

The School Play

Short Story by Gary Soto



Video link at thinkcentral.com

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML6-34

What do you **FEAR** most?



Virginia Standards of Learning

6.5a Identify the elements of narrative structure, including setting, character, plot, conflict, and theme.

6.5l Use reading strategies to monitor comprehension throughout the reading process.

Have you ever jumped at the sight of a harmless bug? Or, maybe you have waited a long time to ride a roller coaster only to change your mind when it was your turn? Things that frighten people range from big to small, from living to nonliving, from the seen to the unseen. In “The School Play,” a student struggles to overcome a fear many people face.

SURVEY What are you most afraid of? Some of the most common fears people have are listed in the survey below. Rank the fears from one to ten, with one being the thing you are most afraid of. Then survey the class to find out what is the most common fear in your classroom.

SURVEY

FACE YOUR FEARS!

Rank the following fears to see what scares you the most:

___ Heights

___ Spiders and Insects

___ Being in the Dark

___ Dentists

___ Thunder and Lightning

___ Failing a Test

___ Being Bullied

___ Airplane Rides

___ Public Speaking

___ Being in a Crowd



● TEXT ANALYSIS: PLOT ELEMENTS

Everything in a story happens for a reason. The series of events is the story's **plot**. The plot usually follows a pattern.

- **Exposition** introduces the characters and setting. It may also hint at what the **conflict**, or problem, will be.
- **Rising action** shows how the conflict develops.
- The most exciting part is the **climax**, a turning point in which you discover how the conflict is settled.
- Tension eases during the **falling action**, and events unfold as a result of the climax.
- The **resolution**, or **denouement**, is the final part of the plot, in which the reader learns how the problem is solved.

As you read "The School Play," notice the events that occur in each stage of the story's plot.

● READING STRATEGY: MONITOR

Have you ever forgotten what you just read? To avoid this problem, **monitor** your reading by pausing occasionally to check your understanding. One way to monitor is to ask yourself questions about what you are reading. Sometimes you'll need to reread to find the answer. Other times you'll find the answer later on in the story.

As you read "The School Play," record questions about what is happening in a chart like the one shown.

<i>My Questions</i>	<i>Answers</i>
<i>What is inside the cardboard box?</i>	

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Soto uses the boldfaced words below to help relate a student's experience in a school play. To see which words you know, replace each boldfaced word with a different word or phrase.

1. Robert's friend delivers the **narrative** about the background of the play.
2. The audience's **relentless** talking distracts the actors.
3. The main **prop** in the play is a map of the West.
4. Belinda wanted to **smirk** when the actor forgot his lines.

Gary Soto

born 1952

True to Life

Gary Soto draws upon his childhood memories of growing up in Fresno, California, as an inspiration for his writing. He is often asked what his family thinks about his writing. He jokes that they don't read much of his work, "so they're not fully aware of how they've been brought to the page."

A Star Is Born

At age ten, Soto was cast in his school play. He only had to remember one line: "I have the glasses," but he was so fascinated with the fake beard he was wearing that he forgot what to say.

BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

The Donner Party

In the spring of 1846, a group of men, women, and children from Illinois and nearby states set out for California. George and Jacob Donner led the group.

While trying to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains in eastern California, the Donner Party was trapped in a snowstorm. The travelers ran out of food, and members of the group began dying of starvation. In desperation, some of them ate the bodies of the dead. Only half the people made it through that grim winter.

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



THE SCHOOL PLAY

Gary Soto

Analyze Visuals ▶

Examine the art on page 37. In what way do the exaggerated **details** create a humorous effect?

A PLOT: EXPOSITION

What background information have you learned about Robert?

In the school play at the end of his sixth-grade year, all Robert Suarez had to remember to say was, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” to a pioneer woman, who was really Belinda Lopez. Instead of a pioneer woman, Belinda was one of the toughest girls since the beginning of the world. She was known to slap boys and grind their faces into the grass so that they bit into chunks of wormy earth. More than once Robert had witnessed Belinda staring down the janitor’s pit bull, who licked his frothing chops but didn’t dare mess with her. **A**

The class rehearsed for three weeks, at first without costumes. Early one morning Mrs. Bunnin wobbled into the classroom lugging a large cardboard box. She wiped her brow and said, “Thanks for the help, Robert.”

