Sometimes one person can have a powerful effect on your life. When you look back, you realize how much you benefited from his or her influence. In “The Teacher Who Changed My Life,” Nicholas Gage fondly recalls how he was challenged by his seventh-grade teacher, Miss Hurd.

DISCUSS In a small group, discuss well-known inspirational figures that you have heard about. What makes these people an inspiration to others? What qualities do they have in common? What have they inspired others to do?
Meet the Author

Nicholas Gage
born 1939

Narrow Escape
Nicholas Gage’s original name was Nikos Gatzoiannis (gā’tzō-vâ’n’îs). He was born in Lia, a village in northwestern Greece. Gage spent his early years with his mother, Eleni, and four older sisters. His father, Christos, had left to find work in the United States. After World War II, Eleni and her children found themselves caught in Greece’s civil war between the Communists and the royalists. In 1947, Communist fighters gained control of Lia. When the Communists began to retreat in the spring of 1948, they took some children with them. Fearing that her children would be sent to Communist countries, Eleni made arrangements for the family to flee. Gage and three of his sisters escaped, but his mother and one sister were left behind. The Communists arrested Eleni, who was put on trial and executed. Eventually, Gage and his sisters joined their father in the United States.

Background to the Essay
A Tireless Investigator
As an investigative reporter for the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, Nicholas Gage reported on important issues such as organized crime and drug trafficking. But ever since childhood, he wanted to cover a more personal story. In 1980, Gage began researching a book about his mother’s fate in the Greek civil war. His investigations led him to one of the judges who ordered Eleni’s execution. Gage actually considered killing the judge, but he realized that if he took revenge he would “become like him, purging myself as he did of all humanity or compassion.” Gage’s award-winning book, Eleni, was published in 1983.

Text Analysis: Characterization in Nonfiction
Because writers of nonfiction portray real people rather than characters, they are limited in certain ways. A writer cannot make up facts about a real person. However, writers can shape the reader’s attitude toward the person by using the same basic methods of characterization used in fiction. These are
• making direct comments about the person’s nature
• describing the person’s appearance
• quoting the person or describing his or her actions
• reporting what other people say or think about the person

As you read “The Teacher Who Changed My Life,” notice how Gage shapes your attitude toward Miss Hurd.

Reading Skill: Author’s Purpose
An author’s purpose is what the writer hopes to achieve in a particular work. For example, the title of Gage’s essay suggests that he wants to inform you about how a teacher influenced his life. In addition to providing information, writers may seek to persuade, to express ideas or emotions, or to entertain. A complex piece of writing often has more than one purpose.

As you read, notice how Gage’s purposes affect the tone of his writing and his choice of details and words. Use a chart like the one shown in recording your analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>How Purpose Affects Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To show influence of Miss Hurd</td>
<td>Narrates how she pushed him to write about his experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vocabulary in Context
To see how many vocabulary words you know, substitute a different word or phrase for each boldfaced term. Then write a brief definition of each boldfaced word you’re familiar with in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

1. The defeat left him lonely and isolated.
2. I’ve learned a lot from my mentor.
3. He participated willingly and avidly.
4. She emphatically endorsed the candidate.
5. We need a catalyst to send us in a new direction.
6. They handled the awkward situation with great tact.

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
The person who set the course of my life in the new land I entered as a young war refugee—who, in fact, nearly dragged me onto the path that would bring all the blessings I’ve received in America—was a salty-tongued, no-nonsense schoolteacher named Marjorie Hurd. When I entered her classroom in 1953, I had been to six schools in five years, starting in the Greek village where I was born in 1939.

When I stepped off a ship in New York Harbor on a gray March day in 1949, I was an undersized 9-year-old in short pants who had lost his mother and was coming to live with the father he didn’t know. My mother, Eleni Gatzoyiannis, had been imprisoned, tortured and shot by Communist guerrillas for sending me and three of my four sisters to freedom. She died so that her children could go to their father in the United States.

The portly, bald, well-dressed man who met me and my sisters seemed a foreign, authoritarian figure. I secretly resented him for not getting the whole family out of Greece early enough to save my mother. Ultimately, I would grow to love him and appreciate how he dealt with becoming a single parent at the age of 56, but at first our relationship was prickly, full of hostility. A

As Father drove us to our new home—a tenement in Worcester, Mass.—and pointed out the huge brick building that would be our first school in America, I clutched my Greek notebooks from the refugee camp, hoping that my few years of schooling would impress my teachers in this cold, crowded country. They didn’t. When my father led me and my 11-year-old sister to Greendale Elementary School, the grim-faced Yankee principal put the two of us in a

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1. Eleni Gatzoyiannis (ē-lē’ē-nē gät’zō-yēn’ēs).
class for the mentally retarded. There was no facility in those days for non-
English-speaking children.

