

MCAS ELA Grade 10 Practice Test

“Snapping an Iconic Photo” and “The Story of the Migrant Mother”

Narrative Student Work Samples and Annotations

Question 9

Idea Development – Score Point 5

This narrative is fully developed and skillfully organized; the writer introduces larger ideas that lead to specific details and then steps back again to draw larger conclusions about the impact Thompson had on her children. The writer draws on relevant text-based details to construct a poignant reflection on Florence Thompson from the perspective of one of her adult children. The opening paragraph engages the reader by introducing important elements of her upbringing: “My family endured hardships that most Americans born after the Great Depression could not imagine” and “I understand now that she [Thompson] modelled the strength of a country which would eventually pull through.” Vivid images revealing the harsh conditions of the pea-pickers’ camp merge with an almost meditative account of Florence Thompson’s interaction with Dorothea Lange. Specific details pulled from the original texts are seamlessly combined with the writer’s own ideas that logically build on the events from the passages: “Mrs. Lange asked permission to take some pictures. Mom was hesitant—at first— but soon realized the opportunity offered by this chance encounter.” The narrator’s mother emerges from a seemingly hopeless state to become co-author of the photographer’s work, and the reader understands the strength and integrity of an individual whose “agony spoke of the agony of a nation.” Vocabulary is rich and appropriate, and the reflective tone is strong and vividly constructed. The writer demonstrates full understanding of the task and narrative mode.

Standard English Conventions – Score Point 3

The writing demonstrates consistent control of a variety of sentence structures. Simple sentences (e.g., “We had nothing” and “Then a car approached”) combine with longer sentences to maximize their impact. Grammar, usage, and mechanics are controlled and correct: “It was late winter, 1936, and we were living out of our run-down car that eventually broke down, stranding us at a pea picker[s]’ camp.” The narrative’s complexity and fluency is sustained by this level of control. Sentences are dense while still conveying clear meaning, as in this example: “She suffered in silence while giving everything to her children, and she remained silent as she shaped how people would understand one of the greatest tragedies in American history.”

Student Work Sample

My family endured hardships that most Americans born after the Great Depression could not imagine. For us, the late 30s were the worst. My mother worked tirelessly to support her seven kids, but her best efforts couldn't provide life's basic material needs. Somehow, we survived without a father, a permanent place to live, and enough food to ward-off hunger and sickness. Yet we had the will to go on, and our mother's example would provide hope. She was determined that the family would pull through. Her will would not be broken, and I understand now that she modelled the strength of a country which would eventually pull through.

I don't let the painful memories of the Depression pull me down. I would rather think of mom's strength and the satisfaction I felt helping her provide for the family. It was late winter, 1936, and we were living out of our run-down car that eventually broke down, stranding us at a pea picker's camp. The weather had been unusually cold. Freezing rain ruined the crop, leaving many residents of the camp to face starvation. There was no work, so we had to leave as soon as the car was repaired. We had nothing. I spent days hunting birds and collecting pea pods from the fields. On our last day in Nipomo, California, we huddled under the crude shelter mom and I made from an old tarp. At least we were warm and dry, and my younger siblings would have a few scraps to eat. The car would be fixed soon, and we looked forward to the prospect of moving on to another town.

We sheltered from an unusually heavy rain on that early afternoon. Mom kept the younger children together, making sure that all would stay as warm and dry as possible. Then a car approached. We were surprised at first but soon stunned as a well-dressed woman exited and walked toward our lean-to. Mom greeted her, and the woman introduced herself as Dorothea Lange, a government photographer assigned to document the plight of displaced people living in work camps. Mrs. Lange asked permission to take some pictures. Mom was hesitant—at first—but soon realized the opportunity offered by this chance encounter. The pea pickers camp was full of suffering, some cases much worse than ours. Residents were starving, and mom immediately thought of the thousands of others just like them. Though her situation was hard, she did not think of a change of fortune for herself. She gladly accepted the role of representing the suffering of others, of playing some part in expressing the almost unthinkable pain of the Great Depression. In fact, Dorothea Lange's famous photograph is not just the work of the photographer. Though my mother did not exactly pose for the camera, she tried her best to project the suffering and worries of an entire nation. I watched as she arranged the scene, and I understood why she took some control of the situation. Even though Dorothea Lange died never knowing the name of her subject, I know the pain in my mother's eyes imprinted itself on her soul. My mother's agony spoke of the agony of a nation and the gulf between her fortune and Lange's was a tangible reminder of that.

