SAMPLE NARRATIVE PROMPT, DIRECTIONS, SUPPORTING MATERIAL

found online at www.achievethecore.org

Narrative Prompt • Grades 6-12

Student Direction Sheet

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:

1. A young child watching the “black blizzard” rolling in over the plains
2. A young child, watching a tractor knock down his family home in Oklahoma, several years into the Dust Bowl drought
3. A mother sitting on her front steps in a migrant camp in California
4. 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.

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Teacher Direction Sheet

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.

Narrative Prompt Supporting Materials

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.

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| --- | --- |
| http://static.ddmcdn.com/gif/dust-bowl-cause-1.jpg | http://www.csub.edu/library/images/dustbowl.jpg |
| Dust storm coming in  National Geographic  Used by permission of National Geographic | Squatters tent in California  California State University, Bakersfield  Used by permission of California State University, Bakersfield |
|  |  |
| http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/media/water0601.jpg | http://www.history.com/images/media/slideshow/the-dust-bowl/boy-in-dust-bowl.jpg |
| Migrant Mother with children  Dorothea Lange photograph, 1936  Used by permission of Dorothea Lange photograph | Migrant child, Oklahoma  History.com, Dust Bowl Photo Gallery)  Used by permission of History.com,  Dust Bowl Photo Gallery |

Narrative Prompt Sample Student Paper

Grade 10 • On-Demand Writing

**Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory** and figurative **language to convey a vivid picture of the events, setting, and characters:**

Precise, vivid language captures the force of the tractor as it destroys the house.

The Day The Tractor Came

I was four years old when our house was destroyed. I didn't understand why but I could remember when the big red tractor came belching its smoke, gleaming in the hot midday sunshine, and rolling over the landscape plowing long furrows in perfect unison. Years later they told me it was the bank - the monster that lived and breathed profits from the land. We lived on that land and worked it until it was exhausted. I was still in the womb when the drought came with its monstrous black clouds of dust that enveloped the landscape. Pa said that the storms caused the land to be barren of profit. When the profit ceased, the bank found other means to satisfy its never-ending appetite for the financial food known to farmers as profit.

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

**Uses a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole**

**Uses sensory details to convey vivid picture of experience**

I'll never forget the day the bank took our house. Pa told me that the bank was cultivating the land because we could no longer sustain the profit ourselves. I did not know nor cared what it meant. I was just a kid playing Indians and Cowboys with my two brothers and sister the day the tractor came. The shiny monster had been plowing the land all day long when it finally got to our small cabin. My father put up a stand, but to no avail. The tractor driver delivered his monotonous address to Pa about the bank's situation and needs. Legally it was fair, but it did not seem fair. Finally, Pa stepped away from the tractor squatted down and buried his head in his hands. Without hesitation, the driver fired up the incredible machine and let its engines roar. Looking back, the tractor driver seemed to have an ultimate connection with his machine because he was an obstinate man controlling an unstoppable force. Slowly, the machine approached the house as if it were not even there. At immediate contact, the wall and roof caved in as if it were a flimsy cardboard box against a freight train. The tractor then proceeded as if there never was a house, without a care in the world, unaware and unconcerned of the devastation left in the dust.

Uses the **narrative technique** of personification (portraying the tractor as the enemy) **to develop events and characters**

**Creates a smooth progression of events**

Back then, I was merely a child watching and wondering what his father would do next. Pa had always been a strong man, a man that our family could depend on. However, in five minutes, the tractor was able to reduce Pa to nothing. Never before had I seen my father break down with hopelessness. Seeing him there without a plan made me feel as though we were alone in a desert with nowhere to turn. But the tractor, the arrogant tractor, took my small life, shattered it into million pieces, and left it on the ground in front of me. What few memories still had in that house flashed before me as I watch them knocked to the ground. That was my home, the house where I was born, the house where I learned to walk, and the house my father had built with his own craftsmanship so quickly destroyed returning to the dust from which it came. But what do I care; I was merely a child in a large, dusty, lonely, world.

**Provides a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is resolved over the course of the narrative**

Uses the **narrative technique** of **reflection to develop events,** as well asthe **character** of the narrator

**Uses a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole**

**Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory** and figurative **language to convey a vivid picture of the events, setting, and characters:**

Precise, telling details contrast the misery of the family with the lack of concern of the tractor

In this on-demand narrative, the writer tells the story of a child watching his home being razed by a tractor during the days of the Dust Bowl. He focuses it around the narrator’s experience of losing the home his father had built. The narrator and main character is the child.

