

Grades 6-12, Prompt for Narrative Writing

Common Core Standard W.CCR.3

Great historical events often have deep effects upon the people who live through them. Depending on the person and the situation, those effects can be very different.

You are going to read a short article about the Dust Bowl days in American history titled “Black Blizzard.” You will also look at some photographs taken during that time period. As you read and study the photographs, think about how this experience may have affected the individual people who lived through it.

Finally, you will write a narrative, showing how a particular small moment during this experience affected one person.

Remember, a good narrative:

- *Establishes a clear point of view*
- *Focuses closely on one character or characters*
- *Uses strong sensory details to make the character(s) and event come alive*
- *Uses precise language*
May use dialogue and description to capture the character(s) and event
- *Concludes effectively*

Here are your choices for your narrative:

- A young child watching the “black blizzard” rolling in over the plains
- A young child, watching a tractor knock down his family home in Oklahoma, several years into the Dust Bowl drought
- A mother sitting on her front steps in a migrant camp in California
- An unemployed father, arriving at a squatter camp in California from Oklahoma

You will have three class periods to complete this reading/thinking/writing task. The narrative will have a single draft, and you may want to take some time to plan your writing before you begin work. When you have finished, be sure to proofread.

Narrative Writing
Common Core Standard W.CCR.3
6-12

Teacher Directions

- The article and photographs provide the information needed to address the prompt, and students should read the text independently before writing. Encourage students to refer back to the text while writing and to take notes.
- Students should be given three sessions for the prompt. Allow approximately 45 minutes for each, but the prompt should not be strictly timed. Students should be given as much time as needed to plan, write, and proofread.
- The writing must be done without help, but students may have access to personal dictionaries, or any other resources to support spelling and mechanics that they are accustomed to using while writing.
 - Be sure students have paper to take notes or do whatever pre-planning they might choose to do.
 - If students are writing by hand, provide lined paper from your classroom for writing. If they are using a word processor, make sure they save their work so it can be accessed the next day.
- This will be first draft writing, but encourage students to proofread and correct any errors they find.

Black Blizzard

From *Teaching Students to Read Nonfiction*, Scholastic, 2003
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Imagine this: You're eating breakfast one Tuesday morning, minding your own business. You chance to look out the window.

"Ma! Dad!" you yell, "It's back. Take cover!"

Even though it's nine A.M., the sky in the distance is pitch black. A dry tidal wave of dust and dirt – 7,000 feet high – is rolling, howling towards you. Your parents race to cram wet towels in the spaces under doors and windows, as the huge black cloud rumbles closer.

It's an eerie sight. In front of the cloud, birds fly and rabbits run, terrified. Soon the cloud is here. The sky is pure black. The wind is screaming, pelting your tiny house with dirt. Your mom hands you a wet towel, which you put over your face, but you can still taste the dust, feel it with every breath, gritty between your teeth. You huddle in the middle of the room with your family in total darkness, waiting for the dust storm to end.

A Natural Disaster

In the mid 1930's, large areas of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico, and Colorado were hit by hundreds of these storms. Together, these storms made up some of the worst natural disasters in America's history.

The dust storms destroyed the land, ruined the economy of the whole area, and threatened the lives of most of the population. Everyone who could picked up and moved west. It became the greatest peacetime migration ever in America. How did it happen?

From 1900 to 1930, many families bought or leased small parcels of land in the Plains states, and built farms. The area was mostly dry grasslands, where crops are difficult to grow. With hard work, the farmers were able to grow wheat and corn, and to raise cattle.

But in 1931, a terrible drought fell across the middle of the nation. America was already suffering from the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. Now, from 1931 to 1935, farmers got almost no rain at all.

For five years in a row, their corn and wheat crops failed. Farmers had no income, and couldn't pay their mortgages. And soon their financial troubles were matched by the horror of their surroundings.

The Soil Blew Away

With no rainfall, the soil in the area became loose, dry, and dusty. The region's native wild grasses, which had served to hold the soil together, had been replaced long ago by crops, which now dried up and blew away.

Soon, heavy winds began to howl, picking up the dust and soil. When the winds reached 50 or 60 miles an hour, they picked up the topsoil right off the ground. The flying dust buried roads. It flew through the walls and windows of flimsy farmhouses. It killed cattle, and ruined the engines of vehicles. Old people and children caught outside were suffocated. Thousands of others died slowly of "dust pneumonia."

