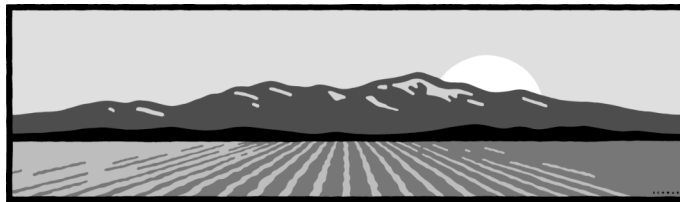


CALIFORNIA WRITING PROJECT
TEACHER-TO-TEACHER CURRICULUM RESOURCES

*CALIFORNIA STORIES UNCOVERED
IN THE CLASSROOM*

WRITING OUR HERITAGE, OUR COMMUNITIES, OUR PROMISE



C A L I F O R N I A
S T O R I E S

The California Council for the Humanities

A JOINT PROJECT OF THE CALIFORNIA COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES
AND THE CALIFORNIA WRITING PROJECT AND PART OF COUNCIL'S
STATEWIDE *CALIFORNIA STORIES UNCOVERED* CAMPAIGN

UNCOVERING MISPERCEPTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH
LIVING IN A SMALL TOWN

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Misperceptions about life in small towns and about an individual’s appearance abound. In this project, students from a rural community respond to issue-based texts and life experiences in preparation for writing academic essays that analyze the myths and the realities of living in a rural town, the misperceptions based on external appearances, and ways of overcoming how people are perceived.

Genre: reflective narratives and analytic/UC Subject A-type essays

Recommended grades: 9-12

Overview

When any of us from California ventures to other states, a frequent assumption is that we all live by the beach, that we know movie stars, that we spend most of our time at the mall, and that we have lots of money. There are different assumptions about rural life too—that it’s pastoral, safe, and beautiful. But the small town in Northern California where I teach isn’t much like the stereotypes. There are no movie theatres, malls, or skate parks. The city takes up a small geographic space and has a population of 6,000, yet the school services an area of over 750 square miles. Some of my students’ families are transplants from urban places, seeking out their little piece of land where they can grow a garden and raise a few chickens. Some students have lived in their small town and in the same house all of their lives, some are children of migrant families, and still others are just passing through. What all of my students share, though, is that they live within the district’s boundaries and come to school nearly every day. Yet what they rarely articulate is that where they live has a powerful impact on the assumptions others make about them, and the ways those assumptions have influenced their own perceptions of themselves.

Rarely does instruction happen without teacher and students creating an elaborate context or chain of actions and influences. For the following assignment sequence, many instructional events came together to allow students to enter into a discussion about the perceptions that are drawn about where a person lives or the judgments that are made about a person’s character by how they look. What follows is a series of lessons that both illustrate the power of assumptions about people and place, as well as the power of being labeled merely by external appearances. The culminating academic essay comes from students studying several texts on a self-selected topic related to the issue of *assumptions*. Students examine these ideas in a variety of texts while forming and then presenting their own position on the topic.

This sequence of lessons moves from informal personal writing to more formal academic writing. The sequence begins with the reading of an excerpt from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, which opens up multiple possibilities for further teaching and learning. The instructional activities were designed for students in English 1 (mostly ninth graders) but is appropriate for a wide range of high school students.

Objectives

- The goal of this project is to position students within an academic discussion about the assumptions that are made about people based on where they live or how they are perceived:

Students will:

- study the genre of reflective narratives
- study the style of Sandra Cisneros
- identify the purpose of reflective narrative
- compose an informal reflective narrative
- use reflective narratives as informal writing for analytic essays
- read and write multiple texts
- study the structures of argument
- study the genre of the *University of California Subject A Essay Examination*, one type of analytic essay
- write a Subject A-type essay
- format their final draft, using MLA style.

For students to be ready to write an essay that meets the demands of a Subject A/academic essay prompt, they must be able to closely read text, understand the requirements of a prompt, and write an academic essay that uses the text as part of their discussion of an issue. The prompt invites writers to incorporate other readings and experiences as part of their essay. Therefore, my students must be familiar with examining the positions others take on issues as ways for understanding their own opinions. They must also be familiar with the varied text structures for essays. Studying multiple texts provides for multiple entry points for students and allows them an informed and organized position in the discussion.