By the time I met Marjorie Hurd four years later, I had learned English,
been placed in a normal, graded class and had even been chosen for the college
preparatory track in the Worcester public school system. I was 13 years old
when our father moved us yet again, and I entered Chandler Junior High
shortly after the beginning of seventh grade. I found myself surrounded by
richer, smarter and better-dressed classmates, who looked askance at my
strange clothes and heavy accent. Shortly after I arrived, we were told to
select a hobby to pursue during “club hour” on Fridays. The idea of hobbies
and clubs made no sense to my immigrant ears, but I decided to follow
the prettiest girl in my class—the blue-eyed daughter of the local Lutheran
minister. She led me through the door marked “Newspaper Club” and into the
presence of Miss Hurd, the newspaper adviser and English teacher who would
become my mentor and my muse.

A formidable, solidly built woman with salt-and-pepper hair, a steely eye
and a flat Boston accent, Miss Hurd had no patience with layabouts. “What
are all you goof-offs doing here?” she bellowed at the would-be journalists.
“This is the Newspaper Club! We’re going to put out a newspaper. So if there’s
anybody in this room who doesn’t like work, I suggest you go across to the
Glee Club now, because you’re going to work your tails off here!”

mentor (měn′tər′) n.
a wise and trusted
counselor or teacher

Why might Gage have
chosen to quote Miss
Hurd’s actual words in
this paragraph?
I was soon under Miss Hurd’s spell. She did indeed teach us to put out a newspaper, skills I honed during my next 25 years as a journalist. Soon I asked the principal to transfer me to her English class as well. There, she drilled us on grammar until I finally began to understand the logic and structure of the English language. She assigned stories for us to read and discuss; not tales of heroes, like the Greek myths I knew, but stories of underdogs—poor people, even immigrants, who seemed ordinary until a crisis drove them to do something extraordinary. She also introduced us to the literary wealth of Greece—giving me a new perspective on my war-ravaged, impoverished homeland. I began to be proud of my origins.

One day, after discussing how writers should write about what they know, she assigned us to compose an essay from our own experience. Fixing me with a stern look, she added, “Nick, I want you to write about what happened to your family in Greece.” I had been trying to put those painful memories behind me and left the assignment until the last moment. Then, on a warm spring afternoon, I sat in my room with a yellow pad and pencil and stared out the window at the buds on the trees. I wrote that the coming of spring always reminded me of the last time I said goodbye to my mother on a green and gold day in 1948.

**COMMON CORE RI 4**

**Language Coach**

**Idioms** The phrase “under Miss Hurd’s spell,” in line 45, is an idiom, or a figure of speech that isn’t meant to be taken literally. How did the narrator feel about Miss Hurd? Why do you think he chose to describe his feelings with this idiom?

**AUTHOR’S PURPOSE**

Reread lines 45–54. Which details support Gage’s purpose of explaining Miss Hurd’s influence on him?
I kept writing, one line after another, telling how the Communist guerrillas occupied our village, took our home and food, how my mother started planning our escape when she learned that the children were to be sent to re-education camps behind the Iron Curtain and how, at the last moment, she couldn’t escape with us because the guerrillas sent her with a group of women to thresh wheat in a distant village. She promised she would try to get away on her own, she told me to be brave and hung a silver cross around my neck, and then she kissed me. I watched the line of women being led down into the ravine and up the other side, until they disappeared around the bend—my mother a tiny brown figure at the end who stopped for an instant to raise her hand in one last farewell.

I wrote about our nighttime escape down the mountain, across the minefields and into the lines of the Nationalist soldiers, who sent us to a refugee camp. It was there that we learned of our mother’s execution. I felt very lucky to have come to America, I concluded, but every year, the coming of spring made me feel sad because it reminded me of the last time I saw my mother.

I handed in the essay, hoping never to see it again, but Miss Hurd had it published in the school paper. This mortified me at first, until I saw that my classmates reacted with sympathy and tact to my family’s story. Without telling me, Miss Hurd also submitted the essay to a contest sponsored by the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, Pa., and it won a medal. The Worcester paper wrote about the award and quoted my essay at length. My father, by then a “five-and-dime-store chef,” as the paper described him, was ecstatic with pride, and the Worcester Greek community celebrated the honor to one of its own.

