Reflecting on Life Experiences

Learning Targets

- Analyze a writer’s use of descriptive techniques.
- Apply a variety of techniques to describe events in narratives.

Before Reading

1. **Quickwrite:** Using the photograph you brought, or one provided by your teacher, describe (or craft) a memorable event in your life.

During Reading

2. Personal essays are reflective in nature, which means that the author looks back on an experience that is significant in his or her life, describes the experience and how he or she felt at the time, and then reflects on the importance of that experience. “A View from Mount Ritter” is an example of a reflective personal essay written by a high school student.

3. Use two different colors of highlighter to mark examples where the author tells how he felt (response) and what he learned (reflection). Then draw a line to indicate where the author shifts from description of the experience to a reflection on its significance and the lessons he learned from it.

Essay

A View From

Mount Ritter

Two weeks in the Sierras changed my attitude toward life and what it takes to succeed.

by Joseph T. O'Connor

1. “I hate this,” I thought. We were on our way to the top of Mount Ritter in northeastern California. You would think everyone, near one of the tallest ridges in the Sierra Nevadas, would be in high spirits. But on this particular day the rain fell in torrents. Quarter-size hailstones pelted our protective helmets as thunder echoed through the canyons.

2. It was the second week of my mountain expedition in California. The first week there had not been a cloud in the sky, but on Tuesday of week two, a dark cover crept in from the west, painting the sunlit, blue sky black. The storm came in so fast we didn't even notice it until our shadows suddenly disappeared.

3. “Here it comes,” our guide warned. As if God himself had given the order, the heavens opened, just a crack. Huge drops began falling but abruptly stopped, as if to say, “You know what's coming, here's a taste.” As we began searching for shelter, a bolt of lightning ripped open the blackish clouds overhead and in unison thunder cracked, leaving everyone's ears ringing. We were in the midst of a huge July thunderstorm. Ethan, our guide, had said that during the summer in the high Sierras it might rain twice, but when it does, it's best not to be there. Suddenly lightning struck a tree not 20 feet from where I was standing.
**Grammar & Usage**

**Subordinating Conjunctions**

Writers use subordinating conjunctions (e.g., when, although, because, since, while, as, until, etc.) to create relationships between clauses in a sentence and to create sentence variety.

Example: The storm came in so fast we didn’t even notice it until our shadows suddenly disappeared.

Example: As we began searching for shelter, a bolt of lightning ripped open the blackish clouds.

Combine the following:

1. Mount Ritter seemed like a huge challenge. I was in high spirits.
2. We shivered in our sleeping bags. The rain poured down outside our tent.

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**Word Connections**

**Roots and Affixes**

Rebellion comes from the Latin root bellum meaning “war.” Rebel, antebellum, and rebellious have the same root.

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4. “Lightning positions!” Ethan yelled frantically. A little too frantically for my taste. I thought he was used to this kind of thing. As scared as I was, squatting in a giant puddle of water and hailstones, with forks of lightning bouncing off the canyon walls around me, I couldn’t help chuckling to myself at the sight of Ethan’s dinner-plate-sized eyeballs as he panicked like an amateur. Soon after the lightning died down some, we hiked to the shelter of nearby redwoods and put on rain gear. While we prayed for the rain to subside, I watched the stream we stood beside grow into a raging, white-water river. Another expeditor, Mike, and I were under a full redwood donning our not-so-waterproof equipment when I realized we were standing on a small island.

5. “Mike! Let’s go!” I yelled, my exclamation nearly drowned out by the roar of water surrounding us and another roll of thunder.

6. “I’m way ahead o’ ya!” he screamed in his thick New York accent, and his goofy smile broke through the torrents. “Ya ready?”

7. “Yeah!” I yelled back, and jumped from our island into the knee-deep water. He followed as we slopped through the storm, losing our footing every few feet.

8. The unforgiving downpour lasted all day and into the night as we stumbled down the rocky cliffs seeking the driest place to set up camp. It was dusk before we found a small clearing in a pine forest, and began what was to be the worst night of my life. We constructed our tents in the dark, fumbling with the ropes with our frozen hands and finishing just as a stiffness like rigor mortis set in. We lay all night, shivering in our wet sleeping bags while rain poured down and a small stream made its way through our tent.

