn't any chicken within thirty miles, and if there are any they aren't my chickens. And this waterless place is not quail country.*

3. *Fur was very valuable to people who lived out there because it was very rare. They were poor so anything that looked very valuable they praised it.*

4. *The animals became his because he had them trapped and he had them in a good position or what ever, to kill them.*

5. *Yes, he kills the coyote because he had them trapped and he said their lives are mine.*

The answers by Student B are not typical, but such answers occur with enough frequency among middle-school students to warrant comment. First of all, this student handed in her paper before half the allotted time was up, and she rejected an admonition to take back her paper and at least proofread it. Second, she indicated, by her answers, that her reading was superficial and impatient, her comprehension marred by serious misinterpretations of parts of the passage. Apparently she assumed that Steinbeck's statement that he "owned both animals" meant that he had "trapped" them and that he was going to keep their cage locked by means of the safety. Even more serious is her conjecture that golden fur refers to monetary worth and that the people living in "this waterless place" must be so poor that the golden fur seems very valuable.

Teaching students to hold their interpretations in abeyance until they are into their second or third reading of a passage can be one of the most important lessons that a teacher can pass on to the maturing reader. The haste, impatience, and inaccuracy evident in Student B's work indicate that she needs help on a one-to-one basis until she overcomes her costly patterns of reading.

Answers by Student C, grade 7:

1. *One of the reasons the author gave for killing the coyotes was that they steal the chickens from the farmers. Another reason he had for killing the coyotes was that they killed off the quail and other game birds which the hunters hunt for sport. Also everybody else kills them too, and he sees it as a good deed to the community.*

2. *One of the reasons the author gives for not shooting them, is that there isn't even a chicken within thirty miles of the place. And even if there were any chickens they weren't his so why should he care.*

   There also weren't any quail or game birds in the area just rats and jackrabbits, so its just a vermin eat vermin area. He doesn't see why he should interfere with this cycle.

   He also doesn't kill the animals because of how they would run then fall to the ground squirming until their last bit of energy was gone. He also thought about them lying there dead, being picked at by some buzzards. This he did not want.

3. *"A few rags of golden fur" is better than a "piece of fur" because it is more descriptive. It gives the reader a more clear understanding and also it makes it much more interesting, and more fun to read.*

4. *The author says he owned both animals because at that moment the lives of both of those coyotes was in the hands of the author. It was up to him and only him whether or not these creatures would live or not, so he owned their lives at that moment.*

5. *The author does not shoot the two animals. After discussing it with himself he made up his mind to not kill them. He put the safety lock on and put the rifle down. He sees himself getting old and to soft hearted to kill something for no reason at all. He had the perfect chance to do it, but he didn't.*

With the exception of the answer to Question 3, this set is excellent. Answers 1 and 2 go well beyond a mere parroting of the text; they give persuasive evidence that the student has a self-assured comprehension of implied meanings as well as of stated meanings. Viewed as a whole, this set of answers suggests, too, a need for flexibility in the teacher's approach to evaluation. The answer to Question 2, for instance, is so detailed, probing, and explicit that it anticipates the answer

to Question 5. The answer to Question 5 is therefore no longer than it should be. In fact, the student's attention to explicit details in Question 2 has allowed for an interpretive summation in Question 5.

A particular characteristic of good answers is especially clear in this set; each answer begins with an implicit restatement of the question. Almost invariably the student who has acquired the discipline of stating, in the first sentence, the purpose of the answer is going to produce at least adequate answers. The teacher who insists on such a format will be doing the student an important service.

Selected Illustrative Answers to Questions 1, 3, and 5

Answer to Question 1, by Student D, grade 6:

> 1. *The author says that coyotes are vermins and they steal chickens. He knows that everyone kills them and that it is a public service, because they are vermin. They must be killed.*

For succinctness and perception it would be hard to improve on this answer. It gets all the implications.

Answer to Question 3, by Student E, grade 7:

> 3. *I feel "a few rags of golden fur" (line 28) is better for this passage because it seems to compare two different thoughts in the same phrase. "A few rags" refers to an image referring to a poor, worthless side of the animal. On the other hand, "Golden fur" portrays a contrasting image of the coyote's beautiful coat.*

This answer, though a bit weak in its follow-through, is the kind that gratifies the expectations of the teacher who has introduced the idea of connotation. Such a good answer clearly indicates a superior student.

Answer to Question 5, by Student F, grade 8:

5. *I believe the speaker did not kill these animals. He never states that he does, and the implications that he has are not very strong. In the third paragraph he says it's a public service to kill them. Afterwards, in the fourth paragraph he says "I guess I'm too old and too lazy to be a good citizen." Immediately after he declares his ownership of the coyotes, he puts the safety on his rifle, without giving any hint that the gun has been fired. He does not go to collect the animals, yet seemingly remains stationary and observes the distance between him and the coyotes.*

The careful reasoning here is persuasive evidence that the student has read the passage carefully and has comprehended it fully. The evidence is persuasive because it is explicit and very specific. It is a model of the kind of specificity and organization that the teacher should hope for from a very able 8th-grade student.

The following answers by fifth graders, though better than those typically written at this grade level, are not unusual, and they do illustrate the kind of rewarding answers that teachers get from students who are still unashamedly naive in their approach to writing. They are the kind of answers that we teachers must praise and encourage in hope that such intuitive rightness can be preserved through the years of increasing sophistication.

Answer to Question 3, by Student G, grade 5:

3. *A few rags of fur is better to say instead of a piece of fur because it gives more detail for instance it gives the color of the animal and how the hair was torn apart.*

Though failing to labor with the word golden, this student has clearly sensed and explicitly dealt with the connotation of rags.

Answer to Question 3, by Student H, grade 5:

3. *The reason why a few rags of golden fur is better than a piece of fur in these passages is that a few rags of golden fur sounds prettier and lonlier and sad.*

This answer captures, in its touchingly subjective response, all that one could hope for.

Answer to Question 3, by Student I, grade 5:

3. *"A few rags of golden fur" is better than saying "a piece of fur" because in this passage before it says "a few rags of golden fur" it says things like a naked, eyeless skull and that is pretty well described facts.*

Here we see a student who is aware of Steinbeck's use of descriptive detail and who realizes that the style demands a sensitive description of the fur. This is a sophisticated answer by a student who has learned how to use quotation marks.

The following answers to Question 5, if combined, would serve as a model for the fully explored and persuasively explained answer. Even as separate answers they are remarkable for their thoughtfulness, and they certainly show that a fifth grader who has been effectively instructed in the techniques of writing an essay answer can handle this test.

Answer to Question 5, by Student J, grade 5:

5. *No, the author does not kill the coyotes. I know that because he says, "I laid the rifle on the table," without saying he killed the animals. Also I know because when he said that he laid the rifle on the table, then he said, "Without the telescope they were not so intimately close." It means he didn't want to think about it being such an easy shot because he didn't want to shoot them. (The telescope means the gun.)*

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Answer to Question 5, by Student K, grade 5:

5. *I don't think that the author killed the coyotes. He said he was not a good citizen. He also said one of the reasons that he should kill them is it was a "Public service." If he will not do a public service he is not a good citizen. Another reason is that he said that there weren't any quail or chicken in the desert, so the coyotes were simply eating things that nobody cared about. The coyotes weren't killing anything of importance. So, he thought, let them live.*

Some Conclusions

What the teacher should be encouraging, then, through thoughtfully selected literature in grades 5-8 is a developing awareness of the author's intentions in selecting and organizing details -- sometimes for supporting direct statements, sometimes for suggesting unstated ideas -- and the author's intentions in choosing words for their connotations as well as for their denotations.

Brief quizzes with questions designed to elicit responses to both statements and implications are one device for directing students toward more perceptive reading of literature. Such quizzes also help the teacher to recognize students who are having unusual difficulty and who may need special help.

