Before the Curtain

Read how a story opening establishes a place, characters, and a problem.

6.W.3.a "Engage and orient the reader by developing an exposition (e.g., describe the setting, establish the situation, introduce the narrator and/or characters)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one clue to when and one clue to where the story begins. Circle two details that introduce Nia and Mateo, then write the numbers 1 and 2 beside two details that show why tonight's performance could go wrong.

Two Minutes to Curtain

1 At six on Friday evening, the school auditorium smelled of dust and orange peels. Beyond the heavy curtain, families found seats for the first performance of our play. I stood beside the lighting board with a pencil behind my ear and a list of cues in my hand. My name is Nia, and until yesterday, my only stage job had been painting a cardboard castle. Tonight I had to control every spotlight because Mr. Vale, our usual operator, was sick and had gone home.

2 My friend Mateo squeezed through the narrow space behind the curtain, carrying a roll of silver tape. He played the dragon, which meant he had to wear a huge green head and could barely see his own feet. 'Just follow the list,' he whispered, tapping my paper with one claw. I nodded, but the list was covered in Mr. Vale's tiny handwriting. I could tell which switch lit the stage. I could not tell which one would leave the actors standing in the dark.

3 Then the work light above us blinked twice and went out. The audience kept talking, unaware that the back of the stage had turned black. Mateo pulled off his dragon head and pointed toward a cable hanging loose beside the lighting board. Our principal called from the front row, 'Places, everyone. Two minutes.' I held the cue list closer to the dim glow of the EXIT sign. Mateo stayed beside me instead of going to his mark, and I realized he was waiting for me to decide what to do.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Which details tell you when and where the story begins? What is about to happen there?

2. What was Nia's stage job before tonight, and why is she operating the lights now? How do these details help you understand her situation?

3. What do Mateo's costume and his actions tell you about who he is and how he relates to Nia?

4. How do the work light going out and the principal's announcement make Nia's problem urgent?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a six- to eight-sentence opening for a new story. Establish when and where it begins, introduce a narrator and another character, and show a specific problem that matters to them without solving it.

ANSWER KEY

Before the Curtain

GRADE 6 · 6.W.3.a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one clue to when and one clue to where the story begins. Circle two details that introduce Nia and Mateo, then write the numbers 1 and 2 beside two details that show why tonight's performance could go wrong. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Which details tell you when and where the story begins? What is about to happen there?	**It is six on Friday evening in the school auditorium. Families are gathering for the first performance of a play.**
2	What was Nia's stage job before tonight, and why is she operating the lights now? How do these details help you understand her situation?	**Nia had only painted a cardboard castle. She must operate the lights because the usual operator is sick, so she is taking on an unfamiliar job.**
3	What do Mateo's costume and his actions tell you about who he is and how he relates to Nia?	**Mateo plays the dragon and is Nia's friend. He tries to help her by pointing to the cue list and later to the loose cable.**
4	How do the work light going out and the principal's announcement make Nia's problem urgent?	**The backstage area is dark, a cable is loose, and the play begins in two minutes. Nia must decide what to do before the performance starts.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

At dawn on Saturday, the community garden was quiet except for the drip of a leaky hose. I had promised my neighbor Ms. Chen that I would help her set up the seed exchange before anyone arrived. She knew every plant by its leaves, while I still mixed up mint and basil. When I opened the supply shed, the shelves were empty, and the boxes of labeled seeds were gone. Across the fence, the first visitors were already locking their bikes. Ms. Chen reached for her phone, but I noticed muddy footprints leading behind the shed.

Accept other passage details that support the same conclusions. For the writing task, look for a clear time and place, two introduced characters, and an unresolved problem that gives the opening a direction.