9. It’s funny how these memories keep coming back to me as if it was just yesterday. All this happened last summer, after my junior year in high school. I had decided to attend a mountaineering program in the Sierras. Two weeks in the back country with no sign of civilization. It sounded exciting and slightly dangerous, and I’ve always been up for a good adventure. I found out on that trip that nature is underestimated. The experience was the most invigorating, fulfilling, stimulating two weeks of my life. For the first time since I could remember, my head was crystal clear. I felt born again, only 2 weeks old. On top of Mount Ritter, 13,000 feet above sea level, I was entranced at the sight of the orange-red sun as it peeked over the glistening peaks far off in the east. Cumulus clouds appeared transparent as they glowing bright red in the morning glory.

10. The wonder of all I’d experienced made me think seriously about what comes next. “Life after high school,” I said to myself. “Uh-oh.” What had I been doing for the last three years? I was so caught up in defying the advice of my parents and teachers to study and play by the rules that I hadn’t considered the effects my actions would have on me.

11. “Youth is wholly experimental,” Robert Louis Stevenson wrote. Sure, there will be mistakes, but there will also be successes. I was a confused kid. Everyone—my parents, teacher and coaches—offered suggestions, but I chose to ignore them. I had “potential,” they told me. As a typical teen, I thought I could make it on my own.

12. I didn’t want any help, and the more people tried to give it the more distant I grew.

13. I was the kid who thought he could be perfect at anything without any preparation.

14. I was lost in the daydream that I didn’t need to study; I was going to play professional soccer. My game was good and I thought that practice, or getting good grades, for that matter, was unnecessary. Stubbornness and rebellion can be terrible things if they get out of control.
“To get back one’s youth one has merely to repeat one’s follies.” A day before my awakening on that fateful July sunrise, I would have disagreed with this quotation from Oscar Wilde. But after recognizing the results of my own follies for the first time, I thoroughly agree.

This year, my final year in high school, I’ve at last cleared my head and buckled down. Judging by the past semester, I’m on the right track. My D average has U-turned into this report card’s three B’s and one A, landing me on my first Honor Roll. I intend to be on the Principal’s List after this semester; then I hope to graduate and attend a community college in northern California, near the mountains, before transferring to a four-year school.

Thanks to that morning’s conversion, I am a new person. Now, I know I’ll have to work hard. The sun streaming over the eastern Sierras wiped out the dark clouds that blurred my vision. Jonathan Harker in Bram Stoker’s “Dracula” must have felt exactly the same way when he wrote in his journal: “No man knows ‘till he has suffered from the night how sweet and how dear to his heart and eye the morning can be.”

After Reading

4. Similarly to how writers use a variety of techniques to create characterization, there are four common techniques that writers use to recreate their subjective reaction and feelings when describing experiences.

- Sensory descriptions and specific details
  
  Example: . . . squatting in a giant puddle of water and hailstones, with forks of lightning bouncing off the canyon walls around me.

- Using comparisons and figurative language (e.g., metaphors, similes, analogies, hyperbole, etc.) to give a sense of what something looked like.
  
  Example: I couldn’t help chuckling to myself at the sight of Ethan’s dinner-plate-sized eyeballs as he panicked like an amateur.

- Describing what is NOT there; drawing attention to what is not happening, not present, etc., usually externally, but not necessarily.
  
  Example: I didn’t want any help, and the more people tried to give it the more distant I grew.

- Noting changes in form or condition, especially in terms of a positive or negative transformation.
  
  Example: . . .we didn’t even notice it until our shadows suddenly disappeared.

In the chart on the next page, find at least one example of each technique. Then write a sentence of your own using each technique.
### Reflecting on Life Experiences

#### Descriptive Techniques

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Imagery: Sensory and Specific Details</th>
<th>O’Connor’s Descriptive Techniques</th>
<th>Krakauer’s Descriptive Techniques</th>
<th>Modify the Examples by Using the Technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The room was dark.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

| Comparisons and Figurative Language |                                  |                                   | The mountain was big.                    |

| What Is Not There                   |                                  |                                   | The forest was quiet.                    |

| Change in Time or Condition         |                                  |                                   | There was no wind.                      |

#### Check Your Understanding

Exchange drafts of the free writes you wrote at the beginning of this activity. Underline sentences in your peer’s draft that could benefit from revision and rewrite at least two sentences, using different techniques to transform them. Revise your own paragraph, using feedback from your peers. Annotate places where you use the various descriptive techniques.