Readings aloud are another device. By encouraging students to very pitch, stress, and juncture in conformity to punctuation and sentence structure, the teacher can show students how to sustain the development of a written idea through the complexities of sentences and paragraphs. The student who reads well aloud is usually a competent reader in all circumstances, but the student who stumbles in reading aloud may or may not be competent. Comparisons of quiz scores with performances in readings aloud can therefore yield helpful diagnostic information.

A further advantage derived from quizzes and readings aloud is the opportunity for discussing interpretations. All students, whether talking or listening during discussions, are involved, and if they are willing to offer or defend or attack interpretations, they show classmates and the teacher alike the processes -- faulty or commendable -- by which they arrive at their interpretations. Properly supervised to prevent domination, embarrassment, or humiliation, such activity can be a very positive learning experience.

A TEST OF READING COMPREHENSION, GRADES 9 AND ABOVE

Life on the Mississippi

The following passage and questions turned out to be an ideal test for discovering 9th-grade students' comprehension of closely-read prose and their ability to express their thoughts in expository form. It is also a guide to the teacher in getting across skills in close reading, such as perception of implied meanings and sensitivity to stylistic enhancement of intellectual and emotional effects.

TIME: Allow 45 minutes.

DIRECTIONS: In the following passage taken from Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain tells of his experiences as a riverboat pilot. Read the passage carefully. Then answer the questions on it. (Feel free to underline or to make notes on this sheet.)

> 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 was never so wonderful a book written by man; never one whose interest was so absorbing, so unflagging, so sparklingly renewed with every perusal. 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 was 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 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 made 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!

1. Several times in this passage Twain contrasts "the passenger" with "the pilot." What are the contrasts that he points out?

2. How does Twain feel toward "the passenger"? Draw fully on all the evidence in the passage that supports your answer.

3. Reread lines 19-25. Then show fully and specifically why each of the following phrases that Twain uses is better than the suggested substitute. To do this well, you must do two things: (1) Show just why Twain's wording is effective, and (2) show just why the substitute is less effective.

   a. *"italicized* passage" rather than "danger signal (line 20)

   b. "with a string of shouting exclamation-points" rather than "with a string of panic-stricken dashes" (line 22)

   c. "tear the life out of" instead of "destroy" (lines 24-25)

4. In lines 37-38 Twain says, "I had made a valuable acquisition." Explain fully

and specifically what this "acquisition" was and why it is "valuable."

5. In lines 38-39 Twain says, "But I had lost something, too." Explain fully and specifically what he had lost and how he had lost it.

The following set of answers by a beginning 9th grader is adequate. Rather than probing, he attempts to deal with the passage and questions on a simple, workmanlike level. For lack of a more searching approach, however, these answers are vulnerable to insufficiency and inaccuracy.

1. *The passenger could not read it just saw the pretty pictures, if he did not overlook that. The pilot of the ship who could read it understood its "exclamation points" which pointed out a rock or a wreck. So to the passenger the river was pretty pictures whereas to the trained eyes it was "the grimmest of reading matter."*

This answer to Question 1 shows a sophisticated sense of how to work quotations into the context. There are some minor difficulties with inadequate punctuation and with vague reference of pronouns to antecedents, but since these difficulties may be the result of the student's writing under pressure, one need not make more than passing mention of them. The significant problem with this answer is the failure to point out the contrast between the pilot's sense of responsibility and the passenger's aesthetic enjoyment of the river. In dealing with only the most obvious contrast -- between the pilot's knowledge and the passenger's ignorance -- the student seems to have missed the tone and all the evocative language and imagery of the passage.

Rather than tearing into this answer as being short of expectations, however, the teacher might be wiser to hold judgment in abeyance and look for values in the succeeding answers. An angered or disappointed judgment on the first answer can unfairly color one's judgment of the whole paper.

In this student's succeeding answers, unfortunately, there is little to cheer,

2. *Twain envies the passenger because all he sees*

are pictures while the trained eye sees the danger signs. As he says at the end, "But I had lost something, too. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the magestic river!"

3. a. *"Italicized passage" puts more feeling into the sentence. Also, the river is compared to a book and italicizes can be found in a book.*

b. *"With a string of shouting exclamation points" makes it sound like the river is alive which Twain wants the reader to think.*

c. *"Tear the life out of" again makes the river sound alive and it, also, replaces the common place descriptive words.*

With the exception of 3a, which makes note of the extended metaphor, these responses lack the kind of perception that would lift the answers above a workmanlike mediocrity. The answers to 4 and 5 are also illustrative of this student's limitations.

4. *Twain's acquisition was the mastering the language of the water. This was valuble because he, too, could not know what the river was saying.*

One might charitably say that this is "a modest little answer."

5. *Twain had lost all the grace, the beauty, the poetry of the river which had gone out once he learned that the river was "not pictures at all but the grimmest and most earnest of reading matter."*

Like the student's answer to Question 1, this answer reveals an ability for clear expression, but it brings us to the end of the test without any new development of thought. The student did not see that each question was intended to illuminate or bring into relief some implications that the casual reader might have missed.

Since many students entering 9th grade typically write such answers, one can assume that this student hasn't shifted

intellectual gears for the tougher demands of a high-school test. The best device for pulling such a student up to the challenge is to read aloud (maybe even post on a bulletin board) several outstanding examples of good, sensitive, perceptive answers. Though some students at this age pretend to scorn the "good student" and the "good answer," they secretly wish to emulate at least the achievements.

Encouragement, repeated and persistent, is what this student needs. The raw materials for good answers are evident in what he has written. He has merely failed to work with the materials.

The following answers to Questions 1 and 2 illustrate a much more rigorous attempt to deal with the subtleties of the passage. They are by a student who spent too much time, however, on these two questions and then fell short of time and expectations on the remaining answers.

1. *"The passenger" and "the piolet" represent the people who rode the river boats. These titles also represent that view of the river. To the passenger "the river was a thing of beauty when calm. He looked at only the pretty side of the picture. He rides these boats for pleasure. This man need not know what lies beneath the surface. To the opposite of this "passenger" is the "piolet." The "piolet" has the lives of everybody on board the ship in his hands. He must not look for the artistic or wonderful things upon the river but for the danger which lies in every bend. He notices the slightest ripple for danger. He reads the signs of danger of the river.*

   After this the main difference between the "piolet" and the "passenger" is that the "passenger" rides the boats for pleasure and sees only the beauty of things while the "piolet" sees only the danger signs while he works.

2. *Mark Twain considers the "passenger" uneducated. He thinks of the "passenger" as a person in a forgien country, not knowing the language and relying on his guide to lead him. Twain points out that the "passenger" does not notice the danger signals, all he does is view his pretty side of the river. The "passenger" does not "read" the river the way it really is. He ignores the dangerous "slight" things like a calm in the river or a dimple on its surface. Still Twain has a little envy for the "passenger". The educated man sees the river no longer as pretty or gay but only as dangerous and grim.*

The answer to Question 1 captures much in the essential contrasts, but its repetitiveness betrays a nervous lack of self-confidence. The first two sentences are a wheel-spinning attempt to get into the test. The remainder of the paragraph shows a good, detailed, specific perception of Twain's attitudes, but it is marred by a motor-racing anxiety that precludes a well-organized, succinct statement. The second paragraph seems to have been tacked on in frantic uncertainty that it hadn't all been said in the first paragraph. Or it might be a desperate obeisance to the sacred trinity of the well-constructed composition -- introduction, body, and conclusion.

This answer is a good reminder that length is not always to be equated with quality. The student needs the teacher's assurance that the answer has all the elements of excellence, but that a calmer approach will yield a more coherent expression. The teacher can best help the student by pointing to what can be <u>easily</u> and <u>quickly</u> improved in this answer (e.g., deletion of the first two sentences and the second paragraph).

The best answer to Question 2 should express the pilot's mixture of contempt for the passenger's ignorance and envy of the passenger's bliss. This student's answer comes very close to capturing that ambivalence. But again it reflects a full-throttled race to get everything down on paper without quite focusing on the essential answer.

