Pace and Pressure

How narrative choices shape a turning point

11-12.W.3.b "Use a variety of literary or narrative techniques or poetic devices."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one sensory detail, circle one example of personification, and put a star beside two short sentences that change the pace. Notice how these choices build or release tension.

The Space Between Notes

1 Behind the auditorium curtain, I pressed my thumb against the nick in the piano bench. Through the velvet, the audience sounded like rain testing a roof. My sheet music waited on the stand, every black note as sharp as a thorn. Last spring, I had stopped halfway through this same piece when my hands forgot the next measure. Tonight, Ms. Alvarez leaned into the wings. "Ready?" she whispered. I nodded, though the bench seemed to remember more than I wanted it to. The stage manager raised three fingers, then two. The curtain began to lift.

2 The first notes landed cleanly. A low note rang beneath them, steady as a train crossing a bridge. For eight measures, I followed the keys without looking at the audience. Then a cough came from the front row, and my left hand slipped. One wrong note. Silence crowded the space after it. My fingers hovered. Last spring's empty measure opened in my mind again, but I heard Ms. Alvarez backstage, tapping the rhythm against her palm. Tap. Tap. I found the next chord. It was softer than I had practiced, but it was mine.

3 The melody returned, not like a train now but like footsteps finding a familiar path in the dark. I stopped trying to erase the wrong note. Instead, I let the quiet between phrases breathe, giving each new chord room to arrive. At the final note, I kept my hands on the keys until its sound thinned into the curtains. No one moved. Then the applause broke open, sudden as a door in a storm. Ms. Alvarez was still at the edge of the stage, tapping two fingers against her palm. This time, I smiled before she did.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does comparing the audience to “rain testing a roof” shape the mood before the performance?

2. What does “Silence crowded the space after it” suggest about the narrator's reaction to the wrong note?

3. How do the short sentences “One wrong note.” and “Tap. Tap.” affect the pace at the turning point?

4. The music is first compared to a train, then to footsteps. How does that change reflect the narrator's playing?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write one 80 to 100 word paragraph about someone recovering from a small mistake somewhere other than an auditorium. Include a sensory detail, personification, two short sentences that change the pace, and a comparison whose meaning shifts as the scene develops.

ANSWER KEY

Pace and Pressure

HIGH SCHOOL · 11-12.W.3.b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one sensory detail, circle one example of personification, and put a star beside two short sentences that change the pace. Notice how these choices build or release tension. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does comparing the audience to "rain testing a roof" shape the mood before the performance?	**The comparison makes the audience's steady noise feel like pressure building before the narrator begins.**
2	What does "Silence crowded the space after it" suggest about the narrator's reaction to the wrong note?	**The personification makes the brief pause feel oppressive as the narrator fears repeating last spring's mistake.**
3	How do the short sentences "One wrong note." and "Tap. Tap." affect the pace at the turning point?	**"One wrong note." abruptly halts the flow. "Tap. Tap." slows the moment into a countable rhythm that helps the narrator resume.**
4	The music is first compared to a train, then to footsteps. How does that change reflect the narrator's playing?	**The train suggests steady forward momentum. The footsteps suggest a slower, more deliberate recovery after the mistake.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

At the Saturday market, the line at my stall flowed like a river ready to pull me under. Orange peels scented the cold air as I counted a customer's change. I handed her an extra five-dollar bill. Too much. The cash box glared up at me, its lid hanging open. I asked for the bill back and checked the price aloud. Wait. She smiled, returned it, and held her basket steady while I counted again. The line still flowed like a river, but now its current carried voices, patience, and room for me to think.

Accept other passage-supported interpretations that explain the effect of the named technique. In Part 3, check that the comparison changes in meaning, rather than simply appearing twice.