

**Oakland Unified School District ♦ Process Writing Assessment**  
**8<sup>th</sup> Grade Response to Literature: “Dancer” by Vickie Sears**

**Introduction**

Much of the writing we do in school requires us to read and respond to a reading selection. If the reading is good, we can relate to it even when the subject and characters come from a different place or a different time. This assignment asks you to carefully read a story and then write an essay about an important idea or theme from the reading. Your essay needs to include a thesis statement where you **make a claim about an important idea or theme** you think the author is trying to communicate. It is also important to **support your thesis with details and evidence from the reading selection**. You may also support your thesis with information from your own experience and previous reading.

The selection you will read is called “*Dancer*” by Vickie Sears. In this story, a five-year-old Native American girl, who is known as a difficult child, is sent to live with a foster family.

**Getting Started**

Think about the title of the story you will read “*Dancer*.” With a partner or as a whole class, discuss these four questions:

1. Have you ever discovered an interest that you never knew you had? What was it?
2. What kinds of activities do you like to do when you feel sad, angry, or lonely?
3. What kinds of activities or hobbies make you feel confident and good about yourself?
4. How can learning about your own culture make you feel good about yourself?

**Vocabulary**

You’ll appreciate the story more if you review the meanings of these words before you begin. Match the words on the right to their synonyms on the left. A synonym is a word that has the same or almost the same meaning as another word.

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| 1. so-cio-path-ic | a. showing pride and self-satisfaction |
| 2. ferocious      | b. absorbed, engrossed                 |
| 3. preening       | c. violently crazy                     |
| 4. abnormal       | d. fierce, often violent               |
| 5. fixated        | e. unusual, atypical                   |

**Reading**

Now read "Dancer" by Vickie Sears. Think about the important ideas about life that this story is trying to communicate. As you read, underline words and phrases that you think are important or meaningful.

## Dancer

By Vickie Sears

Tell you how it was with her. Took her to a dance not long after she come to live with us. Smartest thing I ever done. Seems like some old Eaglespirit woman saw her living down here and came back just to be with Clarissa.

Five years old she was when she come to us. Some foster kids come with lots of stuff, but she came with everything she had in a paper bag. Some dresses that was too short. A pair of pants barely holding a crotch. A pile of ratty underwear and one new nightgown. Mine was her third foster home in as many months. The agency folk said she was so-cio-path-ic. I don't know nothing from that. She just seemed like she was all full up with anger and scaredness like lots of the kids who come to me. Only she was a real loner. Not trusting nobody. But she ran just like any other kid, was quiet when needed. Smiled at the right times. If you could get her to smile, that is. Didn't talk much, though.

Had these ferocious dreams, too. Real screamer dreams they were. Shake the soul right out of you. She'd be screaming and crying with her little body wriggling on the bed, her hair all matted up on her woody-colored face. One time I got her to tell me what she was seeing, and she told me how she was being chased by a man with a long knife what he was going to kill her with and nobody could hear her calling out for help. She didn't talk too much about them, but they was all bad like that one. Seemed the most fierce dreams I ever remember anybody ever having outside of a vision seek.<sup>1</sup> They said her tribe was Assiniboin,<sup>3</sup> but they weren't for certain. What was for sure was that she was a fine dark-eyed girl just meant for someone to scoop up for loving.

Took her to her first dance in September, like I said, not long after she came. It wasn't like I thought it would be a good thing to do. It was just that we was all going. Me, my own kids, some nieces and nephews and the other children who was living with us. The powwow was just part of what we done all the time. Every month. More often in the summer. But this was the regular fist Friday night of the school year. We'd all gather up and go to the school. I was thinking on leaving her home with a sitter 'cause she'd tried to kill one of the cats a couple of days before. We'd had us a big talk and she was grounded, but, well, it seemed like she ought to be with us.

Harold, that's my oldest boy, he and the other kids was mad with her, but he decided to show her around anyhow. At the school he went through the gym telling people, "This here's my sister, Clarissa." Wasn't no fuss or anything. She was just another one of the kids. When they was done meeting folks, he put her on one of the bleachers near the drum and went to join the men. He was in that place where his voice cracks but was real proud to be drumming. Held his hand up to his ear even, some of the time. Anyhow, Clarissa was sitting there, not all that interested in the dance or drum, when Molly Graybull come out in her button dress. Her arms was all stretched out, and she was slipping around, preening on them spindles of legs that get skinnier with every year. She was well into her seventies, and I might as well admit, Molly had won herself a fair share of dance contests. So it wasn't no surprise how a little girl could get so fixated on Molly. Clarissa watched her move around-around-around. Then all the rest of the dancers after Molly. She sure took in a good eyeful. Fancy dance. Owl dance. Circle dance. Even a hoop dancer was visiting that night. Everything weaving all slow, then fast. Around-around

until that child couldn't see nothing else. Seemed like she was struck silent in the night, too. Never had no dreams at all. Well, not the hollering kind anyways.

Next day she was more quiet than usual, only I could see she was tapping the old on-two, one-two. Tapping her toes on the rug with the inside of her head going around and around. As quiet as she could be, she was.

A few days went on before she asks me, "When's there gonna be another dance?"

I tell her in three weeks. She just smiles and goes on outside, waiting on the older kids to come home from school.