The following answers to Question 3, written by another student, present the teacher with an interesting problem in evaluation:

3a. *Twains wording of italicized passage is good because it is a suttle way of stating danger and importance. This way is better (a suttle way) because the water is calm and silent (to the passenger) but quietly holds deadly secrets. The word "italicized" also fits with the metaphor made of comparing the river to a book. Substituting danger signal is more violent and doesn't fit with the metaphor. Danger signal suggests that there is a definate probability of danger, while italicized passage suggests that there is the hint of danger only to the reader, no others (the passenger) even acknoledge it as a hint.*

b. *Twain's wording again fits better because it suggests excitement which is calm. The excitement is caused by the knowledge of the pilot that there is danger. Panic stricken dashes suggests panic. Panic is generally generated by people (passengers) who don't know what is going on and who are inexperienced. These signs are read only by the experienced, so a calm suggestion of <u>past</u> <u>panic</u> would be excitement.*

Excitement because the pilot knows enough so that it isn't dangerous, while the passenger doesn't know anything and is calm. The two suggestions for wording equally carry out the metaphor.

c. *Tear the life out is better because it suggests quiet motions that are fatal. Tearing the life out of gives the idea of being unknowing like someone sneaking up on you. The pilot, no matter how well he "reads" still doesn't know exactly what everything is like so there is mystery involved. Destroy is violent and it produces ideas of bombs which are not calm. This passage (all 3) maintain an atmosphere of calmness, the kind of atmosphere one might expect in a situation where there is an emergency in a hospital, quiet, orderly and suspenseful.*

The student has correctly seen the value of consistency in the extended metaphor, but has taken a complex and misleading point of view in seeing these figures through the eyes of a pilot who feels serene in his ability to navigate the river. Thus the student sees Twain's wording as a serene reflection on dangers that might have been, and sees the suggested alternative wording as an expression of raw emotional response to immediate danger. Instead of dealing directly with the questions, this student has buried the intended meaning under a very abstract interpretation of the context. Nonetheless, the answers are otherwise so specific, thoughtful, and carefully informative that the teacher must give substantial credit. Here is a good example of what can happen when a very intelligent student, "thinking too precisely on the event," goes beyond what was intended.

How to deal with this problem is a matter of one's philosophy of education. The teacher wants the student to be "test wise" -- able to see that a standardized test may probe for fine points but will probably not explore profound abstract meanings. Yet the teacher should not discourage the student from deep creative thinking. Here, then, is the rationale for the teacher's exposing students to a variety of tests: a few that are standardized, such as this, and others that are prepared by the teacher especially for students in a particular course. Such tests as the latter can explore as deeply and demand as much as the teacher's desires and the students' capabilities will allow.

The following answers to Question 3 are an unusually concise example of what the teacher would hope for.

3a. *The main reason that Twain's wording is effective*

is because he has up to that time told about the river as a book and therefore it would not be good writing to right away use some stereotyped words as "danger signal." Secondly danger signal would be less effective because it does not continue the "book" writing. Also if Twain would have used danger signal he would have to have changed the construction of the entire paragraph and it would have altogether become less effective.

b. *"Exclamation points" give the reader a sense of something exciting happening since exclamations usually have to do with excitement while dashes would leave the sentence with a lack of danger or excitement even with the words panic-stricken added on.*

c. *"Tear the life out" makes the reader feel as if the ship has died like human beings while a commonly-used word destroy makes it sound like the ship has been destructed.*

The answer to 3a is unusually perceptive, revealing not only Twain's obligation to the extended metaphor but also the image-destructive consequences of tampering with the metaphor. The answer to 3b is a specifically detailed subjective response, just what a subjective response must be if it is to be persuasive.

The answer to 3c may give the purist some pause over the use of the space-jargon destructed, but that use reveals a remarkably accurate perception of connotations. An excellent distinction is made between words modifying living beings and words modifying mechanical objects.

The following answers, to Questions 4 and 5, are written by yet another student. They show a sure, specific, unadorned understanding of the passage.

4. *It is the "acquisition" of the skill of being able to read the river with all of its tricks. To a pilot of a river boat this "acquisition" was invaluable. For without being able to read the river the pilot would for sure steer in to a rock or wreak unseen to him and sink the boat.*

5. *He had lost the ability to look at the river and see the good things, the reflections on the water or the smoothness. For now he always saw the bad things, snages, rocks wrecks, and so on. He would never be able to look at a river now and see beauty*

This student should be encouraged, however, to be less blunt and more informative with opening sentences. The use of pronouns without antecedents, at the beginnings of these two answers, is the result of thoughtless practice. The student has not been made aware of the confusion that it may cause the reader. Until a student is self-assured enough to use a purposefully different approach, the standard procedure is still the most helpful to student and teacher: "The 'valuable acquisition' that Twain had made was . . . " Such procedure, when it has become a practice, is in itself a valuable acquisition.

TESTS ON COMPREHENSION OF POETRY

The NAIS English Committee has discovered that poetry is the genre most likely to be slighted in the English curricula of middle and upper schools. We hope, therefore, that this section will be especially useful as a practical guide to what may be taught in class and what may be expected of students. We have included at the end of this section a list of suggestions that may be helpful to teachers who have felt shy about teaching poetry (possibly because poetry was slighted in their own schooling).

The questions and answers analyzed in the following pages are based on situations in which students were confronted with a test of their powers of interpretive thinking. The assumption is that the students had had thorough practice with close reading of poetry in class and out, in group study and as individuals. As with the other sections of this Notebook, however, the reader is cautioned to remember that the students' answers were written in class and were virtually first drafts.

A TEST OF POETRY COMPREHENSION, GRADES 5 THROUGH 7

A Test on "Night Is a Curious Child"

TIME: Allow 30 minutes.

DIRECTIONS: Study the following poem. Then answer the questions. Your answers should be

carefully stated. Express your thoughts in complete sentences. You may use this examination sheet for any notes and underlinings that may help you.

Night Is a Curious Child

from

"Four Glimpses of Night:

Night is a curious child, wandering
Between earth and sky, creeping
In windows and doors, daubing
The entire neighborhood
With purple paint.
Day
Is an apologetic mother
Cloth in hand
Following after.

Frank Marshall Davis, "Night Is a Curious Child," from "Four Glimpses of Night," in Black Voices, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1968). All attempts to locate Mr. Davis to secure his permission to reprint this poem have proved unsuccessful.

QUESTIONS:

1. The poet calls "night" a "child." What does night do in the poem that is like what a child might do? (Do not just quote from the poem.)

2. What does "purple paint" mean? Why "purple"?

3. Why is "daubing," in line 3, better than painting?

4. "Day" is described as a "mother." Why is the mother "apologetic"?

5. Does day (in the poem) act in a motherly way? Give reasons for your answer.

6. The poet presents day and night as two characters. Does he seem to like one better than the other? Give reasons for your answer.

An Analysis of Students' Answers, Grade 6

Finding a poem of literary value for children in grades 5 through 7 is difficult. The poem must be within the children's grasp, yet must stretch their sense of the imaginative uses of words. One such poem is this one, "Night Is a Curious Child," from "Four Glimpses of Night," a charming little quartet by Frank Marshall Davis. This poem also has some interesting devices of sound and rhythm. In grades 5 through 7 a study of these devices is better left to classroom discussion than to a written test.

The results of our pretest on this poem show what may be expected of a child at middle-school level. An analysis of some answers by 6th graders follows.

1a. *It is curious and wanders and creeps around and paints and daubs.*

This answer is so cautious that it never gets outside the language of the poem itself. We cannot see whether or not the student has made a connection between his own understanding of childhood and the author's conception of night as a child. Moreover, the vague reference of "It" is typical of the sort of sentence construction that children use unless shown more accurat and effective patterns for answering. The teacher can provide an amusing and informative lesson in making an answer more probing than this by getting the students to act out the role of the child and thus discover what "curious" and "creeping" suggest.

1b. *Night was wandering, creeping and daubing paint on things, just like what a little child may do.*

This answer does make that important connection, but fails to show a specific appreciation of the connection.

