

How It Feels to Be Colored Me

Essay by Zora Neale Hurston

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RI 2** Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text. **RI 5** Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. **RI 10** Read and comprehend literary nonfiction. **L 3a** Apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts when reading.

DID YOU KNOW?

Zora Neale Hurston . . .

- dressed so flamboyantly that one acquaintance referred to her as a “macaw of brilliant plumage.”
- shocked some people by wearing pants in public.
- became a fan of British poet John Milton after rescuing one of his books from the trash.

Meet the Author

Zora Neale Hurston c. 1891–1960

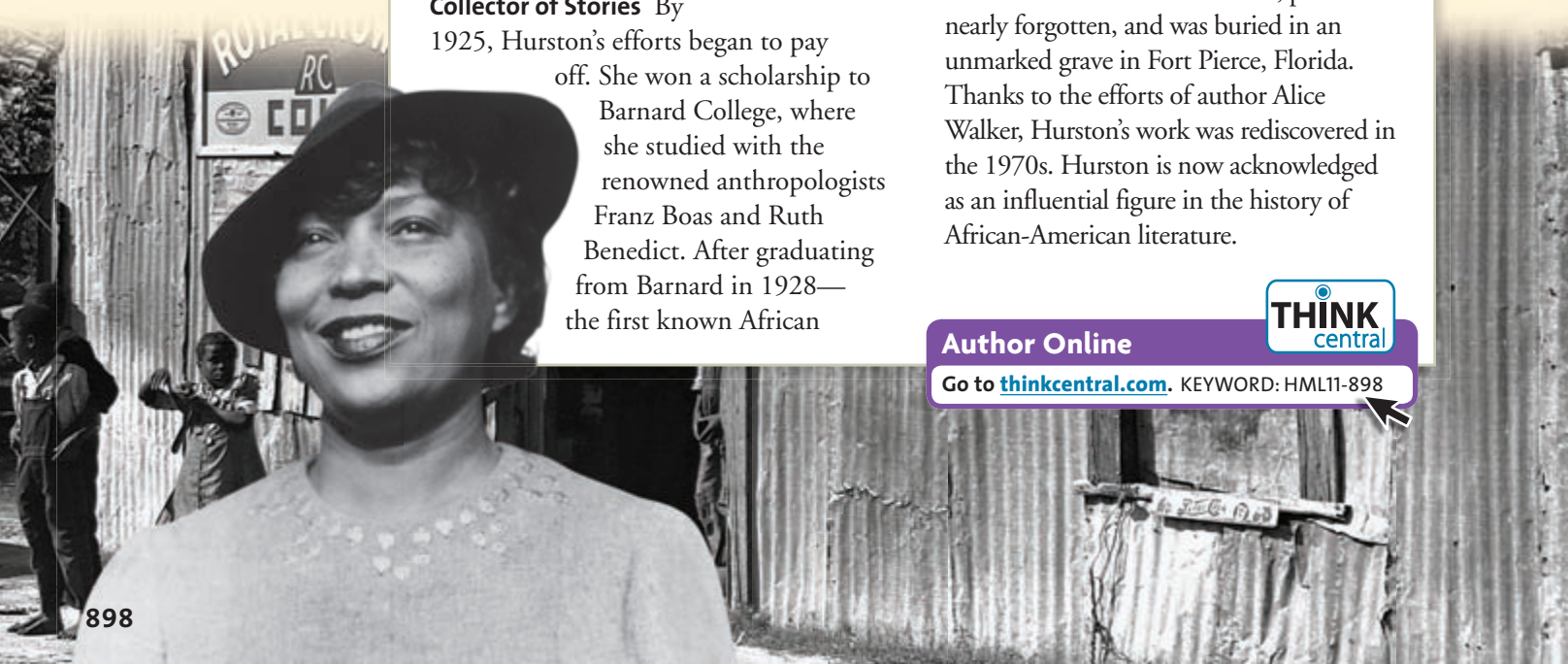
Raised in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, Zora Neale Hurston followed her mother’s advice to “jump at de sun”—to follow her dreams, no matter how impossible they seemed. In 1925, she arrived in New York with “\$1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope.” Hurston’s flair, talent, and sheer nerve soon made her one of the leading African-American novelists of the 1930s.

Early Days When Hurston was 13 years old, her family life fell apart. Her mother died, her father remarried, and by the age of 14, Hurston was on her own. Working an endless series of menial jobs, Hurston tried for years to earn enough money to send herself back to school. After 12 years of trials and adventures, she finally completed high school and scraped together a year’s tuition for Howard University, “the Negro Harvard,” where in 1921 she published her first story.