Applications to the California English-Language Arts Academic Content Standards**Reading**

- 2.3 Generate relevant questions about readings on issues that can be researched.
- 2.5 Extend ideas presented in primary or secondary sources through original analysis, evaluation, and elaboration.
- 2.7 Critique the logic of functional documents by examining the sequence of information and procedures in anticipation of possible reader misunderstandings.
- 2.8 Evaluate the credibility of an author's argument or defense of a claim by critiquing the relationship between generalizations and evidence, the comprehensiveness of evidence, and the way in which the author's intent affects the structure and tone of the text.
- 3.2 Compare and contrast the presentation of similar a theme or topic across genres to explain how the selection of genre shapes the theme or topic.
- 3.3 Analyze interactions between main and subordinate characters in a literary text and explain the way those interactions affect the plot.
- 3.4 Determine characters' traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy.

- 3.5 Compare works that express a universal theme and provide evidence to support the ideas expressed in each work.
- 3.7 Recognize and understand the significance of various literary devices, including figurative language, imagery, allegory, and symbolism, and explain their appeal.
- 3.8 Interpret and evaluate the impact of ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and incongruities in a text.
- 3.9 Explain how voice, persona, and the choice of a narrator affect characterization and the tone, plot, and credibility of a text.
- 3.11 Evaluate the aesthetic qualities of style, including the impact of diction and figurative language on tone, mood, and theme, using the terminology of literary criticism.

Writing

- 1.1 Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing.
- 1.2 Use precise language, action verbs, sensory details, appropriate modifiers, and the active rather than the passive voice.
- 1.4 Develop the main ideas within the body of the composition through supporting evidence.
- 1.6 Integrate quotations and citations into a written text while maintaining the flow of ideas.
- 1.7 Use appropriate conventions for documentation in the text, notes and bibliographies by adhering to those in style manuals.
- 1.9 Revise writing to improve the logic and coherence of the organization and controlling perspective, the precision of word choice, and the tone by taking into consideration the audience, purpose, and formality of the context.
- 2.1 Write biographical or autobiographical narrative or short stories.
- 2.2 Write responses to literature.
- 2.3 Write expository compositions, including analytical essays and research reports.
- 2.4 Write persuasive compositions.

Written and Oral English Language Conventions

- 1.1 Identify and correctly use clauses, phrases, and mechanics of punctuation.
- 1.2 Understand sentence construction.
- 1.3 Demonstrate an understanding of proper English usage and control of grammar, paragraph and sentence structure, diction, and syntax.
- 1.4 Produce legible work that shows accurate spelling and correct use of the conventions of punctuation and capitalization.
- 1.5 Reflect appropriate manuscript requirements, including title page presentation, pagination, spacing and margins, and integration of source and support material with appropriate citations.

Teaching Sequence

□ Beginning Question

- Discuss—Does it matter where we live?
- Quick write: How does where you live affect you?
- Share and chart responses on chart paper. Hang the chart so that it can be referenced as the sequence continues.

□ Read “The House on Mango Street” from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

- Read text aloud to the class.
- Ask students to write a response to the following question: “What is your first reaction to the ideas in this vignette?” They should have about ten minutes to think and write.
- Students read their responses to a small group and then each group shares with the whole class some of the highlights of their group’s writings. Chart these responses and post them for ongoing reference.

□ Reread “The House on Mango Street”

- Students reread the story.
 - Using a yellow colored pencil, underline the most interesting and/or thought-provoking lines in Cisneros’ vignette. Students can read with a partner or alone.
 - On adding machine tape, students copy their most interesting line from the story onto the tape.
 - Post lines on the wall.
 - Discuss common selections of lines and imagery, as well as the reasons for why the lines were chosen.
- Read the story again (alone or with a partner or small group).
- Using a red colored pencil, circle the most important words in the story.
- Make a class list of these words noticing:
 - the economy of Cisneros’ language
 - the construction and diction of personal narrative
 - the construction and diction of reflection.
- Post these on the wall and discuss the power and impact of Cisneros’ writing.
- In about a page of writing, ask students to address the following questions:

Note: The assignment usually asks that student write a full page. They choose which of the following questions they want to address so that they have enough ideas to complete a full page of writing. Other times, they may choose a particular number of questions to respond to in a certain amount of time. The configuration of response is completely open. The goal is for students to think about the vignette’s construction and the ways that reveals the writer’s purpose.