1c. *It shows how any ordinary kid would be curious enough to go in to rooms and look around to see what he can paint on.*

Again the vague "It." However, this student begins with a personal conception of childhood and then specifically relates that conception to details of the poem.

1d. *The night wanders between Earth and sky, representing daydreaming. It crawls through windows and doors as if playing follow-the-leader. Then it paints some mischeif into its' life.*

This answer reaches successfully for a specific childhood parallel to each of the author's images. The answer is well organized, succinctly stated, and perceptively imaginative.

Question 2 tries to discover how far a student will reasonably go in exploring a word-choice. The following answers illustrate some struggles with the question:

2a. *Purple paint is the color of the sky at night, and the paint should be purple because that is the color of the sky at night.*

This answer is unsatisfactory because it does not go beyond the simplest literal explanation. On the other hand, the following answer, which explores more than a literal significance, poses a difficult problem for the teacher:

2b. *Purple paint means the dark, gloom of night. The author chose purple because he or she thinks of purple as a dark, dingy color.*

This seems to be a clear misinterpretation of the author's intention. The emphasis of the poem is on the mischievous child, not some sense of gloom. Moreover, a word like dingy has a connotation of grime or soot, which one would not associate with purple. The teacher should be open to unexpected interpretations, but should be sure that such interpretations are acceptable in context. Here the teacher, in subsequent discussion of the test, has an excellent opportunity to open up discussion on the emotional impact of the words.

The next answer is probably acceptable:

2c. *The purple paint is the darkness of night creeping over the houses. Because that usally the color of the sky and because little children like the color.*

Although the student falls far short of expected sentence

structure, here at least is an attempt to show that purple is a color that a child likes.

In the following answer, a student with a clearer idea of sentence structure explores a different interpretation:

> 2d. *"Purple paint" is night and the darkness that it brings. Purple was used either because it was the hue that objects seemed to be at night or because it is a softer description of the color of night than black.*

In this answer the student is more concerned with the delicacy of the image than with the activities of the child. It is a good answer even though it is not thorough.

In the following answer, one might quarrel with the use of incomplete sentences, though there is an attempt at parallel structure. The thoroughness of the answer seems beyond question however.

> 2a. *Purple because black is too drab for a child to like. Purple isn't bright because the color is supposed to represent night but it has enough color to atract a child. Purple because a child is usually afraid of the dark and the night isn't always completely dark.*

Question 3 further emphasizes word choice. The following answer brings out an interesting problem for the teacher:

> 3a. *Daubing is a better word because it means just spots painted on something and painting is throughoutly covered but daubing of night can be scrached out by light.*

This seems so garbled that the teacher who has become weary and impatient with paper marking might give it a failing grade. A closer look, however, reveals that an imaginative student is trying desperately to express himself in spite of his unwieldy sentence. For creative interpretation it deserves at least a passing grade. This student can be helped by a sensitive teacher who responds positively to the imagination thoughtfulness and takes the time to show how good editing can enhance the answer.

The next answer is a typical violation of the instruction to write complete sentences. It deserves credit, however, for relating the answer correctly to the dominant metaphor of the poem.

> *3b. Because most little kids don't know how to paint but in stead they just dab the paint on or scrible.*

The next answer suggests the metaphor of the poem and then explores the craftsmanship of word choices:

> *3c. Daubing is better than painting because it sounds like night was just softly touching the paint on. Also because having "painting" in line three, and "paint" in line 5 would sound redundant.*

This is a superior answer because it examines the connotation of daubing itself as well as examining a technique of choosing words. It is conceivable, however, that the examiner may be reading too much into the answer. Many teachers compulsively instruct their students to avoid repetition and to substitute synonyms. The result is often a good word-choice followed by a pallid or wholly inappropriate substitution. Daubing, for instance, is not a synonym for painting. It is a better word choice. Moreover, painting, even if it had been semantically suitable, would have been in awkwardly close proximity to "paint." This student probably is sensitive to the artistic problem inherent in the substitution of painting. (He should be made aware, however, of his sloppy writing style.)

The final answer successfully suggests a sensitivity to connotation, context, and craftsmanship:

> *3d. Daubing is like messing around and painting is work. Children like to make a mess so this child is having fun. Anyway if you have painting in line 3 paint doesn't sound good in line 5. Maybe daubing is like shadows or maybe its the light places in the shadows.*

Question 4 tries to get at the figurative differences that the author has ascribed to night and day. The following answers indicate the range of perception and discipline that the teacher might expect:

4a. *She is apologetic for the things her child has done wrong or damaged.*

In this example the mother is inadequately identified, and the child's behavior is inadequately suggested. The student should be expected to begin with "The mother . . . " and should be more specific than to refer simply to "things . . . done wrong or damaged." Getting an answer started in an informative style that anticipates specific supportive detail is a technique that cannot be overemphasized.

The next answer may seem equally vague:

4b. *The mother is sorry because her son is different and far away from her.*

However, the choices of "different" and "far away" have connotations that suggest untamed, mysterious qualities of the night and a wistful estrangement of the day. If these qualities are specified in the context of this student's other answers, the teacher might be sympathetic to this answer. Students should be encouraged, however, to give complete and independent answers.

The following answer is more detailed, but its focus on Day is almost to the exclusion of Night.

4c. *The mother is apologetic because the day gives us all the beautiful things in life. The same is true for the Mother following behind, because she would be trying to make up for the child's mistakes and offering something else in return. Day in this way apologizes for the Night.*

Here Day is portrayed as a creator and a restorer and as an indulgent mother who forgives her erring child. Only by implication do we get the impression that Night is a strangely innocent yet mischievous child. This answer reads more into the significance of Day, moreover, than is apparent in the poem. Students commonly tend toward conjecture if its pitfalls are not pointed out. The teacher in complimenting this student on the details in the answer should point out that the mother could as easily seem tired and gloomy as one who dispenses "all the beautiful things in life," for the poem offers evidence of neither.

Question 4 is probably best answered by a straightforward statement like the following:

4d. The mother is "apologetic" because her child, night, had daubed purple paint on everything and because he had been wandering and creeping all about.

Question 5 anticipates a variety of interpretations. Thus the reasons are more important than the answers.

The following answer is so subjective that it points up the student's failure to consider the behavior of Day in the context of the poem.

5a. I don't believe the Day acts like an apologetic mother because mothers don't usually come right out and apologize.

Classroom discussion of the test, after the papers have been returned, will help such a student to see that "cloth in hand/ Following after" must also be examined. The next answer, for instance, relates Day to the poem. As an independent answer it lacks explicit detail, but it does attempt to explain the mother's motivation.

5b. Yes, Day acts like a mother. She cleans up and makes right all that Night has done wrong before humans notice it.

Fully explicit is the next answer:

5c. Day does act like a mother in the poem because of the phrase "cloth in hand" sometimes reminds me of a mother because I think of mothers dusting and cleaning the house. Also because its wiping up the purple paint.

but the awkward sentences weaken the effect.

Perhaps the most straightforward and succinct is the following:

5d. *Day acts like a mother because she is following her child with a cloth, cleaning up the mess the child has made.*

Question 6 gives the student an opportunity to give a subjective response to the poem. As with Question 5, the emphasis is placed on the reasons for the response. An answer such as the following is unacceptable, however:

6a. *I think the author likes Night better because he goes into more description of Night.*

A quantitative comparison of Night and Day in the poem gives no idea of how the author reflects on the qualities of Night and Day.

The following answer is excellent as half an answer. Unfortunately, it makes no mention of Day:

6b. *I feel that he prefers Night because he makes it so artistic, as in the line, "Daubing the entire neighborhood with purple paint." And as in the line, "Creeping in windows and doors."*

The student who thinks the author shows no preference can make a respectable point:

6c. *I think the author favors neither day or night. I say this because he understands how easy it is for night to be mischevious, but also understands Day's understanding about Night.*

but the point is blunted here by awkward expression and by a failure to be specific.