The dust storms were the last straw for many area farmers. They had already suffered through five years with little or no income because of the drought. Now, banks and mortgage companies took their farms, sending tractors to knock their houses down and run them off the land. The farmers, with no other choice, packed up their families and meager belongings and headed west.

More than one million people migrated west from the Plains states during that time. Poor, dirty, and hungry, they rumbled down Route 66, searching for work picking crops, digging roads – anything that would keep their families from starving.

Tough Times

But things were tough in the West, too. There were not enough jobs for all the new arrivals. Few could afford housing. Most of the migrant families camped or "squatted" where they could.

Many native Californians resented the migrants, calling them "Okies," and spreading rumors that they were mentally retarded. They felt the migrants were ruining local schools with overcrowding. Mobs of local men, armed with clubs and ax handles, raided the squatters' camps and tried to beat the migrants into leaving.

Eventually, as America came out of the Great Depression, things began to improve for the migrants in California. Within a few years, the rains returned to the Dust Bowl, and people began farming again. Over the decades since, there have been several other serious droughts in the Plains states. But the Dust Bowl of the 1930's will always be remembered as the worst of all.



Dust storm coming in.
National Geographic
Used by permission of
National Geographic



Top left: squatters tent in California. California State University, Bakersfield
Used by permission of California State University, Bakersfield

Top right: Migrant Mother with children, Dorothea Lange photograph, 1936
Used by permission of Dorothea Lange photograph

Bottom left: migrant child, Oklahoma (History.com, Dust Bowl Photo Gallery)
Used by permission of (History.com, Dust Bowl Photo Gallery)

File Name: N7P Dust Storm

Narrative

Grade 7

On-Demand Writing- Uniform Prompt

Dust Storm

My family thought our lives were absolutely perfect. My twelve year old mind thought so, too, until our Sunday paper arrived. I heard the clunk of the mail slot, and sprinted to get the first peek of the paper. People on the first page were being interviewed by frantic news reporters, wanting to know reasons for our year long hot weather. I thought they were crazy,
until they were right.

Days went by, and the hot temperatures got worse. Hot baths were long gone, replaced with iced cold water. We had all ate the cold foods we could eat, no more ovens or fires, if you were rich enough. Our family had a fire, and a pan. We stopped doing that yesterday. I slipped out of my thoughts as my younger sister, Leesh, yelled out names. "Mom! Dad! Mary! Come see this!"

The yell was far distance, followed by a scream so high pitch, I sprinted outside, into the woods to find Leesh. Mom and Dad followed, pale with panic and worry. I smelled my own blood, from all the thorns in our woods. I felt the trickling on my legs, my bare legs, and arms, lucky

Engages and orients the reader by establishing a context for the narrative to follow, and by introducing a narrator and characters: The arrival of the storm becomes the focus/conflict of the narrative, which is told from the perspective / point of view of a first person narrator

Uses the narrative technique of foreshadowing to develop events

Uses a transitional clause to convey sequence and signal a shift from one time frame to another

Uses the narrative technique of dialogue to develop events and characters

Uses precise descriptive sensory language to convey experience

my sundress hasn't yet ripped. "Leesh! Leesh - where are you?" I saw our fallen treehouse, and something a little beyond the trees.

"Mom, Dad, get Leesh down. I think I see something beyond the trees!" They opened their mouths to say something, but they were lost for words, as I ran. Tree branches, sticks, thorn bushes, and stumps were my obstacles. I noticed the animals all ran the opposite way, with fear and shock in their faces and eyes. I got to the end, staring in shock at the terrifying sight in front of me.

Over the hills, rather than sun and clouds, I saw it. A big, pitch black cloud, thousands and thousands of feet tall, making any tree look like action figures. It moved with the wind blowing its way towards me. It came up the last hill, the one I stood on. The dust cloud swallowed me, and it whipped me in the face, stinging me like needles piercing every inch of my helpless body. I still sprinted, as fast as my legs could take me, swallowing the dust in my mouth, nose, and burning eyes. I wheezed, coughed, and barely breathed. I felt myself suffocating, remembering my name, will myself I would make it. You can do this Mary, you can get out of this. I opened my mouth to scream, instead filling myself with gallons of dust in my throat and lungs. I realized I was finally back in the woods, almost reaching my terrified family. I took huge rock, and wrote with saliva and dust. My vision blurred and I tripped over tree branches, rocks, and anything in my way. I tumbled, over my head, crashing on the ground. I

Uses precise descriptive sensory language to convey events

Uses precise descriptive sensory language to convey experience; language captures the action going on here, as the dust swallows the

Provides a conclusion which follows from the events and focus / conflict of the narrative, the dust storm of the Dust Bowl days

felt myself suffocate before my head hit the rock, never seeing light or dust, as my body shut down.

