

# Neustadt Curriculum Packet



  
**NSK**  
NEUSTADT PRIZE  
*for*  
Children's  
& Young  
Adult  
Literature

Lessons related to Gene Yang's  
American Born Chinese

**STUDENT VERSIONS**

## Lesson 1

### Analysis of Three Parallel Storylines Composition of a Personal Narrative

Yang's book is unique in that it contains three different storylines. At first, these three seem very distinct and separate from each other. But by the end of the book we see how they overlap, as ultimately these three storylines come together in a meaningful way.

1. Describe and define the three unique storylines of the book. Who is the main character in each?
2. What do you think is Yang's main theme in each of these sections?
3. How do all three of these storylines speak to the issue of identity, especially as it relates to being Chinese-American?

As you think of your own experiences, you may see some connections between them and those of Jin, the main character in one of the storylines of *American Born Chinese*. Have you ever experienced isolation, where you as an individual felt excluded from the dominant group in some significant way? To what extent did factors beyond your control (such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) factor into your exclusion? How did that affect the way you saw yourself or how you related to others?

Assignment: Write a 650-word personal narrative in which you tell the story of a time you felt isolated or excluded.

An effective personal narrative should contain some or all of the following:

- A strong sense of the writer's "voice" – readers should feel the authenticity of the "I" in the piece
- A clear beginning, middle, and end; every personal narrative tells a story
- Lively, descriptive writing, often relying on sensory details to "show not tell"

You should also strive to follow the grammatical and technical conventions of effective writing as well, including

- Use of dialogue incorporating correct dialogue format
- No passive voice
- Consistent use of verb tense
- The incorporation of one simile or metaphor

### Student model:

#### I Guess I'm Not A Runner

I wondered when they were going to notice I wasn't there. When my small, quiet self was far enough that the gaps between them grew suspiciously large. Or when they'd eventually stop running, looking around at each other in glee from completing their strenuous hike, only to notice that one person was missing from their group of four. I waited for this moment to happen, but it never did. Standing at the bottom of a hill, I watched a group of my friends continue to jog up the streets, abandoning the boisterous and wild Chinatown for the serene and quiet North Beach neighborhood.

The steep hills of San Francisco are not for the faint of heart; their tall and looming roads sent a sense of panic in me that my friends didn't seem to have. I've never considered myself to be athletic. In school, I had always been the last person to be picked for a team in P.E. I was the benchwarmer for every single sport I tried, even the ones where my starting-position friends and I joined as beginners at the same time. I seemed to always fall behind. This idea only became more real when watching my peers fade away, continuing their stride without any sign of exhaustion or trouble. For a while, I had been able to keep up with their pace. While I ran at their sides panting and scrambling for air, their breath mimicked that of a sleeping person's. But a benchwarmer can only run for so long before their body gives out, and I found myself stuck in my tracks. I was unable to move against the stubbornness of my weary legs. Standing alone, I eventually watched them fall out of view and then found myself in a harsh reality. I had been completely abandoned. Stranded in a city I hardly knew, surrounded by a language I couldn't understand.

Before my group and I were sent to venture into the streets of San Francisco, we were a part of a much larger group. Together, we arrived in the city as a union of 20 or so, made up of my classmates and seventh graders from the grade below us. We were too large of a group to run, too chaotic a group to do anything but walk so as to not get separated. I felt safe in this large pack of my classmates, knowing I would never get lost so long as I was guarded by the walls that my several peers formed around me. But that feeling wouldn't last. Before I could even protest, our group of 20 was split into measly groups of four. Each group was given a checklist of sites to find, told good luck, and sent on their way. We were told it was a scavenger hunt, but I saw it as my living hell; my former "safety in numbers" shifting to "keep up or be left behind."