There is an engaging candor in the next answer. The student has made an effective quantitative and qualitative comparison. Only the unpolished style bars it from excellence. For instance, the student seems to want to say the poet feels sympathetic to, rather than "sorry" for, Night.

6d. *The poet seems to either like night better or at least feel sorry for night. He seems to tell us more about night, telling us that he wanders, creeps, and daubs the earth with paint. With the day all he does is tell us that she is apologetic and she has that cloth.*

In teaching young students how to explore an understandable and provocative poem like this one for the variety of meanings and emotions that it can evoke, the teacher will find an open discussion very rewarding. The excitement generated by 5th graders, 6th graders, or 7th graders vying with each other to tell their special interpretation can be part of a delightful learning experience.

A TEST OF POETRY COMPREHENSION, GRADES 8 THROUGH 12

"Eleven"

By the time students have completed 8th grade and are moving into the upper school, a much more sophisticated kind of examination can be administered. The following is an example.

TIME: Allow 45 minutes.

DIRECTIONS: Read the following poem carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Eleven

And summer mornings the mute[1] child, rebellious,
Stupid, hating the words, the meanings, hating

From Archibald MacLeish, Collected Poems 1917-1952, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

[1] mute -- in this case implies an unwillingness to speak

The Think now, Think, the Oh but Think! would leave
On tiptoe the three chairs on the verandah
And crossing tree by tree the empty lawn
Push back the shed door and upon the sill
Stand pressing out the sunlight from his eyes
And enter and with outstretched fingers feel
The grindstone and behind it the bare wall
And turn and in the corner on the cool
Hard earth sit listening. And one by one,
Out of the dazzled shadow in the room,
The shapes would gather, the brown plowshare, spades,
Mattocks, the polished helves of picks, a scythe
Hung from the rafters, shovels, slender tines
Glinting across the curve of sickles -- shapes
Older than men were, the wise tools, the iron
Friendly with earth. And sit there, quiet, breathing
The harsh dry smell of withered bulbs, the faint
Odor of dung, the silence. And outside,
Beyond the half-shut door the blind leaves
And the corn moving. And at noon would come,
Up from the garden, his hard crooked hands
Gentle with earth, his knees still earth-stained, smelling
Of sun, of summer, the old gardener, like
A priest, like an interpreter, and bend
Over his baskets.
And they would not speak:
They would say nothing. And the child would sit there
Happy as though he had no name, as though
He had been no one: like a leaf, a stem,
Like a root growing --

-- Archibald MacLeish

Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Describe, in your own words, the child's feelings on this summer morning, as you infer these feelings from the first four lines of the poem. Your comments should include answers to these questions: Why is the child running away? Against what is he rebelling?

2. Explain fully why the boy waits for the gardener and why, to the boy, the gardener is "like / A priest, like an interpreter."

3. In what ways does the scene created in the last five lines differ from the scene described in the first four lines?

4. Would the ending of the poem have been better if the poet had written: "like a plowshare,

a spade, / Like a sickle glinting"? Why, or why not?

5. To what do you think the title refers? Is it an appropriate title? Why, or why not? You are free to suggest a better title if you can think of one.

.even" turned out to be one of the most successful of the :try choices for our Grade VIII Examination. It can be ad- ıistered effectively toward the end of grade 8 and in any of later grades. The vocabulary and the topic are easily with- the grasp of most students, even students with virtually no erience with country life. The unorthodox syntax gives lit- trouble, and students readily identify with the child in poem and have no trouble with interpretation.

From the sensitive insights and creative ideas in the wers to the questions to "Eleven," we can assume that this m is a valid selection.

An Analysis of Students' Answers, Grade 9

er 1, Sample A:

I think the child is running away to get away from the confusion of growing from a young child to an adult. He is rebelling against ideas of others. He trying to be independant, form his own ideas and live his own way. He feels lost, confused, and lonely. He hates the complicated world of mean things like war and hate. He wonders why he can't live simply, ike when he was young.

ıgh the somewhat facile style could mislead a weary teacher) thinking that this answer is better than it is, the answer)arely passable. It says at once too much and too little. instance, there is nothing explicit or implicit in the ;t four lines of the poem to suggest that the child thinks ıimself as growing "from a young child to an adult." There ıo implication that the child equates simplicity with a time :n he was young." Certainly there is no implication that child thinks of a "complicated world of mean things like and hate." The student has indulged in conjecture, in ; case projecting personal feelings into the poem. Teach- a student to distinguish between conjecture and inference

is extremely difficult. It seems to require stern admonition to avoid making assumptions unsupported by any shred of evidence. The student's reply that "There's nothing in the poem that says the child isn't thinking of the war and hate in the world" provides the teacher with a good opportunity to suggest that any answer requiring such insubstantial defense should be cast aside immediately.

On the other hand, the poem does imply that the child "is rebelling against ideas of others" and that the child "feels lost, confused, and lonely." The student, however, has made no reference to the tutorial sessions that are the source of the rebellion and confusion.

Answer 1, Sample B:

> *This young boy is running away from the pressure of being a child. From the first four lines of the poem, I get the feeling that he doesn't want to learn from books, and memorize meanings. He hates to think. He wants to do what would come naturally. He doesn't want to be what he isn't. In brief: he wants to be free from compulsory learning.*

Although the reader cannot be sure what the student means by the "pressure of being a child," this is a very good answer. Notice that the student states that the answer is confined to the first four lines (an excellent device for a student's establishing control over the answer). The student then goes on to infer that the "words" and "meanings" are in books and that the "thinking" is part of a "compulsory learning" experience. One can quibble with the statement that the boy would do "what would come naturally." Such an assumption depends too much on a full understanding of the remainder of the poem, but that the boy wants to be "free" is implicit in the connotations of "summer mornings" and in the boy's tiptoeing away from the verandah.

If only the student had mentioned the child's feelings of inadequacy, as suggested by such words as "mute" and "stupid," this would have been an excellent answer. As it stands, it is clear, forthright, well organized.

Answer 1, Sample C:

> *In this poem the child is rebelling against learning. He is also unconsciously rebelling against thinking and also talking. He is running away from people and escaping into a soothing quiet land of nature, because the things of*

nature do not scold or talk, they sit and keep in understanding silence. He is trying to escape from a harsh, very factual life, and easing into a peaceful and quiet atmosphere. He probably escapes to the tool-house because to him the tools are familiar, and soothingly quiet. It must be like returning to a cool, understanding world after escaping from a harsh, "Do and don't", world.

This answer poses a dilemma for the teacher. It gives a good idea of the child's rebellion against academic abstractions and his escape to the tangible instruments of man's work with nature. Moreover, it is well written -- displaying a good sense of word choice and a good sense of organization, and a clear understanding of the poem. However, it goes far beyond the confines of the question. Instead of dealing with the first four lines, it summarizes the entire poem.

What is the teacher to do? Be totally inflexible and give no credit? Be mathematically fair and give credit only for those thoughts appropriate to the first four lines? Be especially generous and give abundant credit for a sensitive summary of the entire poem?

We would not wish to give narrow advice. The answer to these questions must be the teacher's. However, we suggest a context in which the answer may be found: The purpose of studying poetry is, surely, to heighten one's sensitivity to connotation, to metaphor (in the fullest sense of that word), and to the artistic adornments of sound and rhythm in language. If the student has displayed this appreciation, the teacher may be satisfied to judge all else as secondary, according to personal emphasis on disciplines.

This kind of answer does serve as a caution to teachers, however, to advise their students to read all questions on an examination before answering any. The student who over-extends on one question may penalize himself by being too brief on later questions.

Incidentally, this answer suggests a disadvantage of questions that get at only a part of a poem or essay. The disadvantage of a question that deals with a whole work, on the other hand, is that the student may neglect the small but important points of close reading.