The very next day she asks if she can listen to some singing. I give her the tape recorder and some of Joe Washington from up the Lummi reservation and the Kicking Woman Singers. Clarissa, she takes them tapes and runs out back behind the chicken shed, staying out all afternoon. I wasn't worried none, though, 'cause I could hear the music the whole time. Matter of fact, it like to make me sick of them same songs come the end of three weeks. But that kid, she didn't get into no kind of mischief. Almost abnormal how good she was. Worried me some to see her so caught up but it seemed good too. The angry part of her slowed down so's she wasn't hitting the animals or chopping on herself with sticks like she was doing when she first come. She wasn't laughing much either, but she started playing with the other kids when they come home. Seemed like everybody was working hard to be better with each other.

Come March, Clarissa asks, "Can I dance?"

For sure, the best time for teaching is when a kid wants to listen, so we stood side to side with me doing some steps. She followed along fine. I put on a tape and started moving faster, and Clarissa just kept up all natural. I could tell she'd been practicing lots. She was doing real good.

Comes the next powwow, which was outside on the track field, I braided Clarissa's hair. Did her up with some ermine and bead ties, then give her a purse to carry. It was all beaded with a rose and leaves. Used to be my aunt's. She held it right next to her side with her chin real high. She joined the Circle dance. I could see she was watching her feet a little and looking how others do their steps, but mostly she was doing wonderful. When Molly Graybull showed up beside her, Clarissa tool to a seat and stared. She didn't dance again that night, but I could see there was dreaming coming into her eyes. I saw that fire that said to practice. And she did. I heard her every day in her room. Finally bought her her very own tape recorder so's the rest of us could listen to music too.

Some months passed on. All the kids was getting bigger. Clarissa, she went into the first grade. Harvey went off to community college up in Seattle, and that left me with Ronnie being the oldest at home. Clarissa was keeping herself busy all the time going over to Molly Graybull's. She was coming home with Spider Woman stories and trickster tales. One night she speaks up at supper and says, right clear and loud, "I'm an Assiniboin." Clear as it can be, she says it again. Don't nobody have to say nothing to something that proud said.

Next day I started working on a wing dress for Clarissa. She was going to be needing one for sure real soon.

Comes the first school-year powwow and everyone was putting on their best. I called for Clarissa to come to my room. I told her, "I think it's time you have something special for yourself." Then I held up the green satin and saw her eyes full up with glitter. She didn't say nothing. Only kisses me and runs off to her room.

Just as we're all getting out of the car, Clarissa whispered to me, "I'm gonna dance with Molly Graybull." I put my hand on her should to say, "You just listen to your spirit. That's where your music is."

We all danced an Owl dance, a Friendship dance, and a couple of Circle dances. Things was feeling real warm and good, and then it was time for the women's traditional. Clarissa joined the circle. She opened her arms to something nobody but her seemed to hear.

That's when I saw that old Eagle woman come down and slide right inside of Clarissa, scooping up that child. There Clarissa was, full up with music. All full with that old, old spirit, letting herself dance through Clarissa's feet. Then Molly Graybull come dancing alongside Clarissa, and they was both the same age.

### ***Thinking, Talking and Planning***

1. What do you think is the most memorable part of the story?
2. Who are the main characters in the story?
3. Go back to the story and look at the words and phrases that you underlined. What do you notice?
4. In writing this story, what do you think the author, Vickie Sears, is trying to say about life? What do you think is an important idea or theme of the story? *A theme is an idea or insight about life that is revealed in a story.* Write your idea below:
5. Discuss your idea with a partner. Your partner may have a different idea than you. Write your partner's idea below:
6. Now, your teacher will conduct a conversation with the whole class. As you listen to your classmates' ideas about the theme of the story, please write them in the space below.

 Which theme is most interesting to you? Select a theme and write it on the lines below:

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Next, you will look for evidence in the text that supports the theme you have chosen to write about. Evidence can be a paraphrase of what happened in the story, a direct quotation from the story, or a comparison to your own experience or the experience of someone else. For a stronger essay, MOST of the evidence should be from the text. Skim over the story again and select **three** passages that support the theme you have chosen to write about.

**Thesis Statement: This is your interpretation of the theme of the story.**

Text evidence: quotation/excerpt from the story	Commentary: explain how the evidence supports the theme
1.	
2.	
3.	
Evidence: Your own life experience (or that of someone you know)	Commentary: Explain how this supports the theme
4.	

## Writing

### **Response to “Dancer” by Vicki Sears**

Teachers in Oakland want to know how 8<sup>th</sup> grade students interpret the important ideas in the story “Dancer” by Vickie Sears. Write an essay in response to the story “Dancer.” Choose a theme that the author communicates through the story and explain how the feelings and actions of the character or the events of the story show this theme.

Support your thesis through quotations from the reading selection, paraphrases of passages from the reading selection, and personal experiences that connect to the theme of the story. Use your notes from any of the previous sections to develop and support the ideas in your essay.

#### **Writing Reminders:**

As you write, keep the following points in mind since you won’t have time to rewrite.

- \_\_\_ Begin in an interesting way that leads to your interpretation of the story.
- \_\_\_ In your introductory paragraph, include a formal introduction of the story and its author.
- \_\_\_ Support your interpretation by including specific references to the reading selection (quotations, passages, etc.) and personal experience.
- \_\_\_ Use language and vocabulary that is precise and lively.
- \_\_\_ Organize the main sections of your essay into paragraphs so that the reader can follow your ideas.
- \_\_\_ End with a confident conclusion that restates your interpretation.

#### **After You Write (Editing)**

After you write, take time to review the items below. You may make changes right on your paper.

- \_\_\_ Give the essay a title. (You can choose your title before or after you write the essay.)
- \_\_\_ Check your punctuation. Use capital letters, commas, periods, and quotation marks where they belong.
- \_\_\_ Check your spelling.