Words Under Pressure

Read how a public crisis shapes a private voice.

12.3.R.1 "Students will analyze the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic choices in grade-level literary and informational texts."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two places where the narrator's wording reflects the influenza crisis or its reach across oceans, and circle two places where family language shapes the voice. Number the two contrasting kinds of language the narrator copies into the notebook.

The Space Beneath the Notice

(1) Philadelphia, October 1918. At our corner grocery, the morning arrived in pieces: a crate of pears, a folded newspaper, a cough from the stairwell, three customers asking whether the schools would open. The influenza had already crossed oceans, the paper said, yet its numbers sat beside advertisements for soap. I stacked pears while Father read the names of ships and cities aloud, each place another stop on a route no one could see. He stopped when he reached our own city. Outside, the streetcar bell rang, and someone upstairs coughed again.

(2) By noon a notice appeared on the school door: CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. The words stood apart from the crowded street, clean and certain, though no one could tell me when "further" would come. At home, Mother spoke Italian when she was afraid. "Piano," she told my little brother, meaning slowly, as she carried his cup to the bed. She did not use the newspaper's tally. She counted his breaths, then counted them again. The same city that the paper measured in columns fitted into the space between one breath and the next.

(3) That night I copied the notice into my notebook, leaving a wide blank beneath it. I wanted the page to look like the door, firm enough to keep trouble outside. But from the back room came Mother's quiet "piano, piano," and I wrote beneath the notice: slowly, slowly. The illness had traveled from shore to shore; our words had traveled too, from her childhood home to this shop. On the page, the capital letters did not disappear. They simply could not tell the whole story of a boy breathing in a narrow bed.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does the list in the opening sentence make the 1918 crisis felt in an ordinary morning?

2. Why might the school notice use capital letters and so few words? How does the narrator's description challenge its certainty?

3. How does the narrator's use of "piano" and its translation change the way the family's experience is told?

4. To what extent does the illness's journey across oceans shape the passage's style? Use one detail from the beginning and one from the ending.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Rewrite the school-door notice as a message to a school family group during a present-day outbreak. In 75 to 95 words, use two stylistic choices suited to that audience, then explain both choices in a final sentence.

ANSWER KEY

Words Under Pressure

GRADE 12 · 12.3.R.1

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two places where the narrator's wording reflects the influenza crisis or its reach across oceans, and circle two places where family language shapes the voice. Number the two contrasting kinds of language the narrator copies into the notebook. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the list in the opening sentence make the 1918 crisis felt in an ordinary morning?	**The list places a cough and uncertainty about school beside groceries and customers, showing how the influenza crisis interrupts daily life.**
2	Why might the school notice use capital letters and so few words? How does the narrator's description challenge its certainty?	**The brief capitals make a public announcement look firm and authoritative. The narrator questions that certainty by observing that no one knows when the closure will end.**
3	How does the narrator's use of "piano" and its translation change the way the family's experience is told?	**The Italian word preserves Mother's voice, while its translation lets readers understand her care. Its gentle repetition contrasts with the newspaper's tally of cases.**
4	To what extent does the illness's journey across oceans shape the passage's style? Use one detail from the beginning and one from the ending.	**It shapes the passage's movement from ships and cities to one family's room. At the end, the narrator compares the illness traveling between shores with the family's words traveling between countries, but focuses on the brother's breathing.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

School family group update: Our building is closed during the current outbreak. The district has not announced a reopening date. Please check official updates before making plans. If your household needs help picking up supplies, reply here or send me a private message. Share this message with families who are not in this group, and ask which language works best for them. I used a clear opening for fast scanning and a private reply option so families can seek help without announcing personal needs.

Accept different supported interpretations of the passage's stylistic choices. For Part 3, look for a 75-to-95-word message with two choices suited to a present-day school family group and a final sentence explaining both.