

COMMON CORE

RI 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings. **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.

Straw into Gold: The Metamorphosis of the Everyday

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML11-1286A

Meet the Author

Sandra Cisneros born 1954

"I'm trying to write the stories that haven't been written," Sandra Cisneros has proclaimed. With her rich, intimate portraits of Mexican and Mexican-American characters, Cisneros hopes to make readers of all races aware of the complexities of straddling two cultures. She sees herself as a voice for the voiceless. "I'm determined," she explains, "to fill a literary void."

Fighting Tradition Born to a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother, Cisneros grew up on Chicago's South Side. The only girl among seven children, she felt as if she had "seven fathers" because her brothers tried to control her behavior. Like their father, they thought Sandra should adopt a quiet, traditional lifestyle. Fortunately, she was blessed with a mother "brave enough to raise her daughter in a nontraditional way." "My mother didn't force me to learn how to cook," says Cisneros. "And she always told me, 'Make sure you can take care of yourself.'"

Growing Up Lonely Cisneros formed few lasting friendships in early childhood, because her family moved frequently between Chicago and Mexico. "The moving back and forth, the new school, were very upsetting to me as a child,"

she once said. Retreating into herself, Cisneros became a keen observer of others and a secret writer of poetry. After years of clandestine composition, she encountered a teacher in high school who appreciated her experiences and her writing. With the teacher's encouragement, Cisneros began to share her work with her classmates.

The Value of Heritage In 1976, Cisneros entered the University of Iowa's prestigious Writers' Workshop. Surrounded by people from more privileged backgrounds, Cisneros felt intimidated. Soon, however, she came to realize that she could write about something her classmates could not. "It was not until this moment," Cisneros recalls, "when I separated myself, when I considered myself truly distinct, that my writing acquired a voice." Cisneros's realization gave rise to her acclaimed *The House on Mango Street* (1984), a series of interlocking prose poems about a poor Mexican-American family. Her reputation was cemented with the publication in 1991 of *Woman Hollering Creek*, a collection of stories. "In everything I've done in my life," she maintains, "including all the choices I've made as a writer, I've followed my gut and my heart. It's taken me where I've needed to go so far."

DID YOU KNOW?

Sandra Cisneros ...

- wrote in secret as a child because she knew her family would disapprove.
- won a MacArthur "genius grant," a large monetary award given to honor "exceptional creativity and originality."
- has had poems on display on Chicago subways and buses.

Author Online



Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML11-1286B



● TEXT ANALYSIS: VOICE

A writer's **voice** is his or her unique style of expression. This unique use of language is what allows you to “hear” a human personality behind the words you read. In “Straw into Gold,” Sandra Cisneros writes:

I'd never seen anybody make corn tortillas. Ever.

The informal tone, the use of a contraction, the everyday words, the short sentence followed by a fragment, and the pauses before and after the word *ever*—all help create Cisneros's voice in this essay—one that is personal, relaxed, and conversational. The voice is consistently natural, even with this essay's central **allusion**—an indirect reference the author assumes her readers will recognize. The mythological story to which Cisneros alludes is familiar to most children. As you read, look for instances when you “hear” Cisneros behind her words. Note the stylistic elements that help create this unique effect.

● READING SKILL: ANALYZE STRUCTURE

The **structure** of a text, or how its different parts are organized, is directly tied to the author's purpose. Cisneros reveals two purposes in this essay, and she uses two methods of reasoning—two kinds of structures—to achieve them. Her primary structure is anecdotal. Using **inductive reasoning**, she shares with readers some of her formative experiences—moments that helped shape her life as a writer. Then she draws general conclusions from those specific experiences.

At the heart of this essay, you will also find an example of **deductive reasoning**. The writer arrives at a conclusion by applying a general principle to a specific situation. The general principle is that weaving straw into gold reveals magical power. The specific situation is that Cisneros, in her own way, can weave straw into gold. Finally, the specific conclusion is that as a writer, Cisneros also has magical power.

Personal essays are often loosely structured, and “Straw into Gold” is no exception. Cisneros begins the essay with an **anecdote**—a brief story that makes a point. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to list these anecdotes and the author's inductive generalizations about them.

Anecdote or Recollection	Inductive Generalization
learning to make tortillas	



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

Where do writers get their MATERIAL?