Answer 2, Sample A:

He pictures the gardener as a priest, because the gardener is one of the only types of Man who can understand a little

boy's ideal relationship with nature. The boy might also think that a gardener should be a priest, because he cares for the plants, making them happy, his earth-brown hands, making them comfortable. The boy also may think he's an interpreter because the gardener perhaps tells the boy about the plants, and teaches the child the gentle art of caring for them by just actions. In some ways the boy sees the things of nature through the gardener.

This is probably as good an answer as one could hope for. An extraordinary student might have more concretely dealt with the first part of the question ("why the boy waits for the gardener"), but the point seems implicit in the answer even though the child's faith in the gardener is not contrasted with the rebellion against academic learning.

With this exception, the student goes directly to the core of the question and probes it with specific accuracy. By capitalizing Man, the student has effectively illuminated the gardener's divine sensitivity to the child's faith (a conception of the gardener's role that is sustained in the succinct closing sentence) and has, at the same time, neatly avoided any temptation to indulge in symbol chasing.

Answer 2, Sample B:

To the young lad, a gardener preeches the works of God. He works with the earth makes what he can out of it. The boy waits for this gardener, this holy man because he respects what the gardener does. The youngster believes that one should do what he wishes, and the boy wishes to watch, to understand this magical thing the gardener performs.

This answer should probably be rated as fair. Its somewhat awkward style seems to be in reaction to the distaste that some teachers develop against repetition (note the use of "young lad" and "youngster" as rather forced substitutes for boy or child). Apparently restrained by such a stricture, the answer indicates only by implication an understanding of the poem. What it lacks are the explicit detail and the disciplined techniques of expression that are obvious in Answer A. For instance, the second sentence, "He works with the earth [and?] makes what he can out of it," contributes nothing to answering the question. Only the final sentence gets toward the point, and the teacher must be sympathetic in weighting it favorably against the rest of the answer.

Answer 2, Sample C:

> *The boy waits for the gardener because the gardener seems to be understanding to the boys way of thinking and feeling.*

Here the student attempts an answer to the first part of the question, but neglects the priest and interpreter part. The single-sentence answer gives a plausible reason for the boy's waiting for the gardener, but it lacks any appearance of supportive evidence. The brevity of the answer suggests a writing problem or a reading problem that familiarity with the student's writing patterns might uncover. A conference with the student would, of course, give a clearer indication of what help may be needed with writing skills and reading skills.

A passing grade cannot be justified for this answer as it stands.

Question 3 gives the student an opportunity to approach in another way why the child "waits for the gardener." Here the student must explain the child's transition from anxiety to awe, and the explanation must refer to specific evidence for the child's change.

Answer Sample A:

> *The scene created at the beginning of the poem is that of a young boy who doesn't want to learn in school but wants to be free and if he must learn to learn by seeing. But the two kinds of learning concerned are different. One is of knowledge of words and of how to think. The other is of nature, believing, seeing and thinking. The scene which the last five lines creates is a feeling of the boy as a young one growing and free; able to think for himself of nature and beauty; just beginning his long life.*

This answer makes an interesting distinction between structured education and an open or free learning experience. It is a well-organized answer that states its purpose at the beginning. Its only real flaw is that it states that the child's two learning experiences are implicit in the opening part of the poem instead of being contrasted at the beginning and the end. The importance of accurately setting the purpose of an answer cannot be overstressed. The slight confusion that exists at the outset is carried through the rest of the answer, not as a basic misunderstanding but as an imprecise separating of the parts of the answer in relation to the structure of the poem. A less perceptive student might have badly misinterpreted the

poem as a consequence. This student saved the meaning and wrote, on balance, a very good answer.

Answer 3, Sample B:

> *In the beginning of the poem the boy is rebelling ("hating the words, the meanings, hating the Think now"). He is forlorn. In the last lines the child is "Happy as though he had no name, as though he had been no one." The poem is at first very strong and not at all vague. These last five lines, however are softer and create a scene not really of ecstacy, but of down-right happiness.*

Here the answer is superbly organized, and it is nicely specific in referring directly to phrases in the poem. It does not, however, explore the contrasting elements beyond a concrete, literal level, and its attempts at communicating the abstract meaning of the poem are more a subjective expression of feeling than an objective revelation of understanding.

Answer 3, Sample C:

> *By then the boy has forgotten all his lessons and is happy and content to be with the preist of nature, just as happy as if he had been a stem or leaf.*

This answer neither establishes its purpose nor identifies its points of reference. As a consequence, it does nothing but rearrange some phrases, and it is too superficial and literal to be considered acceptable. By ninth grade, students should know the limits of acceptability. The teacher, however, bears the responsibility of being sensitive enough to individuals like this one to know whether severity or a great deal of extra help will do more good.

Question 4 on "Eleven" is like Question 3 on "Night Is a Curious Child." The substitution of less appropriate language and imagery for the original is a provocative device for testing one's literary sensitivity to connotations. It has the danger, however, of misleading some students into defending the less satisfactory alternatives. The teacher must be aware of this danger, and should be prepared to accept an "incorrect" answer so long as the defense shows perceptiveness and a reasonable appreciation of the changes in tone, structure, and meaning

created by the substitution.

Answer 4, Sample A:

> *The ending could not have been any better. "Like a leaf, a stem, Like a root growing . . . " was perfect. It shows the relation between the child and the gardener. Under the guidance and friendship of him, the child grows. As under the care of a gardener a plant grows. He becomes aware of reality, as he sees it in the world of the gardener's shed . . . the tools, friendly with the earth, the gardener "his hard crooked hands gentle with earth, . . . smelling of sun, of summer . . . the old gardener." He knows earth and shows her beauty to the boy, who cannot see why there must be words and meanings, when by just looking, there is so much to be had. He is a plant . . . growing from the earth, learning from the earth. If he'd been a plowshare, spade, or sickle, it would ruin the whole idea of earth teaching him, for he would train earth in this form.*

Though this answer is wordy and somewhat awkward, it shows a clear and very perceptive grasp of the connotations in the last two lines of the poem. The student's last sentence is exceptionally convincing. In breadth and depth this answer must be considered outstanding despite the sentence fragment.

Answer 4, Sample B:

> *No! because a root is a growing thing; it has life. Something not alive made out of wood or metal would have "killed" the poem.*

Though not thorough and specific enough, this answer shows a bold and enthusiastic grasp of the connotations in the language of the poem. How to convince the student (who has surely grasped the essential meaning) that more is needed, that the context of the poem must be dealt with in making the answer explicit, may be a real challenge to the teacher. One positive approach would be to compliment the student on the inspired "something not alive made out of wood or metal would have 'killed' the poem," and then urge the student to go on and show that the substituted ending would not only destroy the progress of the poem -- from the frustration of academic education to the friendliness of gardening tools to a communion with living things -- but would make meaningless the lifegiving purpose of

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the tools.

Answer 4, Sample C:

> *I think that the end that the poem has is much stronger than what you suggest. It shows how the farmer gives this child strength and well. It also relates itself back to the beginning which makes it a stronger poem.*

Unlike Answer 3C, this answer does show the student's appreciation of the over-all structure of the poem. It is much too subjective and abstract, however, and its clumsy style and word choices suggest serious problems with vocabulary, or at least with an ear for the right sound of an answer. The potential inherent in the answer indicates that individual conferences might readily help this student to develop a more sophisticated and explicit style.

The openness of Question 5 encourages creative thinking. The teacher should be more than usually prepared for unexpected and perceptive insights. The "right" answers are those that are thoughtful, sensitive, and relevant to the context.

Answer 5, Sample A:

> *I think the title refers to the age of the child concerned in this poem. I think it is a good title because I think an eleven year old child is like that: rebellious, and wild, but at the same time quiet and thoughtful, happy, friendly, searching for love.*

This answer might be expected as the most probable. It is a clearly stated response to the poem itself and to the student's knowledge of an eleven-year-old child.

Answer 5, Sample B:

> *The title refers to the time of day. It is eleven o'clock. I think it's a very appropriate title because you can feel the late morning as you read the poem. When the boy goes to the shed, it's eleven and he sits alone with the earth-*

for an hour or so. He is waiting for the gardener who comes at noon.