Mom left a great gift to her family and the world. She taught me and my siblings the importance of caring, self-sacrifice, and working for the greater good. Of course, Dorothea Lange would gain fame as one of the world's great portrait photographers, and it may seem unjust that mom's part in creating the famous photo is mostly ignored—but this never seemed to bother her. She suffered in silence while giving everything to her children, and she remained silent as she shaped how people would understand one of the greatest tragedies in American history.

Idea Development – Score Point 4

This well-developed narrative provides a clear view of Florence Thompson’s values and situation. The narrator’s voice begins: “I am the second oldest of the ten children,” introducing Florence Thompson as a mother whose identity amounted to more than her image in the “famous photograph.” The Migrant Mother’s selflessness and dedication to the welfare of her children is clear: “She sacrificed everything she had to care for us—she gave us the will to live.” The stark reflection on “return[ing] from the fields with a bag full of frozen peas” to a “ragged and hungry family sheltered from the rain in a crude lean-to” is effectively set against Dorothea Lange’s appearance at the camp and Florence Thompson’s willingness to be photographed—but for a purpose. This six-paragraph essay moves chronologically through Thompson’s life, and it uses a combination of details from both passages as well as the writer’s original thoughts to reflect on Thompson’s impact on her children: “Towards the end of her life she had a stroke, and naturally we were there for her. . . . Finally, we chose to do something [M]om never could, and found a way to raise money from the fame she gained.” The conclusion describes the family’s gratitude to their mother. Again, the narrator reflects: “. . . the hospital bills were paid” and “it was a small tribute to a woman whose spirit will remain a part of her children’s lives and the life of our nation.” The writing demonstrates full understanding of the task and narrative mode.

Standard English Conventions – Score Point 3

Control of a variety of sentence structures supports strong fluency, as shown in this sentence: “You may look at Dorothea Lange’s famous photograph and see only a representation of poverty, and although this is true, it takes away from real significance of the photograph.” Even though a word was left out of the sentence (“the” before “significance”), the intent is clear, and the correct use of a variety of clauses shows full control of sentence structure. Minor punctuation or usage mistakes do not take away from the overall control of grammar and mechanics. Sentences are skillfully crafted to reveal the narrator’s voice: “Even when the photo became famous, she chose to stay anonymous so that her children would not be embarrassed—if that would happen!”

Student Work Sample

I am the second oldest of the ten children. Florence Thompson was my beloved mother’s name, though others may know her as “Migrant Mother.” My mom was the most hard-working and selfless woman I have ever known. You may look at Dorothea Lange’s famous photograph and see only a representation of poverty, and although this is true, it takes away from real significance of the photograph.

Mom did more than work hard to keep us alive and well. She sacrificed everything she had to care for us—and she gave us the will to live. She made sure we were clothed and fed, and although our days and nights were filled with struggle, we always felt safe with mom at our side. Mother taught us that no matter what we would not lose the power of family and love. My mother’s care and positive attitude got us to where we are today, and I am so grateful. Although we’re not poor now, my siblings and I still don’t have so much—but we survived as a loving family, and that’s what really matters.

Dorothea Lange’s visit to the pea-picker’s camp on that cold day in March caught us all by surprise. She drove-up just a few minutes after I returned from the fields with a paper bag full of frozen

peas—all there would be for the night's dinner as the birds were too quick for me. This well-dressed lady carried a camera and approached us, a ragged and hungry family sheltered from the rain in a crude lean-to. She introduced herself, and asked mom if she could take a few photos--and the rest is history, I suppose.