Writers harvest ideas for their work in a variety of places. Some writers find inspiration in controversies ripped from the headlines. Others are intrigued by a particular moment in history. Literature can be inspired by a writer's travels around the world, but just as often, powerful stories start closer to home. In “Straw into Gold,” you will meet a writer who has unearthed a wealth of ideas in her own experiences and heritage.

QUICKWRITE Think of a work of literature you're familiar with. Where do you think the writer came by his or her ideas? Whether it's a lyric poem about lost love or a novel about a historical event, try to imagine the writer's source of material. Explain your thoughts in a short paragraph.



Straw into Gold:

The Metamorphosis of the Everyday

Sandra Cisneros

BACKGROUND Cisneros originally delivered the text of “Straw into Gold” as a speech. The essay still retains some characteristics of an oral work—for example, the voice has a distinctly conversational character. The phrase “Straw into Gold” refers to the challenge faced by the heroine in “Rumpelstiltskin.” In this fairy tale, as you may recall, a miller’s daughter will be put to death unless she can do the seemingly impossible—namely, spin gold out of mere straw. The word *metamorphosis* in the subtitle means “transformation.”

Analyze Visuals ►

What does the image on the opposite page suggest about women’s roles in traditional Mexican culture? Read the essay and then revisit your answer, citing details from the text.

When I was living in an artists’ colony in the south of France, some fellow Latin-Americans who taught at the university in Aix-en-Provence¹ invited me to share a homecooked meal with them. I had been living abroad almost a year then on an NEA² grant, subsisting mainly on French bread and lentils so that my money could last longer. So when the invitation to dinner arrived, I accepted without hesitation. Especially since they had promised Mexican food.

What I didn’t realize when they made this invitation was that I was supposed to be involved in preparing the meal. I guess they assumed I knew how to cook Mexican food because I am Mexican. They wanted specifically tortillas, though
10 I’d never made a tortilla in my life. **A**

A VOICE

Reread lines 1–10. What stylistic elements allow Cisneros’s informal, conversational voice to emerge? Cite specific examples.

1. **Aix-en-Provence** (āk’sän-prō-vāns’): French city about ten miles north of the Mediterranean Sea.

2. **NEA**: the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency that funds artistic projects of organizations and individuals.



It's true I had witnessed my mother rolling the little armies of dough into perfect circles, but my mother's family is from Guanajuato;³ they are *provincianos*, country folk. They only know how to make flour tortillas. My father's family, on the other hand, is *chilango*⁴ from Mexico City. We ate corn tortillas but we didn't make them. Someone was sent to the corner tortilleria to buy some. I'd never seen anybody make corn tortillas. Ever.

Somehow my Latino hosts had gotten a hold of a packet of corn flour, and this is what they tossed my way with orders to produce tortillas. *Así como sea*. Any ol' way, they said and went back to their cooking.

20 Why did I feel like the woman in the fairy tale who was locked in a room and ordered to spin straw into gold? I had the same sick feeling when I was required to write my critical essay for the MFA⁵ exam—the only piece of noncreative writing necessary in order to get my graduate degree. How was I to start? There were rules involved here, unlike writing a poem or story, which I did intuitively. There was a step by step process needed and I had better know it. I felt as if making tortillas—or writing a critical paper, for that matter—were tasks so impossible I wanted to break down into tears.

Somehow though, I managed to make tortillas—crooked and burnt, but edible nonetheless. My hosts were absolutely ignorant when it came to Mexican food; they thought my tortillas were delicious. (I'm glad my mama wasn't there.) Thinking back and looking at an old photograph documenting the three of us consuming those lopsided circles I am amazed. Just as I am amazed I could finish my MFA exam. I've managed to do a lot of things in my life I didn't think I was capable of and which many others didn't think I was capable of either. Especially because I am a woman, a Latina, an only daughter in a family of six men. My father would've liked to have seen me married long ago. In our culture men and women don't leave their father's house except by way of marriage. I crossed my father's threshold with nothing carrying me but my own two feet. A woman whom no one came for and no one chased away. **C**

40 To make matters worse, I left before any of my six brothers had ventured away from home. I broke a terrible taboo. Somehow, looking back at photos of myself as a child, I wonder if I was aware of having begun already my own quiet war.