- What effect does Cisneros’ language have on you? What does the line you chose show you about writing style? What do you notice about the lines you chose? Do you see connections, differences, commonalities, etc.?
- Discuss the impact of Cisneros’ language—the diction.
- Identify the ways the lines are constructed—the syntax.

- Discuss the central character’s concern and state her claim as you interpret it from the vignette.
- What do you think Cisneros wants her readers to consider? With a partner, write what you believe Cisneros is saying.

□ Writing about “The House on Mango Street”

- Informal Writing: Reflective Narrative

In Sandra Cisneros’ vignette, “The House on Mango Street,” the narrator describes the house she lives in, how she feels about living there, and how others make assumptions about her based on their impression of her house.

Think about the house that you live in:

If someone who doesn’t know you were to drive by your house, what might he or she assume about the people who live there? Based on the exterior of your house, how accurate would their assessment be of the people who live inside?

- Students compose an informal reflective narrative that is due the following day.

Student Samples

Note: From the following examples, it is easy to see that these students were influenced by studying the elements of the vignette.

- #1 “When someone drives by my house, they might think the people were just another Mexican family with not a lot of money that really don’t care what their house looks like. O.K., so maybe they won’t think all of that but my house is out of town on a dirt road with a lot of potholes. The house’s paint is falling off and the screen door has a lot of holes in it. Even if you looked inside of the house you might still feel the same way. My house is not the cleanest of houses. There is almost always a wrapper of some sort on the floor. And because I’m the one that usually takes out the trash, I’m also hardly ever home, so it doesn’t get done all the time. But my house isn’t all bad. We have a big front yard and two acres in the back. We have roses and flowers in the front yard and the grass is nice and green. So all in all I don’t know what someone would think about my house.
- A person driving by my house might fail to realize that the people in the house don’t have it that easy and the mother is a single mother with four kids. And her husband is in jail. And to top it off, she works 10 hours a day everyday, can’t afford a babysitter or a person to take care of the yard work, or anything. The kids are young and the older brother is almost never home because of all the other stuff he has to do. I don’t think you should ever assume anything by what someone has.”
- #2 “...People might think we are unfortunate and poor, but what they don’t understand is that we are trying to find a house.... People don’t see how much love goes on in our house. My mom works hard at her job then comes home and makes dinner. She makes sure that my brother and I are doing well in school and talks to us about our day.... My mom spends her every waking hour into making sure my brother and I are safe and happy. That is what goes on inside our small apartment. That is all everyone ever really needs, is love and comfort in your home, no matter what the size or what your house looks like. People see a small apartment; I see a warm cozy home with love and support.”

#3 "I have always lived in a nice house or apartment. Before I moved [here] I lived on Cherry Street and Ocean Avenue [in San Diego]. But right now I live on Fifth Street. The house is nice, but it does have a splattered egg on the front of the house that has chipped away the paint.

When people walk or drive by my house, I see their look of disappointment or disgust.

People must think that we are poor and cannot keep things clean and nice. I am embarrassed to bring anybody over. I don't want their first impression to be like "Eww! You live here?" Whenever we go to the grocery store or along the roads to Chico I see the rich and very well kept houses and wish that I could live there.

But instead I live on Fifth Street. What people might not understand is that we are not poor and we try to do the best we can to make our home nice looking. We manage to get by with what we get. We are nice people who take pride about the way we look and how our home looks. When my mom says that this house is only "temporary," I can't help but think that maybe it's not for a little while but until I graduate from high school. But I am grateful that we do have a house."