This less-expected answer is subtler than Answer A and technically more relevant to specific words, incidents, and images in the poem. It is so perceptive in its somewhat restricted interpretation that the student should not be penalized for failing to suspect that "Eleven" may also refer to the child's age. Only the extraordinary answer would include both interpretations in so detailed and perceptive a form as this. Answer C (below), for instance, deals with both interpretations, but with neither so successfully as Answers A and B deal with single interpretations.

Answer 5, Sample C:

I think the title refers to the time at the opening of the poem and the age of the little boy as well. As the poem progresses, it is noon and the boy is older, and more mature. I believe that the title is an appropriate one for this reason.

A TEST OF POETRY COMPREHENSION, GRADES 9 AND BEYOND

"The Bear on the Delhi Road"

In developing an assignment, a teacher hopes to set up conditions that encourage the excellent student to do excellent work, the average student to have some pride of accomplishment, and the weak student to discover latent abilities. In attempting to fulfill these conditions, the English Committee was lucky in developing uniquely successful examination questions based on Earl Birney's poem "The Bear on the Delhi Road." The questions, intended for 9th grade and beyond, were designed to test powers of perception in close reading and to test abilities to express these powers in an expository prose that is reasoned and explicit.

When this examination was in its pretest stage of development, it had seven questions. Two of these questions (X and Y in the copy that follows) were eliminated because reading and responding proved to take too long and because Question 4 tested students more effectively for the same powers called for in Questions X and Y. In their uncut form, however, the questions elicited breathtakingly beautiful responses from one 9th-grade

girl. Because this student's answers are an example of something very rare -- an excellence that goes beyond all expectations -- the questions are presented here in their original form, followed by her answers.

TIME: Allow 45 minutes.

DIRECTIONS: Read the following poem carefully, and then answer the questions on it. (Feel free to underline or to make notes on this sheet.)

THE BEAR ON THE DELHI ROAD

Unreal tall as a myth
by the road the Himalayan bear
is beating the brilliant air
with his crooked arms
About him two men bare
spindly as locusts leap
One pulls on a ring
in the great soft nose His mate
flicks flicks with a stick
up at the rolling eyes

They have not led him here
down from the fabulous hills
to this bald alien plain
and the clamorous world to kill
but simply to teach him to dance

They are peaceful both these spare
men of Kashmir and the bear
alive is their living too
If far on the Delhi way
around him galvanic they dance
it is merely to wear wear
from his shaggy body the tranced
wish forever to stay
only an ambling bear
four-footed in berries

It is no more joyous for them
in this hot dust to prance

Delhi (title) -- city in India
galvanic (line 20) -- electrically

out of reach of the praying claws
sharpened to paw for ants
in the shadows of deodars
It is not easy to free
myth from reality
or rear this fellow up
to lurch lurch with them
in the tranced dancing of men

Srinagar 1958/Ile des Porquerolles 1959

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deodars (line 30) -- cedars

DIRECTIONS: Answer the following questions. The last question will be weighted somewhat more than the others.

1. What are the differences between where the bear has been and where he is going?

2. In what ways is the word rear (line 33) more effective than (a) stand or (b) bring?

3. By what means does the poet arouse the reader's sympathy for the bear? To answer this you will need to comment on specific words in the poem.

X. What differences in meaning does the word tranced have as it is used in line 22 and then in the last line of the poem?

Y. What does the word myth suggest in line 1 and then in line 32?

4. Comment on the different kinds of dancing with which this poem is concerned.

5. So far you have been examining specific words and parts of the poem. Now in a carefully planned, fully developed paragraph explore the meaning of the poem as a whole, giving special attention to the relationship between the bear

and the men, which the poem describes, suggests, and develops.

Answers by a 9th-grade girl:

1. *The bear has been up in "the fabulous hills", free to wander among the berries, to dig for food under the cedar trees. He has been in the wild, surrounded by pure, clean mountains. He is being led, by the men, down to the "bald, alien plain" to the dust-filled, cowed life of a trained bear. His future is one only of misery, a death in life, whereas his past is one of glorious freedom.*

2. *Rear is more effective than stand or bring because it suggests the jabbing pain of the whip driven, actually, against the bear's rump, and the powerful rise of the bear, surging upward. Stand is a weak word that contains no suggestive force or power, or even the motion needed to rise up, which is illustrated by "rear." Bring is poor also, because it suggests meekness on the part of the bear, as if the men were leading it, whereas, in truth, the bear is being forced. ("Rear" also suggests up-bringing, the training involved in teaching him how to dance.)*

3. *The author arouses sympathy for the bear throughout the poem by describing his pitiful state. In line 3 "is beating the brilliant air" illustrates the bear's desparate desire to be free, pawing for his escape. Line 8, "in the great, soft nose," illustrates the bear's true nature and the fact that the men have jabbed a ring through his nose, have captured him. Line 10 (" . . . rolling eyes") again points out the bear's fear and bewilderment and pain. In lines 21-25, especially "the tranced wish forever to stay only an ambling bear", the author illustrates the simpleness of the bear's former life and the confusion he must now be feeling. In line 28, "the praying claws" show his desparate wish to be free, and, finally, in the last two lines, the bear's lurching dance illustrates the pathetic and senseless pain of the life he is now caught in.*

X. *"Tranced" in line 22 has a lovely connotation, one of dreamy wishes, yet already, it begins to have the bitter taste of the last "tranced." In line 22, the bear is dazed, yet still clings to the fantastic unreal dream of his former happiness. In the last line, tranced is pathetic, illustrating the senseless, dazed attempts of man as he "dances" through life. It also could suggest the presence of an evil force, entrancing man and dazing*

him into the senseless life he leads.

"Myth" in line 1 suggests might, fantastic, untouchable glory, and the mysteriousness of a woundrous being. The bear still retains some of the magical quality of freedom and spirit here. "Myth" in line 32, however, suggests that the unreality of the bear's former life is a myth, is something which doesn't or can't exist for man. The 2 men have "freed" the bear from his mythical life in the mountains to bring him into the world of reality, of dirt and pain and humiliation. Also myth suggests the Indian myths and mysticism of pure life and true self.

4. *Dancing throughout this poem changes meaning drastically. In line 15, the men are trying to teach him to dance, not to kill him. They are earning their livings, and are training him to help (they must use him). Dance here is a livlihood. In line 20, the men are dancing out of his way, avoiding his claws as he struggles to retain his freedom. Dance in the last line represents the mad, crazed way men live their lives, "dancing" through misery and pain. Here the word carries the full bitterness of the poem, illustrating the senseless ways of man in his endeavors to "live", really, all the while, walking about dead in spirit.*

5. *Throughout this poem, the bear symbolizes the myth of freedom, of pure contented life. The two men, who have captured this dream, cannot hold it, because they must live, must eat, and join the crazed way of dancing of all men who went before them. They train the bear cruelly, out of necessity, to help them in their dance of life. Although they are striving to live, they are really leading a life of death, a struggle for existence, while the bear's former life, which they obliterate in their dazed efforts to live, is really the life of the living. The very last lines (26-35) fully illustrates the point of the poem -- that the life of existence of the 2 men isn't really what, in reality, life is, but merely a myth, a twisted tale, of life. The bear's life, although it didn't fit in with the "reality" of man's life, was the true reality, not the myth which our crazed way of living seems to make it.*

The teacher who is at first tempted to fault the answer to Question 1 for its failure to mention the shadowed cedar woods, the brilliant glare of the plains, and the clamor of civilization will probably be disarmed by the student's sophisticated handling of tenses and participles and by her excellent use of parallel structure. The answer is a clear, concise statement of the essential differences between where the bear has been

and where he is going. If it seems a trifle short on some details, it is an excellent and perceptive preamble to the extraordinarily thorough and sensitive answers that follow. The teacher who has compulsively jotted shortcomings in the margins will want to cross them out. In fact, beyond making a self-reminder to teach a few details in mechanics, such as underlining words referred to as words (see the answer to Question 2), one ought to indulge in the rare excitement of welcoming answers that discover insights, some of which would not have occurred to the teacher.