Collector of Stories By 1925, Hurston’s efforts began to pay off. She won a scholarship to Barnard College, where she studied with the renowned anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict. After graduating from Barnard in 1928—the first known African

American to do so—Hurston returned to the South to collect African-American folklore. “I had to go back, dress as they did, talk as they did, live their life,” she said, “so I could get into my stories the world I knew as a child.” The lively, hilarious stories she collected soon became material for her own fiction. In the 1930s and ’40s, she published a series of major works, including the folklore collection *Mules and Men* (1935), the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

Down But Not Out Hurston often came under fire by African-American writers who felt she minimized the seriousness of racial prejudice. By the late 1940s, her books had fallen out of favor and out of print. During the last 20 years of her life, Hurston struggled to earn a living, once again working as a maid to pay her bills. In 1960, Hurston died in a welfare home, poor and nearly forgotten, and was buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida. Thanks to the efforts of author Alice Walker, Hurston’s work was rediscovered in the 1970s. Hurston is now acknowledged as an influential figure in the history of African-American literature.



Author Online

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● TEXT ANALYSIS: RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES

Famously outspoken, Zora Neale Hurston wasn't afraid to stand out from the crowd in a unique way. In this essay, Hurston uses the following **rhetorical techniques** to discuss her views about race.

- **repetition**—when a sound, word, phrase, or line is repeated for emphasis or unity.
- **parallel structure**—the use of similar grammatical constructions to express ideas that are related or equal in importance.

As you read, notice how Hurston uses these rhetorical techniques to make her ideas come alive.

● READING SKILL: IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS

You know that the **main idea** of a paragraph is the basic point it makes. Sometimes, the main idea is **explicit**, or directly stated in the text. However, main ideas may also be **implicit**—suggested or hinted at by the details in the text. In such cases, you'll need to analyze the details the author presents to discover the main idea.

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record the main idea of each paragraph. If the main idea is implicit, note key details that helped you identify the main idea.

Paragraph	Main Idea	Key Details
1	I'm not ashamed to be colored.	offers no "extenuating circumstances"

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Hurston uses the following words to make her points about African-American identity. Restate each phrase, using a different word or words for the boldfaced term.

1. collected a **miscellany** of objects on her travels
2. did not use **pigmentation** to judge character
3. excused from penalties because of **extenuating** factors
4. dressed in colorful **raiment**
5. spoke **exultingly** of her triumphs
6. saw herself as **cosmic** rather than small and narrow



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

What makes you YOU?

Think of the things that make you unique: your style, your sense of humor, the way you keep your head (or don't) when things get tense. Of all the qualities and behaviors that make you who you are, which ones do you think best define your personality?

The Insider's Guide to Me

1. To find me in a crowd, look/listen for _____
2. The story my friends/family all tell about me is _____
3. Most people in school know me as _____
4. The thing I do that is most "me" is _____

How It Feels to Be Colored Me

Zora Neale Hurston

BACKGROUND Between 1865 and 1900, more than 100 independent towns were founded by African Americans trying to escape racial prejudice. Eatonville, Florida, a small town just north of Orlando, was the oldest of these self-governing black communities. Growing up in Eatonville, Zora Neale Hurston was sheltered from the experiences of exclusion and contempt that shaped the lives of many African Americans. As you read this essay, think about how these early experiences influenced Hurston’s opinions on race.

Analyze Visuals ►

What words would you use to describe the girl in the painting? Identify the techniques or elements that lend her these qualities.

extenuating
(ĭk-stĕn’yōō-a’tĭng) *adj.*
lessening the severity of
extenuate v.

I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of **extenuating** circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was *not* an Indian chief.

I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village. **A**

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat to me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter.¹ Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn’t mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I actually spoke to them in passing. I’d wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: “Howdy-do-well-

A RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES

Reread lines 4–12. Which lines have parallel structures? How do these comparisons help you understand more about Hurston and her hometown?

1. **proscenium . . . first-nighter:** A proscenium box is a box seat near the stage. A first-nighter is a person who attends the opening night of a performance.

Girl in a Red Dress (1934), Charles Alston. Oil on canvas, 71" × 55.9". © The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Collection of African American Art. © Estate of Charles Alston. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York.



I-thank-you-where-you-goin’?” Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably “go a piece of the way” with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first “welcome-to-our-state” Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me “speak pieces” and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la,² and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn’t know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody’s Zora.

But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders,³ as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change.⁴ I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run.