For the first time I began to understand the power of the written word. A secret ambition took root in me. One day, I vowed, I would go back to Greece, find out the details of my mother’s death and write about her life, so her grandchildren would know of her courage. Perhaps I would even track down the men who killed her and write of their crimes. Fulfilling that ambition would take me 30 years.

Meanwhile, I followed the literary path that Miss Hurd had so forcefully set me on. After junior high, I became the editor of my school paper at Classical High School and got a part-time job at the Worcester Telegram and Gazette. Although my father could only give me $50 and encouragement toward a college education, I managed to finance four years at Boston University with scholarships and part-time jobs in journalism. During my last year of college, an article I wrote about a friend who had died in the Philippines—the first person to lose his life working for the Peace Corps—led to my winning the Hearst Award for College Journalism. And the plaque was given to me in the White House by President John F. Kennedy.

2. **re-education camps**: camps where people were forced to go to be indoctrinated with Communist ideas and beliefs.

3. **behind the Iron Curtain**: on the Communist side of the imaginary divide between the democracies of Western Europe and the Communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe; in this case, the camps were in Albania.
For a refugee who had never seen a motorized vehicle or indoor plumbing until he was 9, this was an unimaginable honor. When the Worcester paper ran a picture of me standing next to President Kennedy, my father rushed out to buy a new suit in order to be properly dressed to receive the congratulations of the Worcester Greeks. He clipped out the photograph, had it laminated in plastic and carried it in his breast pocket for the rest of his life to show everyone he met. I found the much-worn photo in his pocket on the day he died 20 years later.

In our isolated Greek village, my mother had bribed a cousin to teach her to read, for girls were not supposed to attend school beyond a certain age. She had always dreamed of her children receiving an education. She couldn’t be there when I graduated from Boston University, but the person who came with my father and shared our joy was my former teacher, Marjorie Hurd. We celebrated not only my bachelor’s degree but also the scholarships that paid my way to Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism. There, I met the woman who would eventually become my wife. At our wedding and at the baptisms of our three children, Marjorie Hurd was always there, dancing alongside the Greeks.

By then, she was Mrs. Rabidou, for she had married a widower when she was in her early 40s. That didn’t distract her from her vocation of introducing young minds to English literature, however. She taught for a total of 41 years.

**CHARACTERIZATION IN NONFICTION**

What do the father’s actions tell you about his feelings for his son?

isolated (i’sə-la’td) adj. separated from others
and continually would make a “project” of some balky student in whom she spied a spark of potential. Often these were students from the most troubled homes, yet she would alternately bully and charm each one with her own special brand of tough love until the spark caught fire. She retired in 1981 at the age of 62 but still avidly follows the lives and careers of former students while overseeing her adult stepchildren and driving her husband on camping trips to New Hampshire.

Miss Hurd was one of the first to call me on Dec. 10, 1987, when President Reagan, in his television address after the summit meeting with Gorbachev, told the nation that Eleni Gatzoyiannis’s dying cry, “My children!” had helped inspire him to seek an arms agreement “for all the children of the world.” “I can’t imagine a better monument for your mother,” Miss Hurd said with an uncharacteristic catch in her voice.

Although a bad hip makes it impossible for her to join in the Greek dancing, Marjorie Hurd Rabidou is still an honored and enthusiastic guest at all our family celebrations, including my 50th birthday picnic last summer, where the shish kebab was cooked on spits, clarinets and bouzoukis5 wailed, and costumed dancers led the guests in a serpentine line around our Colonial farmhouse, only 20 minutes from my first home in Worcester.

My sisters and I felt an aching void because my father was not there to lead the line, balancing a glass of wine on his head while he danced, the way he did at every celebration during his 92 years. But Miss Hurd was there, surveying the scene with quiet satisfaction. Although my parents are gone, her presence was a consolation, because I owe her so much.

This is truly the land of opportunity, and I would have enjoyed its bounty even if I hadn’t walked into Miss Hurd’s classroom in 1953. But she was the one who directed my grief and pain into writing, and if it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t have become an investigative reporter and foreign correspondent, recorded the story of my mother’s life and death in Eleni and now my father’s story in A Place for Us, which is also a testament to the country that took us in. She was the catalyst that sent me into journalism and indirectly caused all the good things that came after. But Miss Hurd would probably deny this emphatically.

A few years ago, I answered the telephone and heard my former teacher’s voice telling me, in that won’t-take-no-for-an-answer tone of hers, that she had decided I was to write and deliver the eulogy at her funeral. I agreed (she didn’t leave me any choice), but that’s one assignment I never want to do. I hope, Miss Hurd, that you’ll accept this remembrance instead.