Soon after I lost sight of them, I had given up trying to find my group. Mindlessly walking around after being left on my own, I was too lost to follow the direction they had disappeared into. My only hope was to find another group of familiar faces, but finding them in such an overwhelming town felt impossible. Of all places to be abandoned in San Francisco, Chinatown was the least ideal. Walking around the lively streets I seemed to be surround-

## LESSON 1 / STUDENT MODEL CONT.

ed by images of red and gold. Each building I passed glittered with shiny foreign letters hemmed with low-hanging lanterns or murals of people plastered against their walls. Every once in a while I'd pass some sort of building with words I could recognize. "Clinic", "Restaurant", "Tea" and "School" stuck out sorely against Chinese characters. Seeing these words felt like trying to read a story in a language one hardly knows. You may understand some basic words, but the meaning of each sentence is lost to your illiteracy. It was a bitter reminder of my unfamiliarity with the place.

I had never liked being on my own before. As a child, I'd beg and plead whenever my mother attempted to leave me alone in the car, even when I knew she would typically be back in less than a minute. I couldn't seem to shake the thought that something bad would happen to me when left on my own. However, being lost in Chinatown was one of the few moments I remember not having this fear. My walk turned from the cowardly, shy stumble of a lost teenage girl to the prance of a fellow Chinatown customer, trying my best to blend in with the crowd I strode among. I'd find myself looking through each window I'd pass by, eyeing the products that lie inside. Books and vegetables and candy and t-shirts greeted my eyes, and in return, I'd give them back a slight hum and nod. Roaming through Chinatown began to feel like a game. Rather than being the shy, unathletic, and anxiety-ridden girl my peers knew me to be, I got to play as a whole new person. Surrounded by people I'd never met, who didn't pay any attention to me at all, I felt free. My worries about how I would find my way back, or what my peers and teachers would say to me fled. I instead chose to enjoy myself. To make my own journey, at my own pace.

It wasn't long after that a group of my classmates came into my view—not my initial group of peers that fled without me, but a group of boys I only hardly knew. I stood still, watching them holler at me, then scramble up to where I stood. One boy made it before the others.

"Where's your group?"

"They ran off a bit ago, I couldn't keep up."

"They didn't wait for you?"

"Nope."

"Oh. Well, you can join our group then."

Whether it's true or not, I like to think my newfound confidence and ability to wander the city by myself is what led that group of boys to me. That my decision to finally let go and enjoy my journey made me stand out against the many visitors of Chinatown, just enough for people I hardly knew to recognize me. Because while I may not be a runner, I'm pretty good at finding my way around.

## Lesson 2

### Drawing a Memory

For graphic artists, storytelling comes in the form of pictures as well as words. This allows them to provide the reader with an enriched experience that speaks more directly to our visual sense. As we have seen in our study of *American Born Chinese*, Yang connects to his readers through the effective use of text AND illustration.

The goal of this lesson is for you to create a series of panels that illustrate a memory from your own lives.

**Step 1.** Using page 30 as a starting point, choose a particularly meaningful moment from your own experience. Perhaps, like Jin, you were introduced to a new group in a way that made you feel uncomfortable. Think of the images you would use to show that experience.

Another good reference point would be pages 38-40 in which Jin makes a new friend (Wei-Chen Sun). These pages might spark a memory of when/how you met an important new person in your life.

Sketch/draw/paint several of the images you imagine. Include text if you want to, but it's also fine to let the images speak for themselves.

After you have sketched a few of these images, choose one that you think captures the memory best. OR create a series of panels the way Yang does throughout *American Born Chinese*. In the end, the goal is to have the equivalent of one page of imagery with/without text.

Discuss and share your choices with your teacher and classmates.

**Step 2.** At this point, you as the student-artist will have options as to how to proceed. You may either continue the storyline you have started in Step 1, or begin a second page that captures another memory.

By the end of the assignment, you will have a series of images that either depict an extended scene of one memory, or multiple images that show a series of memories.

You should continue to discuss your choices with your teacher(s) and peers, seeking inspiration from each other as needed. The conversations should also focus on choices related to when to use text and when to use visual representations without words.