Robert was at his desk scribbling a ballpoint tattoo that spelled DUDE on the tops of his knuckles. He looked up and stared, blinking at his teacher. “Oh, did you need some help?” he asked.



She rolled her eyes at him and told him to stop writing on his skin. “You’ll look like a criminal,” she scolded.

Robert stuffed his hands into his pockets as he rose from his seat. “What’s in the box?” he asked.

20 She muttered under her breath. She popped open the taped top and brought out skirts, hats, snowshoes, scarves, and vests. She tossed Robert a red beard, which he held up to his face, thinking it made him look handsome.

“I like it,” Robert said. He sneezed and ran his hand across his moist nose.

His classmates were coming into the classroom and looked at Robert in awe. “That’s bad,” Ruben said. “What do I get?”

Mrs. Bunnin threw him a wrinkled shirt. Ruben raised it to his chest and said, “My dad could wear this. Can I give it to him after the play is done?”

30 Mrs. Bunnin turned away in silence.

Most of the actors didn’t have speaking parts. They just got cutout crepe-paper snowflakes to pin to their shirts or crepe-paper leaves to wear.

During the blizzard in which Robert delivered his line, Belinda asked, “Is there something wrong with your eyes?” Robert looked at the audience, which at the moment was a classroom of empty chairs, a dented world globe that had been dropped by almost everyone, one limp flag, one wastebasket, and a picture of George Washington, whose eyes followed you around the room when you got up to sharpen your pencil. Robert answered, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

40 Mrs. Bunnin, biting on the end of her pencil, said, “Louder, both of you.”

Belinda stepped up, nostrils flaring so that the shadows on her nose quivered, and said louder, “Sucka, is there something wrong with your eye-balls?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

“Louder! Make sure the audience can hear you,” Mrs. Bunnin directed. She tapped her pencil hard against the desk. She scolded, “Robert, I’m not going to tell you again to quit fooling with the beard.”

“It’s itchy.”

50 “We can’t do anything about that. Actors need **props**. You’re an actor. Now try again.”

Robert and Belinda stood center stage as they waited for Mrs. Bunnin to call “Action!” When she did, Belinda approached Robert slowly. “Sucka face, is there anything wrong with your mug?” Belinda asked. Her eyes were squinted in anger. For a moment Robert saw his head grinding into the playground grass. **B**

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

Language Coach

Oral Fluency Reread line 27 aloud. When the letter *w* is followed by the letter *r*, the *w* is usually silent, as in *wrinkled*. Think of two other words that have a silent *w* before an *r*.

prop (prɒp) *n.* an object an actor uses in a play

B PLOT: RISING ACTION

Reread lines 42–56. What **conflict**, or struggle, is developing?

Robert giggled behind his red beard. Belinda popped her gum and **smirked**. She stood with her hands on her hips.

60 “What? What did you say?” Mrs. Bunnin asked, pulling off her glasses. “Are you chewing gum, Belinda?”

“No, Mrs. Bunnin,” Belinda lied. “I just forgot my lines.” **C**

Belinda turned to face the snowflake boys clumped together in the back. She rolled out her tongue, on which rested a ball of gray gum, depleted of sweetness under her **relentless** chomp. She whispered “sucka” and giggled so that her nose quivered dark shadows.

The play, *The Last Stand*, was about the Donner party just before they got hungry and started eating each other. Everyone who scored at least twelve out of fifteen on their spelling tests got to say at least one line.

70 Everyone else had to stand and be trees or snowflakes.

Mrs. Bunnin wanted the play to be a success. She couldn’t risk having kids with bad memories on stage. The nonspeaking trees and snowflakes stood humming snow flurries, blistering wind, and hail, which they produced by clacking their teeth.

Robert’s mother was proud of him because he was living up to the legend of Robert De Niro, for whom he was named. Over dinner he said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” when his brother asked him to pass the dishtowel, their communal napkin. His sister said, “It’s your turn to do dishes,” and he said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.” His dog, Queenie,
80 begged him for more than water and a dog biscuit. He touched his dog’s own hairy beard and said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

One warm spring night, Robert lay on his back in the backyard, counting shooting stars. He was up to three when David, a friend who was really his brother’s friend, hopped the fence and asked, “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” Robert answered. He sat up, feeling good because the line came naturally, without much thought. He leaned back on his elbow and asked David what he wanted to be when he grew up. **D**

“I don’t know yet,” David said, plucking at the grass. “Maybe a fighter
90 pilot. What do you want to be?”