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little **pigmentation** more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.⁵ **B**

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the grand-daughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said “On the line!” The Reconstruction said “Get set!”; and the generation before said “Go!” I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep. **C**

Language Coach

Fixed Expressions Note “negotiations would be . . . broken off” (lines 21–22). A **fixed expression**, or standard combination of words, *break off negotiations* means “stop negotiations.” What must the fixed expressions *enter into negotiations* and *resume negotiations* mean?

pigmentation
(pɪgˈmən-tāˈshən) *n.*
coloring

B MAIN IDEAS

State the main idea of lines 38–44. What criticism is implied by the author’s statement?

C RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES

Reread lines 45–48. What important word does Hurston repeat in these sentences? What effect does this repetition have on Hurston’s message?

2. **parse-me-la**: a dance movement popular with Southern African Americans of the period.

3. **oleanders** (ōˈlĕ-ănˈdərz): evergreen shrubs with fragrant flowers.

4. **sea change**: complete transformation.

5. **oyster knife**: a reference to the saying “The world is my oyster,” implying that the world contains treasure waiting to be taken, like the pearl in an oyster.



Empress of the Blues (1974), Romare Bearden. Collage, 36" × 48". Photo © Smithsonian American Art Museum/Art Resource, New York. © The Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the
60 game of getting.

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira.⁶ I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson"⁷ I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the
70 drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks

Language Coach

Context Clues The words, sentences, paragraphs, and even punctuation marks that surround a word make up its **context**. *Specter* (line 57) means "visible spirit." In lines 57–59, what context clues can you find for the word *specter*?

6. **Hegira** (hĭ-jĭ'rə): journey (from the name given to Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina in 622).

7. **Barnard . . . Hudson**: Barnard is the college in New York City from which Hurston graduated in 1928. "Beside the waters . . ." is a reference to the first line of the college song.

the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them **exultingly**. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai⁸ above my head, I hurl it true to the mark *yeeeeooww!* I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow, and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

exultingly (ɪg-zʌltˈɪŋɡ-lē)
adv. joyfully

“Good music they have here,” he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

Music! The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am *so* colored. **D**

D MAIN IDEAS
Describe the two responses that are contrasted in lines 88–91. What does this contrast imply about the differences between whites and blacks?


At certain times I have no race, I am *me*. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich⁹ with her gorgeous **raiment**, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The **cosmic** Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time, I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

raiment (rāˈmənt) *n.*
clothing; garments

cosmic (kɒzˈmɪk) *adj.* of or relating to the universe

I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It's beyond me.

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of **miscellany** propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water¹⁰ diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two, still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held—so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place—who knows? 

miscellany (mɪsˈə-lāˈnē)
n. a mixture of various things

E GRAMMAR AND STYLE
Reread lines 105–111. Note how Hurston uses **sentence fragments** to highlight specific details in her description.

8. **assegai** (äs'ə-gī'): a type of light spear used in southern Africa.

9. **Peggy . . . Boule Mich**: a wealthy woman of Hurston's day, walking along the Boulevard Saint-Michel in Paris.

10. **first-water**: of the highest quality or purity.

Comprehension

- Recall** In Hurston’s description, what kind of community was Eatonville?
- Recall** What was the big change Hurston experienced at age 13?
- Paraphrase** What is Hurston’s view on slavery?

Text Analysis

- Identify Main Ideas** Review the chart you created as you read. What is the main idea of the essay? In what ways does race shape Hurston’s sense of identity?
- Analyze Rhetorical Techniques** What effect is created by Hurston’s use of rhetorical techniques to show how she belonged in Eatonville (lines 30–31), to reveal her thoughts at Barnard (lines 64–67), and to emphasize her connection with jazz (lines 68–85).
- Make Inferences** Judging from the anecdotes Hurston includes in her essay, what experiences and traits does she consider distinctively African-American? Support your answer with details.
- Interpret Analogy** An **analogy** is a comparison using one thing or idea to make sense of another. Look at the analogy in lines 105–116. What is being compared? Be sure to explain each part of the analogy, including the colored bags, the “Great Stuffer of Bags,” and the bags’ contents.
- Compare and Contrast Author’s Perspectives** Hurston’s views set her apart from most of her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries. Choose one of the poets you have read in this unit, and use a chart like the one shown to contrast his perspectives with Hurston’s. What similarities and differences do you find?

	<i>Hurston’s Views</i>	<i>_____’s Views</i>
<i>What Defines Black Identity</i>		
<i>Goals of Black Writers</i>		
<i>Opinions of Whites</i>		

Text Criticism

- Critical Interpretations** The author Alice Walker, one of Hurston’s greatest admirers, finds Hurston’s views sometimes “exasperating.” She notes that this essay “presents two stereotypes: the ‘happy ducky’ who sings and dances for white folks, for money and for joy; and the educated black person who is, underneath the thin veneer of civilization, still a ‘heathen.’” Do you agree with Walker’s views? Why or why not? Be specific in your response.