Mom was not the type to do things for others and expect something in return. She did not earn a cent from the photo and she did not want to. Even when the photo became famous, she chose to stay anonymous so that her children would not be embarrassed—if that would happen! She agreed to do it since she knew there were many more families like ours, and that somehow the photo might help them.

Mom kept working for as long as she could. She would work anywhere—hospitals, bars, factories. When my siblings and I bought her a house, she could not move in. She decided to stay in her little trailer. She told us, "I need to have wheels under me."

Towards the end of her life she had a stroke, and naturally we were there for her. We cared for her as best we could, but the hospital bills were more than we could afford, and the doctors could do little for her. Finally, we chose to do something mom never could, and found a way to raise money from the fame she gained as the subject of the famous photograph. She passed, but the hospital bills were paid. It was a small tribute to a woman whose spirit will remain a part of her children's lives and the life of our nation.

Idea Development – Score Point 3

The narrative is moderately developed and contains general descriptions of the mother’s actions and personality. Development is point to point, and the writing reads like a loosely connected series of memories rather than a purposeful reflection. The narrative focuses more on the facts of Thompson’s situation (“We were towed to a pea picker’s camp. . . . Mom would pick 400-500 pounds of peas per day. . . . [W]e all huddled in a lean-to mom made with a tarp”) rather than deeper reflections on the significance and impact of Thompson’s decisions and role in a broader sense. Ideas are expressed adequately, though pacing is uneven, as development of events and characters is brief at multiple points. There is a sense of the larger impact of Thompson’s life (“She put other people’s needs before her own” and “we ended up middle class, all thanks to my mother”), but these ideas are not fully developed. The writer demonstrates a sufficient awareness of the task and narrative mode.

Standard English Conventions – Score Point 3

A variety of sentence structures are used correctly, support overall fluency, and demonstrate control, as shown in these examples: “Anytime my mom did something, it was always for others” and “my mother agreed and sat in front of the camera with my two brothers behind her, laying their heads on her shoulders.” The text is sufficiently complex to allow demonstration of control of grammar, usage, and mechanics, despite a couple of spelling errors (“embarased” and “devated”) and minor punctuation errors.

Student Work Sample

My mother was a hard worker and worked to provide for us as long as she was alive. She did this all on her own because my father had passed away. At times, I didn’t think we’d be able to get by. But I remember my mother working from morning to night to afford the little amounts of food we had. She always made sure we ate, never cared that she had leftovers.

I remember times when we lived on a blanket. It was terrible, but I never complained. I knew how hard my mom worked to get that blanket. We were constantly on the move. One day we were driving to who knows where when suddenly the car broke down. We were towed to a pea-picker’s camp and wait there until the car was fixed. At least there was some work. Mom would pick 400-500 pounds of peas per day but when the weather was bad work stopped and we all huddled in a lean-to mom made with a tarp.

Then a woman in her 40s appeared, carrying a camera in her hand. She introduced herself as Dorothea Lange and asked how old my mother was and if she could take some photographs of our family. My mother agreed and sat in front of the camera with my two brothers behind her, laying their heads on her shoulders.

Even when Dorothea Lange’s picture made her famous, mom never cared for the attention. She wanted the picture to show Americans what it was like for people less fortunate than most. She never gave our identities, since she thought we’d be embarased by the publicity. After her job as a pea-picker she moved to a hospital to make a living. She worked such long hours. I don’t know how she did it. Anytime my mom did something, it was always for others. That’s what made her a great person. She put other people’s needs before her own.

Our lives got better after the Great Depression, but not much better. We ended up as middle class, all thanks to my mother. If she wasn't so caring and strong, my siblings and I may not have made it to where we are today. But I'm trying to be like her and work to provide for my family. Everything she has done will always be my motivation to get up and work. I'll forever be thankful that I had such a devoted and caring mother.