The writer uses a clear sequence of events to develop the story, using some skillfully executed flashbacks to illuminate the present experience with the tractor. The writer uses no dialogue; most of the detail is provided through the narrator’s reflection and through vivid descriptions of events. The narrator’s state of mind—bewildered and shocked—is captured through this reflective detail. The narrative concludes with the narrator reflecting on his powerlessness and aloneness. The lack of tidy resolution is appropriate to this narrative and suggests the maturity of the writer.

Narrative Prompt Sample Student Paper

Grade 12 • On-Demand Writing

**Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory** and figurative **language to convey a vivid picture of the events, setting, and characters:**

Precise, vivid language captures the force of the tractor as it destroys the house.

Better Than the Sunset.

Adam sat on the porch and watched the clear blue sky. Today was his sixth birthday and all he wanted was to watch the sunset. It was only noon and he had hours to go. Inside the house his mother was cooking and his father was out in the fields. He didn't mind being alone on his birthday. He liked the quiet.

He sensed it before he saw it. Something felt wrong. Everything was too quiet, much the same as the minutes before a hurricane. Those moments were magical. The world seemed to stand still; the air charged with electricity.

Establishes the **problem** (coming of the dust storm) and **its significance,** using narrative technique of **suspense**

Waiting to explode into chaos.

**Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the events, setting, and character**

Today was no different. A cloud that had not been present only seconds before covered the sun. Adam looked up and squinted into the still bright sky. The cloud covering the sun was alone. It would not be a thunderstorm. Suddenly a huge shadow loomed before him. It sped forward from the tree line and deftly made its way towards him.

**Uses a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome,** the coming of the storm

Time slowed down and he watched as animals exploded from their hiding places. The wide yard was chaos as a hundred tiny bodies ran for cover. His breath caught in his throat and while he was afraid he could not tear his eyes away. There was something beautiful about the way the cloud of black dust crept towards him, swallowing everything in its path. To him it looked like a monster. Big and ugly and destructive and yet somehow extraordinary at the same time.

He vaguely registered that his name was being called, but there was nothing urgent enough to tear him away from the havoc unfolding before his eyes. He ignored the voices and watched as his mother's flowerbed was swallowed in seconds. Next were the tractor and then the shed. His big blue eyes grew wide as the cloud of angry, swirling black dust drew ever closer. His heart pounded now not from fear, but from something else. Adrenaline sang through his veins. It was exhilarating to watch his own death approach. He had no intention of dying today, but he couldn't bear to run inside and lose sight of this beautiful destruction.

**Uses** **description and reflection to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome,** how the child will experience the storm

The voices grew more and more frantic and the swirling mass of dust threatened closer and closer. And still Adam sat, watching and waiting for what was to be swallowed next. The shadow of this beast loomed over the house and he craned his head back to watch the hurricane of dust descend upon him. If possible time slowed even more. The door behind him burst open, the wood creaking and groaning in protest at the force shoved against it. The span of seconds in which his father ran towards him, shouting his name, stretched and seemed to become years. His footsteps pounded against the rotting planks of the porch, the noise exploding in Adam's ears. He looked between his father and the black monster, which had now reached the bottom step.

**Provides a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is resolved over the course of the narrative:** The writer contrasts the danger of the storm with the child’s experience of it to establish an ironic ending.

**Creates a smooth progression of events**

**Uses precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the events, setting, and characters:** Here, the writer conveys the danger of the moment

His father's strong arm reached towards him and closed around is body like a metal vice. His small bones jarred from the impact. He watched over his father's shoulder as the storm wailed closer.

I'll catch you, it seemed to be mocking.

As suddenly as time had slowed, it began again. The dust exploded around them just as his father slammed the door, shutting out the world. Black dust curled under the door and shifted forward in fury. His mother shoved a wet towel in the crack and pressed another to Adams face. Together, the three of them huddled in the middle of the room, gasping and hacking and choking for air. But Adam didn't mind. He had only one thought as the black dust wormed its way into his lungs and stole his breath.

**Creates a smooth progression of events**

That was better than the sunset.

*In this on-demand narrative, the writer tells the story of a child experiencing a dust storm during the days of the Dust Bowl. He focuses it around the irony of such a dreadful thing being such a magical experience for the child. The main character is the child, and the narrative is told from a third-person limited point of view.*

*The writer uses a clear sequence of events to develop the story, beginning with the main character watching the sunset and using the notion of the sunset to create a cohesive whole by the end of the narrative. The writer uses no dialogue; most of the detail is provided through reflection on the part of the child and through vivid description of events. The child’s state of mind—shocked but also thrilled—is captured through this reflective detail. The narrative concludes with the child thinking, “That was better than the sunset,” an ironic resolution that is appropriate to this narrative and that suggests the maturity of the writer.*