

This student's draft has a good basic narrative structure and organization and a strong message or lesson learned. This draft also includes some dialogue. The next draft would need more descriptive details and concrete images of the grandmother and the setting. Also, the essay would be stronger with more examples, sentence variety, and changes in style and vocabulary.

## Activity 7-8 Thinking Critically About the Student Essay

**Directions:** *Analyze the essay to identify the features and details characteristic of the narration mode. Mark them on the essay. Then, reread the essay, and make a list of specific revisions you would make to correct any problems with content, organization, transitions, and style.* ●

### PROFESSIONAL NARRATION ESSAY

#### Only Daughter

Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros, born in Chicago in 1954, was the only daughter raised in a Mexican-American family with six brothers. She has a B.A. in English from Loyola University and an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Iowa. Her first book, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), features short vignettes related to Latina women in America. Later publications include *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), and *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (2000). "Only Daughter" is an essay first published in *Glamour*.

- 1 Once, several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor's note for an anthology. I wrote: "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. *That* explains everything."
- 2 Well, I've thought that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader's sake I should have written: "I am the only daughter in a *Mexican* family of six sons." Or even: "I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother." Or: "I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine." All of these had everything to do with who I am today.

- 3 I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a *girl* in public. But that aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself.
- 4 Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed. But when I was in the fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, "*Que bueno, mi'ja*, that's good." That meant a lot to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.
- 5 In retrospect, I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice professional eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a "What's that you're writing?"
- 6 But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as "My only daughter, the writer." Not as "This is my only daughter. She teaches." *Es maestra—teacher*. Not even *profesora*.
- 7 In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words, even though my father's only reading includes the brown-ink *Esto* sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody *¡Alarma!* magazines that feature yet another sighting of *La Virgen de Gaudalupe* on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering husband by bashing his skull in with a *molcajete* (a kitchen mortar made of volcanic rock). Or the *fotonovelas*, the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the characters' mouths in bubbles.
- 8 A father represents, then, the public majority. A public who's disinterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for, and privately trying to woo.
- 9 When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered bouts of nostalgia. Then we'd have to let go of our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches and head south. To Mexico City.
- 10 We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school. Each time, my father would seek

out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: "I have seven sons."

- 11 He meant *siete hijos*, seven children, but he translated it "sons." "I have seven sons." To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. "I have seven sons." As if he deserved a medal from the state.
- 12 My papa. He didn't mean anything by the mistranslation, I'm sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper: "Not seven sons. Six! and one *daughter*."
- 13 When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father's dream that we study hard and use this—our heads, instead of this—our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. "Use this," my father said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.
- 14 Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who has always been poor.
- 15 Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.
- 16 At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always; hot *tamales* and sweet *tamales* hissing in my mother's pressure cooker, and everybody—my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts, cousins—talking too loud and at the same time, like in a Fellini film, because that's just how we are.
- 17 I went upstairs to my father's room. One of my stories had just been translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano writing, and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally. And that's how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante movie on Galavision and eating rice pudding.
- 18 There was a glass filled with milk on the bedside table. There were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock and a plastic urinal that I didn't want to look at but looked at anyway. Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing.
- 19 I'm not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish, or because it was published in Mexico, or perhaps because the story dealt with Tepeyac, the *colonia* my father was raised in and the house he grew



up in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote control and read my story.

- 20 I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: "Is this So—and—so?" "Yes," I said. He kept reading.
- 21 When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: "Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?"

### Reading Reflection Questions *Answers will vary. Sample answers provided.*

- What are the direct or indirect (implied) messages in this story?  
*In general, the message is that even though her father thought she was less capable in some ways because she was a daughter and not a son, she found a way through her writing to impress him.*
- What does Sandra Cisneros mean by her statement, "I was/am the only daughter and only a daughter" (paragraph 3)?  
*The second "only" relates to the idea of being less capable than a son.*
- In paragraph 2, Cisneros adds details to her self-description of being one daughter among six sons. Name one of the details. What effect does her including these details have on you as a reader?  
*Answers will vary.*

### Objective Questions

- T/F   F   Cisneros doesn't feel there are any advantages to being a daughter.
- T/F   F   Her father didn't want her to go to college.
- T/F   T   Her father often announces that he has seven sons (not specifying that one of his children is a female).
- List two examples of details Cisneros includes in this essay that illustrate how she felt treated differently by her father because she is a daughter.

*Answers will vary.*