Idea Development – Score Point 2

The narrative is written from the correct point of view but lacks development. Organization is chronological, and basic descriptions of events do not form a convincing reflection on the life of Florence Thompson. Simple details from the passages are listed and not intentionally sequenced, and the ideas are not explained or connected to a larger purpose in reference to Thompson’s life and its significance to her children: “She would do various jobs to get us food for another night” and “the woman seemed sad that we had to live in a tent and had nothing to eat but frozen vegetables and dead birds.” Overall, the writer demonstrates a partial awareness of the task stated in the writing prompt.

Standard English Conventions – Score Point 2

Sentences lack variety, though structures are generally correct. There are some spelling errors (“waigh” and “evidant”), although grammar, usage, and mechanics are mostly controlled. Repetition of basic sentence structures adds to the narrative’s somewhat choppy effect. The writing is simple and not sufficient to demonstrate consistent control of conventions.

Student Work Sample

My mother sacrificed everything for her children during the years of the Great Depression. She cared for us on her own ever since our father passed away. He died of tuberculosis when my mom was only 28 years old and about to have her sixth child. We were completely poor and had no money to our names. She would do various jobs to get us food for another night. In the 1930s she worked on many different farms, picking whatever was growing during the season. When I was very young mom would harvest cotton but would earn only 50 cents for hundred pounds that she picked. Mom didn’t even waigh one hundred pounds but was able to pick 450 to 500 pounds of cotton a day. We kids knew how hard she worked to protect and feed us. There was one day when my mother’s car broke down while we were on our way to Watsonville from Los Angeles. The car was towed to a local pea-pickers camp. When the car was being fixed a strange lady in a nice car pulled up. Mom said that the lady would like to take our photograph. At the time I wasn’t sure why, but now it is evidant that the photographer wanted to capture the affects of the Great Depression. I remember burying my face next to my mom as the woman took the photo. My mom made sure that our identities wouldn’t be revealed. The woman seemed sad that we had to live in a tent and had nothing to eat but frozen vegetables and dead birds. We didn’t mind since we knew mom was always doing her best to provide for us.

Idea Development – Score Point 1

This narrative lacks development and does not convey a reflective tone. A list of details provides only a weak view of the setting and characters described in the passages. Reflection is attempted (“I just wish I could have been there for her”), but without effect. There is a limited sense of Thompson’s significance to her children in writing that contains few specifics from the passages.

Standard English Conventions – Score Point 1

Though sentences are mostly correct and contain only a few errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics, the writing is too brief to demonstrate more than little control.

Student Work Sample

I have six siblings, but that didn’t stop my mother from providing for us. It made her work harder. Sometimes she would work sixteen hours a day. We didn’t have the best food or much of it but she always made sure we were fed even if meant that she had to go without. I just wish I could have been there for her in the last few years of her life like she was for all of mine. But I know that she has done for me and my siblings, and what her photos have done for the world. She will not be forgotten today tomorrow or ever.

Idea Development – Score Point 1

The narrative is not developed beyond a few points taken from the excerpts. The writing maintains the correct point of view, but there is little to no substance—no inclusion of setting and situations, and only a brief view of one character.

Standard English Conventions – Score Point 0

Many errors are obvious in a very short amount of text. Omission of commas is a major error that affects sentence structures and meaning. The writing is too brief and contains too many errors to receive any points for conventions.

Student Work Sample

My mom was a very selfless person only caring for the people around her. Her name was Florence Thompson also known as the “Migrant Mother.” She was in a famus photo but poor all her life. She would always work 16 hours a day all week just to support us getting nothing in return. She didn’t really care though she just wanted us to be happy.

Idea Development – Score Point 0

This very minimal response does indicate that the student read at least part of the material, but it does not address the writing prompt.

Standard English Conventions – Score Point 0

The response is minimal; contains errors in sentence formation, grammar, and mechanics; and is too brief to show any type of control.

Student Work Sample

Florence Tompson, in the perspective of her childern were a great mother. She had a large effect on her childerns lives.