What makes you YOU?

Those who study people often debate whether nature or nurture most defines someone’s personality. In other words, is the person born that way or is he or she shaped more by the environment. What do you think? Do you believe your personality is shaped more by nature or nurture? Explain your answer.

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RI 2** Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text. **RI 5** Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. **RI 10** Read and comprehend literary nonfiction. **L 3a** Apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts when reading.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the word that is not related in meaning to the other words.

1. (a) collection, (b) miscellany, (c) regulation, (d) assortment
2. (a) apparel, (b) clothing, (c) weathering, (d) raiment
3. (a) vast, (b) cosmic, (c) universal, (d) fictional
4. (a) shading, (b) pigmentation, (c) zoology, (d) coloration
5. (a) determinedly, (b) exultingly, (c) delightedly, (d) ecstatically
6. (a) extenuating, (b) moderating, (c) mitigating, (d) exaggerating

WORD LIST

cosmic
extenuating
exultingly
miscellany
pigmentation
raiment

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

• conclude • criteria • despite • justify • maintain

Zora Neale Hurston was upbeat and positive **despite** being the grand-daughter of slaves. In a group, discuss how the past influences the future. Do difficulties in the past **justify** someone being angry and resentful today? Use at least three Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE GREEK ROOT *cosm* OR *cosmo*

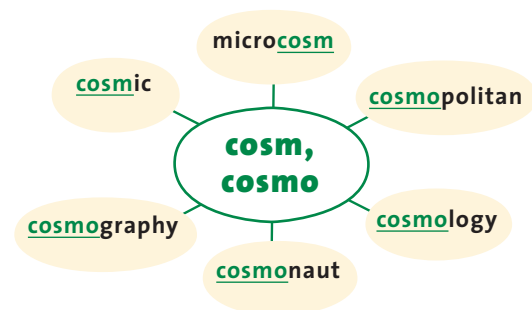
The origin of the root word *cosm*, which may also be spelled *cosmo*, is the Greek language. *Cosm* is derived from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning “world” or “universe.” This Greek root is found in the vocabulary word *cosmic* as well as a number of other English words. You can use your knowledge of the origin and meaning of this root word, in addition to the context of a word, to help determine the word’s meaning.

PRACTICE Apply what you know about the Greek root *cosm* or *cosmo* to the words in the web. Then, choose the word from the web that best completes each sentence. If you need to, consult a dictionary.

1. Many myths of creation also include a _____, or a theory of the universe.
2. A _____ is an explorer of outer space.
3. The science called _____ includes astronomy, geography, and geology.
4. A _____ can be any type of miniature community or world.
5. A _____ person tends to have a sophisticated view of the world.

COMMON CORE

L4b Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech. **L6** Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases.



Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central

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Language

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Vary Sentence Structure

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 904. Zora Neale Hurston’s independent and unconventional personality shines through in her writing style. She wasn’t afraid to bend the rules of formal writing, adding punch and emphasis through the use of **sentence fragments**. Here are two examples from the essay:

*I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.
For instance at Barnard.* (lines 62–64)

*I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries.
My country, right or wrong.* (lines 99–101)

The fragment “My country, right or wrong” brings the reader to an abrupt halt, creating a dramatic and strong statement. The change in sentence rhythm helps emphasize the finality of Hurston’s belief about her place in the world.

PRACTICE Rewrite the following paragraph in Zora Neale Hurston’s style, incorporating one or two intentional sentence fragments. Add or delete any words as necessary.

My parents were always finding opportunities to point out how much the world owed to China. We learned that our Chinese ancestors had invented paper, books, kites, gunpowder, compasses, fishing reels, and umbrellas. Was there anything that hadn’t been invented by the Chinese? One day we went to eat at an Italian restaurant. As I dug into my plate of pasta, I told my mom, “Well, here’s one thing the Chinese didn’t invent.” I was wrong! The Chinese invented pasta, she explained, and they invented restaurants, too!

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of Hurston’s essay by responding to this prompt. Then, use the **revising tips** to improve your essay.

WRITING PROMPT

WRITE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY
Imagine that you have entered a writing contest sponsored by a heritage society. Draft a **three-to-five-paragraph autobiographical essay**, modeled after Hurston’s essay, in which you share your feelings about your own heritage. In your essay, include at least two sentence fragments that help emphasize important points.

REVISING TIPS

- Focus on one or two important details about your heritage.
- Use personal examples, explanations, and anecdotes to show why your heritage is important.
- End with a conclusion that wraps up the thoughts in your essay.

COMMON CORE

L 1a Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time, and is sometimes contested. **L 3a** Vary syntax for effect, consulting references for guidance as needed. **W 3** Write narratives to develop imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

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