#4 "My house is on Chestnut Street. It is right on the corner of the street. It is light blue almost white. There are about three trees in front of my house. It has two big rooms and two small rooms and it also has a back yard. I feel happy living at my house because I live in town. Before moving there I used to live in a different house and it was out of town and I didn't like it there because it was lonely and I didn't have people to talk to. At this house it is different because I can go walking to my friend's house.

People who drive by my house would think that we are a lazy family, but we are not.

It because we don't have time to fix our house. My parents work and they come home tired and late from work. But I don't care what they say as long as we are happy, that is good for me."

#5 "It's a country house surrounded by 175 acres of trees. There are sidewalks surrounding it with olive and sycamore branches obstructing the pathway around the house. The sidewalk leads to a small cement bottomed pond that contains dark water and fish long absent from it. The lawn is becoming slightly patchy and long, and the hedge has become overgrown. By the garage are boxes of stuff in somewhat organized little towers. By the front of the house there is a pool held up with iron poles to keep it from collapsing. Around the back, one of the numerous wooden decks has several boards torn up, indicating a half-done project. Away from the house a sandbox sits with a few sun-bleached toys for playing in the sand.

Someone passing by would get the impression of people incompetent to finish projects or to buy new things. They may see the overgrowing shrubs and brush as laziness or scatterbrained. I see the boxes and things as part of numerous other projects slowly being accomplished. I see a busy family who takes time out to be together and not to work their children in their little free time to make sure everything is perfect. I see a family who cares more about how their children grow up than how perfect their yard looks. I see a family who cared about their lawn more until the 6th child came along.

In reality, it is a manicured house and lawn gone a little to seed like a mother whose toned body rounds out a little after too many children. Like the mom who becomes so busy she neglects herself, so it is with us. Other things take precedence over "keeping up with the Jones'!" It is not that bad, but just worn down a little. Being busy and having lots of family time takes priority over an immaculate landscape."

Teaching Sequence Continued

□ Learning from informal writing:

Note: Students may work with their own writings or they can work with a partner's.

- Choose the most significant sentences and color them yellow.
- Their own significant sentences are written on adding machine tape and posted on the bulletin board.
- Using the red colored pencil, students circle the most powerful/meaningful word in their narrative.
- Compare students' lines and words to Cisneros' by looking at the chart and tapes.
- Discuss the comparisons and the ways they chose to present their ideas.
- Students write a short reflection about the ways their own ideas and the ways they've written about them were influenced by the ways Cisneros wrote hers. Students might write about style, topic, point of view, tone, or any other connections they may have with "The House on Mango Street." This writing helps them focus on the power of their own ideas, as well as on the ways they tell their own stories of where they live and the misperceptions that may exist for them.

□ Writing about an issue from "The House on Mango Street"

Formal Writing: The Analytic Essay

- Students generate a list of ideas that comes from their reading and from their writing about assumptions based on outward appearances. They reread their own lists, the ones on the wall, and their informal writings from "The House on Mango Street." They are reminded that Cisneros helped them think about *assumptions and perceptions* in their own lives. They are also reminded that they will be thinking about a topic that will culminate in an essay where they will use additional texts to help them both think about the topic, as well as explain their own positions on the topic.
- The class brainstorms a collective list of issues about *assumptions and perceptions* presented both in the vignette as well as from their groups. We chart these and post them so that students can review them and use them as references for their paper's topic.
- Once students see the variety and range of ideas, they begin to think about the power of *assumptions and perceptions* that arise from merely looking at outward appearances.
- Students choose two *assumptions and perceptions* from the list to think about through a pair of short writings that are about ½ page on each topic. They write about how their selection helps them think about the power of assumptions and perceptions.
- Students then begin to think about how *assumptions and perceptions* about appearances can lead to misunderstanding about an individual's character.

Note: The range of topics students choose can sometimes be quite broad, and some of the topics students think are interesting to explore are too complex for them to research. It's completely appropriate to focus the class on writing about only a few of the topics. Some of the most often chosen ones are about the misperceptions of how we dress vs. our true identity and the ways people in urban areas perceive rural life. The age of students in the class can help with how individual the topic/essay focus can be. If students are good researchers, then they can have broader choices of topics. Younger students, like the ones who did the work for this particular sequence, were given only two choices. They were provided additional articles to read instead of researching their own.