“I want to guard the president. I could wrestle the assassins and be on television. But I’d pin those dudes, and people would say, ‘That’s him, our hero.’” David plucked at a stalk of grass and thought deeply.

Robert thought of telling David that he really wanted to be someone with a supergreat memory, who could recall facts that most people thought were unimportant. He didn’t know if there was such a job, but he thought it would be great to sit at home by the telephone waiting for scientists to call him and ask hard questions.

smirk (smûrk) v. to smile in an insulting way

C MONITOR

What is the actual line Belinda is supposed to say?

relentless (rĭ-lĕnt’lĭs)
adj. refusing to stop or give up

Language Coach

Word Forms Some nouns have related adjective forms. To create an adjective from a noun, add to or change the ending of the noun. In line 81, for example, “hair” (n.) + y = “hairy” (adj.). Think of another example of a noun that can change into an adjective.

D MONITOR

Reread lines 75–88. Why does Robert respond with his line when someone speaks to him at home?

100 **T**he three weeks passed quickly. The day before the play, Robert felt happy as he walked home from school with no homework. As he turned onto his street, he found a dollar floating over the currents of wind.

“A buck,” he screamed to himself. He snapped it up and looked for others. But he didn’t find any more. It was his lucky day, though. At recess he had hit a home run on a fluke bunt—a fluke because the catcher had kicked the ball, another player had thrown it into center field, and the pitcher wasn’t looking when Robert slowed down at third, then burst home with dust flying behind him.

That night, it was his sister’s turn to do the dishes. They had eaten enchiladas with the works, so she slaved with suds up to her elbows. 110 Robert bathed in bubble bath, the suds peaked high like the Donner Pass. He thought about how full he was and how those poor people had had nothing to eat but snow. I can live on nothing, he thought and whistled like wind through a mountain pass, raking flat the suds with his palm. **E**

The next day, after lunch, he was ready for the play, red beard in hand and his one line trembling on his lips. Classes herded into the auditorium. As the actors dressed and argued about stepping on each other’s feet, Robert stood near a cardboard barrel full of toys, whispering over and over to himself, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.” He was hot, itchy, and confused when he tied on the beard. He sneezed when a strand of the 120 beard entered his nostril. He said louder, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” but the words seemed to get caught in the beard. “Nothing, no, no. I can see great,” he said louder, then under his breath because the words seemed wrong. “Nothing’s wrong, can’t you see? Nothing’s wrong. I can see you.” Worried, he approached Belinda and asked if she remembered his line. Balling her hand into a fist, Belinda warned, “Sucka, I’m gonna bury your ugly face in the ground if you mess up.” **F**

“I won’t,” Robert said as he walked away. He bit a nail and looked into the barrel of toys. A clown’s mask stared back at him. He prayed that his line would come back to him. He would hate to disappoint his teacher 130 and didn’t like the thought of his face being rubbed into spiky grass.

The curtain parted slightly, and the principal came out smiling onto the stage. She said some words about pioneer history and then, stern faced, warned the audience not to scrape the chairs on the just-waxed floor. The principal then introduced Mrs. Bunnin, who told the audience about how they had rehearsed for weeks.

Meanwhile, the class stood quietly in place with lunchtime spaghetti on their breath. They were ready. Belinda had swallowed her gum because she knew this was for real. The snowflakes clumped together and began howling. **◆**

E MONITOR

Think about how Robert feels the day before the play. How might this affect his performance?

F PLOT: RISING ACTION

How has the tension increased now that it is the day of the play?

◆ GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

Look at the sentences in lines 136–139. The sentences in this paragraph are complete sentences, not sentence fragments. Every sentence contains a subject (*class, they, Belinda, snowflakes*) and a predicate that says something about the subject.



140 Robert retied his beard. Belinda, smoothing her skirt, looked at him and said, “If you know what’s good for you, you’d better do it right.” Robert grew nervous when the curtain parted and his classmates who were assigned to do snow, wind, and hail broke into song.