I like to think that somehow my family, my Mexicanness, my poverty, all had something to do with shaping me into a writer. I like to think my parents were preparing me all along for my life as an artist even though they didn't know it. From my father I inherited a love of wandering. He was born in Mexico City but as a young man he traveled into the U.S. vagabonding. He eventually was drafted and thus became a citizen. Some of the stories he has told about his first months in the U.S. with little or no English surface in my stories in *The House on Mango Street*⁶ as well as others I have in mind to write in the future. From him I inherited

B ALLUSION

An **allusion** is an indirect reference to a person, a place, an event, or a literary work that the writer believes readers will recognize. Cisneros uses a literary allusion in lines 20–21 to compare her challenge (making tortillas) with that of a character in “Rumpelstiltskin.” As you read, consider the essay's title. How does Cisneros carry the allusion through the essay, and what is its greater meaning?

Language Coach

Word Definitions

Intuitively (line 24) means “done in a manner requiring no active thought or knowledge.” What does Cisneros do intuitively? How does she contrast intuitive tasks and non-intuitive tasks?

C ANALYZE STRUCTURE

What does Cisneros's completion of her MFA exam have in common with the experience recounted in the tortilla anecdote? Explain how these experiences make Cisneros feel like “the woman in the fairy tale” she alludes to in lines 20–21.

3. **Guanajuato** (gwā'nā-hwä'tō): state in central Mexico.

4. **chilango** (chē-läng'gō) *Mexican slang*: native to Mexico City.

5. **MFA**: Master of Fine Arts, an academic degree.

6. **The House on Mango Street**: Cisneros's first book of fiction, published in 1983.

a sappy heart. (He still cries when he watches Mexican soaps—especially if they deal with children who have forsaken their parents.)

My mother was born like me—in Chicago but of Mexican descent. It would be her tough streetwise voice that would haunt all my stories and poems. An amazing woman who loves to draw and read books and can sing an opera. A smart cookie. **D**

When I was a little girl we traveled to Mexico City so much I thought my grandparents' house on La Fortuna, number 12, was home. It was the only constant in our nomadic ramblings from one Chicago flat to another. The house on Destiny Street, number 12, in the colonia Tepeyac would be perhaps the only
60 home I knew, and that nostalgia for a home would be a theme that would obsess me.

My brothers also figured greatly in my art. Especially the older two; I grew up in their shadows. Henry, the second oldest and my favorite, appears often in poems I have written and in stories which at times only borrow his nickname, Kiki. He played a major role in my childhood. We were bunk-bed mates. We were co-conspirators. We were pals. Until my oldest brother came back from studying in Mexico and left me odd woman out for always.

What would my teachers say if they knew I was a writer now? Who would've guessed it? I wasn't a very bright student. I didn't much like school because we
70 moved so much and I was always new and funny looking. In my fifth-grade report card I have nothing but an avalanche of C's and D's, but I don't remember being that stupid. I was good at art and I read plenty of library books and Kiki laughed at all my jokes. At home I was fine, but at school I never opened my mouth except when the teacher called on me.

When I think of how I see myself it would have to be at age eleven. I know I'm thirty-two on the outside, but inside I'm eleven. I'm the girl in the picture with skinny arms and a crumpled skirt and crooked hair. I didn't like school because all they saw was the outside me. School was lots of rules and sitting with your hands folded and being very afraid all the time. I liked looking out the window
80 and thinking. I liked staring at the girl across the way writing her name over and over again in red ink. I wondered why the boy with the dirty collar in front of me didn't have a mama who took better care of him.

I think my mama and papa did the best they could to keep us warm and clean and never hungry. We had birthday and graduation parties and things like that, but there was another hunger that had to be fed. There was a hunger I didn't even have a name for. Was this when I began writing? **E**

In 1966 we moved into a house, a real one, our first real home. This meant we didn't have to change schools and be the new kids on the block every couple of years. We could make friends and not be afraid we'd have to say goodbye to them
90 and start all over. My brothers and the flock of boys they brought home would become important characters eventually for my stories—Louie and his cousins, Meme Ortiz and his dog with two names, one in English and one in Spanish.

My mother flourished in her own home. She took books out of the library and taught herself to garden—to grow flowers so envied we had to put a lock

D VOICE

Reread Cisneros's description of her parents in lines 43–55. Identify the informal words, as well as the short sentences and fragments, that establish Cisneros's voice here.

E ANALYZE STRUCTURE

Identify the six recollections Cisneros presents in lines 43–86. What do they have in common? What is the inductive conclusion Cisneros draws from them?

on the gate to keep out the midnight flower thieves. My mother has never quit gardening.

This was the period in my life, that slippery age when you are both child and woman and neither, I was to record in *The House on Mango Street*. I was still shy. I was a girl who couldn't come out of her shell.