In this on-demand narrative, the writer tells the story of a girl and her family caught in a dust storm during the days of the Dust Bowl. She focuses it around the narrator's conflict with the huge storm. The protagonist/narrator is a girl who is terrified by the storm as she is caught up in it.

The writer organizes an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically, including a bit of effective foreshadowing at the beginning of the narrative, which strengthens the piece. The writer uses minimal dialogue; most of the detail is provided through description. There is a significant amount of precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive detail, and sensory language used to portray events. The narrative concludes with the narrator falling and losing consciousness—perhaps a bit overly dramatic for an ending but reasonable for this grade level. Because the narrator is losing consciousness, she understandably cannot reflect on the experience (as the Standards require).

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I felt myself suffocate before my head hit the rock, never seeing light or dust, as my body shut down.

File Name: N7R The Boy

Narrative

Grade 7

Range of Writing

The Boy

The young boy stood with the most menacing look he could muster spread across his face. He just stood there watching the endless columns stretch as far as the eye could see down the long, dusty road. The soldiers would turn and look as they went by, and he made sure to look right back. He made sure to stare as far as he could into the dark pupils of their eyes, as if it would raise the house that was now nothing more than a heap of ashes. Only a few charred remains of the walls were left.

As his eyes went from soldiers to remains he saw a small soft lump poking up from the ashes. He knew exactly what it was and he turned away. That teddy bear had been his favorite friend. Not a toy, it was more than a toy to him. For a second he was back on a green lawn, with the shutters of a house tapping softly on the window pane. And there was his bear. They waited for the next pirate ship to come around the bend in the road, so they could board it and make the captain walk the plank. But then he heard a shout and knew he was back on the dusty road with no green lawn and no shutters tapping softly.

He leaped down from his perch on an old dresser, one of the few things that hadn't been pillaged or burned in the fire. He bent down, putting both hands on his knees as his eyes searched the ground intently. He picked up the most deadly rock he could find and hopped back up on his perch to resume his watchful glare. No soldier escaped the watchful eyes as he probed them. The giant snake of blue tails was tapering off, and the boy could now see the end of the tail. The boy once again hopped down from his perch. He could feel the sweat-covered rock in his palm. The last of the blue columns were passing.

Engages and orients the reader by establishing context for narrative to follow. Main character is introduced, the boy. The story will be told from his point of view, a limited third person

Uses precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory details to capture the action and convey events: The writer subtly establishes both the setting and focus - the conflict the boy is dealing with.

Uses transitional clause to signal time shift back in time (flashback). Uses precise language to capture the memory the boy has of his life before the soldiers came

Uses precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory details to capture the action and convey events, and to develop the character of the boy

The boy took a step forward and leaned back, then whipped his body forward and released the rock at the same moment. The boy heard a thud as the rock came home and the rear most soldier clutched his side and looked back – but all he saw were those hateful eyes with tears rolling forth.

Provides a conclusion that follows from and reflects on the narrated events: The boy's "hateful eyes with tears rolling forth" are a comment on the events of the story—the boy is angry but helpless in the face of war.

For this narrative from a seventh-grade social studies class, the student was asked to write a story on the Civil War that focused on the effect of the war on one character at one moment in time. The writer effectively introduces a main character—a child whose home has been burned by the Yankees (“*the giant snake of blue tails*”) and relates events from his perspective.

The writer has organized a well-structured event sequence that unfolds naturally (though not in linear time order). To do this, he develops a structure that shifts the narrative from the main character’s present to a happier past, when the boy could play with his bear, and then back to the narrative present. He uses transitional clauses to signal this time shift. The writer uses precise words and phrases, sensory details, and some metaphoric language (“*giant snake of blue tails*”) to tell the story.

This narrative does not conclude in the traditional sense. The boy is left to throw a rock in helpless fury at the soldiers passing by. The lack of overt reflection is, in fact, an implied reflection on his helplessness in this war.

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