Alfonso stepped forward with his **narrative** about a blot on American history that would live with us forever. He looked at the audience, lost for a minute. He continued by saying that if the Donner party could come back, hungry from not eating for over a hundred years, they would be sorry for what they had done.

The play began with some boys in snowshoes shuffling around the stage, muttering that the blizzard would cut them off from civilization. They looked up, held out their hands, and said in unison,¹ “Snow.” One stepped center stage and said, “I wish I had never left the prairie.” Another one said, “California is just over there.” He pointed, and some of the first graders looked in the direction of the piano.

“What are we going to do?” one kid asked, brushing pretend snow off his vest.

“I’m getting pretty hungry,” another said, rubbing her stomach.

Analyze Visuals ▲

What do the facial expressions of the audience members suggest about the actor’s performance?

narrative (năr’ə-tīv)
n. a story

1. **in unison** (yōō’nī-sən): at the same time.

The audience seemed to be following the play. A ribbon of sweat ran down Robert's face. When his scene came up, he staggered to center stage and dropped to the floor, just as Mrs. Bunnin had said, just as he had seen Robert De Niro do in that movie about a boxer. Belinda, bending over with an "Oh, my," yanked him up so hard that something clicked in his elbow. She boomed, "Is there anything wrong with your eyes?"

Robert rubbed his elbow, then his eyes, and said, "I can see nothing wrong. Wrong is nothing, I can see." **G**

"How are we going to get through?" she boomed, wringing her hands together at the audience, some of whom had their mouths taped shut because they were known talkers. "My husband needs a doctor." The drama advanced through snow, wind, and hail that sounded like chattering teeth.

Belinda turned to Robert and muttered, "You mess-up. You're gonna hate life."


But Robert thought he'd done okay. At least, he reasoned to himself, I got the words right. Just not in the right order.

With his part of the play done, he joined the snowflakes and trees, chattering his teeth the loudest. He howled wind like a baying hound and snapped his fingers furiously in a snow flurry. He trembled from the cold.

The play ended with Alfonso saying that if they came back to life, the Donner party would be sorry for eating each other. "It's just not right," he argued. "You gotta suck it up in bad times." **H**

Robert figured that Alfonso was right. He remembered how one day his sister had locked him in the closet and he didn't eat or drink for five hours. When he got out, he hit his sister, but not so hard as to leave a bruise. He then ate three sandwiches and felt a whole lot better.

The cast then paraded up the aisle into the audience. Belinda pinched Robert hard, but only once because she was thinking that it could have been worse. As he passed a smiling and relieved Mrs. Bunnin, she patted Robert's shoulder and said, "Almost perfect."

Robert was happy. He'd made it through without passing out from fear. Now the first and second graders were looking at him and clapping. He was sure everyone wondered who the actor was behind that smooth voice and red, red beard.  **I**

G PLOT: TURNING POINT/CLIMAX

The **climax** is the story's most exciting moment, when you find out how the problem or conflict will be resolved. How is the delivery of Robert's line a turning point in the story?

H PLOT: FALLING ACTION

What effect does Robert's delivery of his lines have on the end of the play?

I PLOT: RESOLUTION/DENOUEMENT

How do Robert, Belinda, and Mrs. Bunnin feel about Robert's performance?



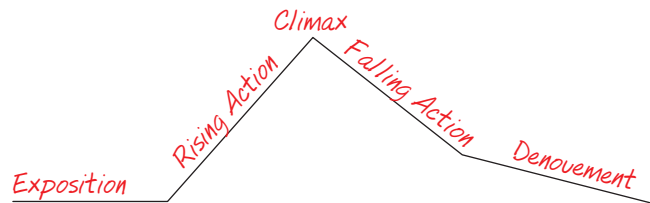
6.5a Identify the elements of narrative structure, including setting, character, plot, conflict, and theme.
6.5l Use reading strategies to monitor comprehension throughout the reading process.

Comprehension

- 1. Clarify** Does repeating his line again and again help Robert remember it?
- 2. Clarify** Reread lines 86–98. What does Robert want to be when he grows up?
- 3. Summarize** What happens on the day of the performance?