4. summit meeting with Gorbachev (gôr′bə-chôf′); a high-level meeting between U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union.
5. bouzouki (bó̇-zō̇-kē); traditional Greek stringed instruments resembling mandolins.
Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why did Nicholas Gage come to the United States?
2. **Recall** What did Miss Hurd encourage him to write about?
3. **Recall** How did people react to Gage’s essay?
4. **Paraphrase** According to Gage, what influence did Miss Hurd have on his career?

Text Analysis

5. **Analyze Characterization** For each method of characterization in the chart, give an example of how Gage uses it to convey Miss Hurd’s personality. Which method gives you the most vivid impression of Miss Hurd? Explain your answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Words and Actions</th>
<th>Physical Appearances</th>
<th>Gage’s Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example from text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What it reveals about Miss Hurd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **Make Inferences** What led Miss Hurd to take a special interest in Gage when he was her student?

7. **Draw Conclusions About Character** Does Gage offer a realistic or an idealized portrait of Miss Hurd in this essay? Support your conclusion with evidence from the text.

8. **Examine Author’s Purpose** Review the chart you created as you read. What is the main purpose of Gage’s essay? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

9. **Evaluate Actions** The essay that Gage wrote for Miss Hurd in the seventh grade was about a traumatic event in his life. Should a teacher publish such writing without the student’s permission? Why or why not?

Text Criticism

10. **Author’s Style** Some critics have complained that Nicholas Gage includes too many details in works such as Eleni, which is almost 500 pages long. Consider the kinds of details Gage included in “The Teacher Who Changed My Life.” Would you say they are excessive, or do they serve an important function in conveying his message? Cite evidence in support of your opinion.

**Who has made you a BETTER person?**

How can a teacher inspire you to improve yourself?
Vocabulary in Context

∆ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Decide whether the words in each pair are synonyms or antonyms.

1. mentor/advisor
2. tact/insensitivity
3. isolated/united
4. avidly/enthusiastically
5. catalyst/observer
6. emphatically/wearily

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

- dynamic
- individual
- motive
- seek
- undergo

Write a description of an individual who had a strong positive influence on your life. Create a dynamic portrait that explains how this person changed you. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response. Here is an example of an opening:

SAMPLE OPENING

Without a doubt, our neighbor Mr. Arisa is the individual who has changed my life the most, even though he only moved in six months ago.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE LATIN ROOT sol

The word isolated contains the root sol, from the Latin word solus, which means “alone.” This root is found in a number of English words. To understand the meaning of words with sol, use context clues as well as your knowledge of the root.

PRACTICE Write the word from the word web that best completes each sentence. Use context clues to help you, or consult a dictionary if necessary.

1. Accidentally _________ from his family, the young boy asked the police officer for help.
2. In the play, Hamlet performs a _________ in which he talks to himself.
3. Enjoying time alone, she engages in _________ pursuits such as reading and drawing.
4. They enjoyed the quiet _________ of a picnic on an empty stretch of beach.
5. The conductor quiets the rest of the orchestra so that the violinist can perform her _________.
GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Elaborate With Examples

Review the Grammar and Style note on page 232. Illustrating your ideas with examples, as Gage does, can strengthen your message to readers. Note that Gage uses both concrete and abstract nouns in his examples to fully describe events and people’s reactions to them. A concrete noun names an object that can be seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted (such as sky, whistle, flower, book, and lemon). An abstract noun names an idea, quality, or state (such as democracy, independence, security, comfort, and sadness).

... she told me to be brave and hung a silver cross around my neck. ... (lines 70–71)
... my classmates reacted with sympathy and tact. ... (line 82)

Notice how the revisions in blue use examples to strengthen the main points of this first draft. Use a similar method to revise your responses to the prompt.

STUDENT MODEL

Nick arrived in the United States when he was only nine years old. His mother had just died, and he struggled to learn English. But he eventually succeeded.

His courage and determination led him to write a prize-winning essay at age thirteen.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION

Broaden your understanding of “The Teacher Who Changed My Life” by responding to this prompt. Then use the revising tip to improve your writing.

WRITING PROMPT

Extended Constructed Response: Speech

Imagine that you are the author’s father. Write a three-to-five-paragraph speech describing your son’s life and your feelings for him.

REVISIING TIP

Review your speech. Did you illustrate your ideas with examples? If not, revise your response with concrete and abstract nouns that fully describe events and people’s reactions.