100 How was I to know I would be recording and documenting the women who sat their sadness on an elbow and stared out a window? It would be the city streets of Chicago I would later record, as seen through a child's eyes.

I've done all kinds of things I didn't think I could do since then. I've gone to a prestigious university, studied with famous writers, and taken an MFA degree. I've taught poetry in schools in Illinois and Texas. I've gotten an NEA grant and run away with it as far as my courage would take me. I've seen the bleached and bitter mountains of the Peloponnesus.⁷ I've lived on an island. I've been to Venice twice. I've lived in Yugoslavia. I've been to the famous Nice⁸ flower market behind the opera house. I've lived in a village in the pre-Alps and witnessed the daily parade
110 of promenaders.

I've moved since Europe to the strange and wonderful country of Texas, land of polaroid-blue skies and big bugs. I met a mayor with my last name. I met famous Chicana and Chicano artists and writers and *políticos*.⁹

Texas is another chapter in my life. It brought with it the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship,¹⁰ a six-month residency on a 265-acre ranch. But most important, Texas brought Mexico back to me.

In the days when I would sit at my favorite people-watching spot, the snakey Woolworth's counter across the street from the Alamo¹¹ (the Woolworth's which has since been torn down to make way for progress), I couldn't think of anything
120 else I'd rather be than a writer. I've traveled and lectured from Cape Cod to San Francisco, to Spain, Yugoslavia, Greece, Mexico, France, Italy, and now today to Texas. Along the way there has been straw for the taking. With a little imagination, it can be spun into gold. 🌀 F

COMMON CORE RI.5

F ANALYZE STRUCTURE

The author concludes this essay with a pattern of **inductive reasoning** that she has used throughout—moving from specific experiences to a generalization about these experiences. However, as you learned before reading this selection, Cisneros weaves **deductive reasoning** into her reflections here. Review the information about deductive reasoning on page 1287. Then, identify the three parts of the author's deductive argument: the general principle, the specific situation, and the conclusion. What part does the essay's closing sentence play in this deductive structure?

7. **Peloponnesus** (pěll'ə-pə-ně'-səs): peninsula forming the southern part of mainland Greece.

8. **Nice** (nēs): port city in southern France.

9. **políticos** (pō-lē'tē-kōs) *Spanish*: politicians.

10. **Dobie-Paisano** (dō'bē pī-zā'nō) **Fellowship**: a prestigious award offered to authors who are from or write about Texas. It includes cash as well as the use of living quarters.

11. **Alamo**: a mission chapel in San Antonio, Texas, site of a famous battle in Texas's war of independence from Mexico.

Comprehension

- Recall** What misunderstanding does Cisneros recount at the beginning of the essay?
- Recall** What traits do Cisneros and her father have in common?
- Summarize** As a child, how did Cisneros feel at school?

Text Analysis

- Make Inferences** What childhood events and circumstances inspired Cisneros to become a writer? Cite evidence from the selection to support your inferences.
- Interpret Allusion** An allusion is an indirect reference to a person, a place, an event, or a literary work with which the writer believes the reader will be familiar. Reread lines 120–123 and consider the essay’s title. By incorporating allusions to the fairy tale “Rumpelstiltskin,” what point is Cisneros making about ordinary experiences? What is she saying about the imagination? Cite evidence from the essay to support your response.
- Analyze Structure** Review the chart you created. What idea does Cisneros return to throughout the essay? What is the function of this recurring idea in developing her message? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
- Compare Voice** In a chart, record examples of the stylistic elements that create Cisneros’s unique voice. Then choose another prose selection from this unit, and analyze the voice of its author as well. Use your completed chart to explain how Cisneros’s voice differs from that of the other writer’s.

	<i>Sentence Type/Length</i>	<i>Word Choice</i>	<i>Tone</i>
<i>Cisneros</i>			
<i>Other Writer</i>			

Text Criticism

- Critical Interpretations** Cisneros’s candid recollections prompted one critic to say, “The memories that Cisneros offers . . . sometimes wrinkle the nose and scorch the palate.” He went on to praise her talent for “evoking the sensations of the past in their full complexity.” Why do you think Cisneros shares her insecurities and painful experiences as well as her triumphs? How might failing to do this have altered the essay’s message? Explain, citing evidence.

Where do writers get their MATERIAL?

Like many writers, Cisneros uses personal experiences and real people as material for her literary creations. How “creative” do you think it is to use personal experiences as the raw material for writing? Explain.

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RI 4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings. **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.