□ Reading Non-Fiction

Note: These articles were studied on separate days.

- Read “Uniting the World One Pair of Pants At A Time” and “Perceptions of Rural America.”

Note: “Perceptions of Rural America” is quite long, so the text students receive might be abridged, although most students find it quite interesting.

- Ask students to reread both articles. With a yellow highlighter, identify where in each article the writer places the claim.

Note: The claim is the writer’s assertion and is often restated throughout the piece, is placed near the end, or can even be found in the first sentence. The purpose here is to illustrate that the writer indeed has a position and that the construction of the argument differs in each of the two texts because each article has a different purpose. Here is where we discuss the importance of fashioning an argument to meet a topic’s demands and a reader’s needs.

- Using two different colors of pencils that the class agrees on, color the article’s facts one color, and use another to color the writer’s opinions that support the claim.
- Using an overhead transparency of the article, debrief what students believe about the articles by coloring the overhead as they suggest. They will notice that sometimes it is difficult to decide if an idea is a fact or an opinion. They will actually see that the structure of each argument is different.
- If there is time, or if the class is inclined, it is interesting to identify the most significant sentences in each article as well as the most powerful words, just as they did with “The House On Mango Street.”
- Once the students have studied the articles, they write about the ideas of each article that they think are interesting. This writing can be based on time, or they can be asked to write a particular length—like half of a page. The purpose here is to connect their thinking to the ideas of the articles and to let students reflect on the issues presented.

□ Culminating Writing Assignment

- The Analytic Essay Prompt: Choice #1

The author in “The House On Mango Street” believes that physical appearance can shape how people value themselves. The author of “Uniting the World One Pair Of Pants At A Time” suggests that people should wear uniforms in order to avoid being judged. To what extent do you agree with these authors? To develop your essay use examples from your own experience, your observations of others, and your reading, including “The House On Mango Street” and “Uniting the World One Pair Of Pants At A Time.”

- The Analytic Essay Prompt: Choice #1

The author in “The House on Mango Street” suggests that where we live can influence the ways others think about us, and even the ways we think about ourselves. In “Perceptions of Rural Life in America” the study shows that people living in urban areas believe that life in a rural place is distinctly different from city life and city values. To what extent do you see these attitudes where you live? To develop your essay, use examples from your own experiences, your observations of others, and your reading, including “The House on Mango Street” and “Perceptions of Rural Life in America?”

- Students compose an essay that includes:
 - a well formulated claim
 - sound reasoning
 - multiple sources of evidence
 - an appropriate level of diction
 - MLA formatting.

Assessment Tool

- One of the assessment tools we use is the Subject A Scoring Guide. For a downloadable copy, link to <http://www.ucop.edu/sas/sub-a/process.html#scoring>

Recommended Instructional Resources

- Cisneros, Sandra. "The House on Mango Street." *The House on Mango Street*. New York: First Vintage Contemporaries, 1984.
- Johnson, Brian. "Uniting the World One Pair of Pants at a Time"
www.dailyutahchronicle.com/news/2003/07/10/Opinion/Uniting.The.World.One.Pair.Of.Pants.At.A.Time-446739.shtml
- The Kellogg Foundation. "Perceptions of Rural America."
www.greenbergresearch.com/publications/reports/r_perceptionsofruralamerica_110801.pdf

Recommended Professional Resources

- Soven, Margot Iris. *Teaching Writing in Middle and Secondary Schools: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.
- Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *Reading Don't Fix No Chevy's: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.
- Wilhelm, Jeffrey D., Tanya N. Baker, and Julie Dube Hackett. *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy, 6-12*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers-Heinemann, 2002.

More Info

- For more information about the UC Subject A Essay Examination, link to <http://www.ucop.edu/sas/sub-a/>

About the Teacher Consultant

Rochelle Ramay teaches English at Corning Union High School in Corning, California. As a teacher consultant with the Northern California Writing Project, she directs teacher research and leads workshops in secondary reading and writing. She is co-chair of the National Writing Project's Teacher Inquiry Communities Network, a NWP focus network that promotes teacher research in education across the National Writing Project network.