One should not normally anticipate such answers at these, however, even from a gifted high-school senior, especially under the time pressure imposed by the original seven-question test. In fact, the English Committee found, in evaluation of the pretest results, that the questions could not all be answered adequately within the time allotment. Some students rushed through the questions, missing all the subtle points. Others, more diligent, dug so deeply that they couldn't finish on time. These are problems that teachers must reckon with under normal test circumstances. They become exaggerated when the time allotment is unrealistic.

"The Bear on the Delhi Road" does not provide textbook criteria for analysis of poetry, but it does evoke subtle responses that get to the almost intangible heart of poetry. In this capacity it has proved to be an especially effective work. The following answers, written by a good, but not exceptional, 10th-grade boy, illustrate how effective it is. (Questions X and Y had been eliminated by the time this student took the test.) The answers to Questions 2 and 4 fall quite short of expectations, especially the answer to Question 2, which makes no mention of the words stand and bring for comparison with rear. But the answer to Question 1 is certainly reasonable, and the answers to Questions 3 and 5 are sensitive and respectable. All five answers will bring the teacher back to reality after having read the gifted student's answers to the pretest.

Answers by a 10th-grade boy:

1. *There are two major differences in where the bear has been and where he is going. The obvious difference is the fact that the bear is being taken from his natural habitat and brought into a strange and unfriendly environment of humans. The second and perhaps not as obvious difference is the taking of the bears freedom. The bear is taken from his wandering way of life where he is chained and beat and forced to do little dances in order to amuse the sick humor of the "human beings."*

2. The word rear is more effective first of all, because of its general meaning, which is to raise, as parents raise a child, teaching the child the correct norms and manorisms of the society. Secondly, the word rear implies that the bear is being raised to fit into a strange society. It is obvious that the bear is full grown merely by the way the poem opens in the begining. In other words the bear is being forced to forget the past way of living, and to remember the new way of life.

3. The poet uses several words that give the physical appearance and gestures of the bear, projecting sympathy for him. Some of [redacted] words are on lines 7 and 8. The lines read, "One pulls on a ring, in the great soft nose". This, to me, gives the feeling of forcefulness, that of not wanting to go but being forced. I also can't help, but think of this steel ring being placed through the soft nose of the bear, and the pain that the bear must have felt. Some other words, line 10, are "rolling eyes". This again gives the feeling of pain, and perhaps expressing the fear of not knowing what is going to happen. In line 18 the words "is their living too", can make someone feel sorry for the bear, because these men are using the bear to make money for themselves. The idea of making money is not bad, but it is the way in which they do it. The are using the bear to make money without the bears permission. Another is line 28, the words "praying claws". This simply shows of the bears fear and subconsious wish to be free.

4. They danced galvanically. The purpose for this wild dancing was to tire the captive bear. They also danced in a trance, of course this was after the bear had been beaten and made to live differently.

5. I feel that this poem is trying to realate to the reader the exploitation of people by other people in order to advance themselves. He did this by using the representation of a helpless bear and the, perhaps far supirior, representation of the two men. If he wasn't trying to show the evil of exploitation, and the danger and unhappiness of forceful change, maybe he was trying to show the cruelty and injustice that is done to animals in a zoo or circus.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM STUDY OF POETRY

The following suggestions are a few that have proved successful in the teaching of poetry to students of middle-school age and older:

1. Choose a beginning text that really appeals to the lively interests of the students. The poems should be short and provocative, dealing with ideas that the students can understand and identify with.

2. Get students personally involved in a critical appreciation of poetry. Start by setting some standards for respectable poetry. Otherwise the level of approval will quickly sink to that of doggerel. For instance, a comparison of the following two poems can illustrate some differences between good and inferior poetry:

A.* I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove's door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Leaning against the sun!

B.** Away, where leaves scarce grown are strown,
O'er the hills by the dewdrops known,
Across the dales by the dewdrops known,
Away from the city I'll flee.

* By Emily Dickinson.
**Anonymous.

I'll seek me a hilly throne of stone,
Where summer flowers by the winds are blown,
Where woodland smells by the winds are blown,
And free as the winds I'll be.

There on my hilly throne alone,
Where skies of blue to me are shown,
Where wonderful shrubs to me are shown,
Laurel tree and buzzing bee.

Other examples, of different subject matter, are advisable, too, lest students think poetry must be limited to the wonders of nature.

Then ask the students to browse through their poetry texts and be prepared individually to present and advocate poems of their own choosing. This sharpens personal interest and group participation, and it demands very specific, critical, supportive argument.

3. Encourage the art of reading and reciting aloud. Hold poetry-reading contests, and prepare for them with coaching sessions. Students genuinely enjoy hearing themselves and each other improve under the stress of individual coaching and friendly competition.

Some poems are especially appropriate for choral reading, which provides quite marvelous opportunities to distort rhythm, pitch, stress, and juncture for dramatic and musical effects.

Memorization, too, should be encouraged, rather than scorned as old-fashioned. Most students accept the challenge and take obvious pride in their success. A few will stubbornly refuse (then surreptitiously ask for a second chance). The discipline is excellent, and memorized patterns of artistic word choice and syntax have subtle influences on one's ability to express oneself (as anyone who acts in plays knows).

4. Early in the study of poetry, insist on some very close reading. Choose an especially stimulating poem with striking word choices; get the students to jot down all the images and phrases that are interesting; then get the students to <u>copy</u> the poem in longhand and discover how many <u>more</u> images and phrases strike them.

5. Praise students lavishly for their interpretive insights and for their creations of felicitous imagery and poetic structure. Nothing encourages students so effectively as the teacher's enthusiasm for individual efforts. Be sure to praise only what is good, but

don't discourage students whose efforts are at first unsuccessful.

6. Involve students in the creative process of writing poetry.* Publish, just for the classroom, a weekly duplicated anthology of the students' works. Let the students read their own works and constructively (but truthfully) participate in the criticism. Such an approach soon provides for students some profound insights into creative uses of words and ideas.

7. Most poems are full of evocative pictures and sounds. Encourage students to experience and recreate such imagery through projects such as the following:

   a. Students present a sensitive live reading of a favorite poem accompanied by recorded or taped music of their choice.

   b. Students play a tape of a favorite poem read by them while projecting a series of magazine pictures on a screen by means of an opaque projector.

   c. Students print or photoduplicate a poem on an original poster or collage that captures the mood or imagery of that poem. Over the years the teacher retains the best posters and collages and uses them as displays in the classroom during poetry study.

8. For work with scansion, first select poems strictly illustrative of the four basic meters -- iambic, trochaic, anapestic, dactylic. Ask for volunteers who can play drums or a guitar. Then persuade this "rhythm section" to establish a beat while someone else (or a choral group) in the class reads a poem, exaggerating the accented syllables. With some practice, the students will soon develop a feel for the stresses and for the metric patterns. More sophisticated students may, on their own, want to work up a poetry-and-music presentation.

   An overhead projector or an opaque projector can be very useful as a visual aid and a time-saver in pointing out stressed and unstressed syllables in time to a choral class reading of the projected image.

Most important, the teacher should like the poems he or she

*Make use of such books as Kenneth Koch's Wishes, Lies, and Dreams, Teaching Children to Write Poetry. This book is a good source of ideas for inspiring young students to write poetry.

chooses for study. The pleasure of sharing an enthusiasm for a poem, a short story, an essay, a play, a novel is what has sustained man's interest in literature. This pleasure, tactfully shown by the teacher, is welcomed by most students, who will respond by wanting to share with the teacher their own enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm and persistence will win many a student and teacher to a love of poetry. Once the conversion is made, the teacher can introduce the technical mysteries of poetry as questions and interest dictate. For enhancement of the teacher's competence in dealing with these "mysteries," we recommend a look at the bibliography on poetry in the first volume of this Notebook.

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