Text Analysis

- 4. Monitor** Review the chart you filled in as you read. Which questions and answers were most helpful for understanding the story? Explain.
- 5. Compare and Contrast** Do you think Belinda is nervous about performing in front of the student audience? Compare and contrast her actions with Robert’s on the day of the play.
- 6. Make Inferences** How does the audience react to the play? Support your answer with specific details from the story.
- 7. Examine Plot Elements** The plot of “The School Play” centers on Robert’s fear of forgetting his line. Go back through the story and make a list of important events. Place the events on a diagram like the one shown to identify what happens at each stage of the plot. Do you think the plot of this story is realistic? Why or why not?
- 8. Analyze Character’s Effect on Plot** In addition to fear, Robert shows other personal qualities as the plot develops. Identify two of these qualities and explain how they help Robert resolve the conflicts he meets.



Extension and Challenge

- 9. Creative Project: Drama** With a partner, choose a part of the story to act out. Rely on the details provided by Soto to accurately portray the characters. Present your performance to the class.
- 10. Inquiry and Research** The United States expanded in the 1800s as people followed trails from eastern states to western territories. Research to find the trail used by the Donner Party. Using a map you can write on, sketch the trail and label the Donner Pass, which Robert describes in line 110.

What do you FEAR the most?

Are some fears more real than others? Explain.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the letter of the word or phrase that has the same, or nearly the same, meaning as the boldfaced word.

1. a thrilling **narrative**: (a) argument, (b) story, (c) debate, (d) notice
2. **prop** for the play: (a) script, (b) costume, (c) object, (d) director
3. **relentless** noise: (a) constant, (b) deafening, (c) frightening, (d) occasional
4. to **smirk** at someone: (a) stare rudely, (b) laugh quietly, (c) yell loudly, (d) smile defiantly

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

• affect • analyze • evidence • impact • provide

With a partner, **analyze** the resolution of “The School Play.” How would the story be **affected** if Robert was upset as he came offstage? Use at least two Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: DENOTATIONS AND CONNOTATIONS

A word’s **denotation** is its literal meaning—that is, the definition you find in a dictionary. A word’s **connotation** is the feelings and ideas associated with a word. You might find words that have similar denotations but different connotations in a **thesaurus**, or book of synonyms. For example, if you looked up *smile* in a thesaurus, you would likely find the Vocabulary word *smirk* listed as a synonym. The words have similar denotations but different connotations. *Smile* suggests happiness while *smirk* suggests smugness. You can also use a thesaurus to vary your word choice when writing, as well as to build up the new words in your vocabulary.

PRACTICE Use a thesaurus (either a printed version or an online version) to find a word with the same denotation as the boldfaced word, but with a negative connotation. Then use it in a sentence to show the negative meaning.

1. a **serious** speech
2. her **funny** hat
3. **eager** to get started
4. **enthusiastic** about the project
5. a **youthful** outlook



Virginia Standards
of Learning

6.4e Use word-reference materials.
6.4f Extend general and specialized vocabulary through speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Interactive
Vocabulary

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Language

◆ GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT: Avoid Sentence Fragments

A **sentence fragment** is exactly what it says it is—a piece of a sentence. A fragment lacks a **subject** (whom or what the sentence is about), a **predicate** (what the subject is or does), or both. Don't let the punctuation at the end of a fragment fool you. What might look like a sentence is still a fragment if a complete thought is not expressed. A fragment can usually be combined with the sentence before it to make a complete sentence.

Original: Robert was cast in a play. About the Donner Party.

Revised: Robert was cast in a play about the Donner Party.

PRACTICE Rewrite this paragraph, correcting the four sentence fragments.

The story would end very differently. If Robert had forgotten his line completely. He might run off the stage. Leaving Belinda to go on without him. Belinda would be angry. At Robert. However, Mrs. Bunnin would have another chance next year. To direct a perfect school play.

For more help with fragments, see page R64 in the *Grammar Handbook*.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Broaden your understanding of “The School Play” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

WRITING PROMPT

Short Constructed Response: Review

Drama critics write reviews of plays to give their opinion of a performance. In **one paragraph**, write a review of Robert’s play for his school newspaper. Use your imagination to fill in the details.

REVISING TIP

Review your response. Have you avoided using sentence fragments? If not, revise your writing.



Virginia Standards of Learning

6.7 The student will write narration, description, exposition, and persuasion. **6.8** The student will edit writing for correct grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and paragraphing.

Interactive Revision **THINK** central
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KEYWORD: HML6-45