An important part of becoming an adult is learning to stand up for yourself and maintain your convictions. In “The Rights to the Streets of Memphis,” Richard Wright recalls an episode from his early childhood when he was threatened by a neighborhood gang.

**DISCUSS** What would draw you to a rally or make you speak out in a crowd? With a small group, generate a list of issues or values that you would defend at any cost. Why is each one so important to you? Choose a spokesperson to present the one your group cares about the most.
Meet the Author

Richard Wright
1908–1960

A Hard Beginning
Richard Wright’s life began in poverty. His father, a Mississippi sharecropper, abandoned his family when Wright was five. His mother, a teacher, had to support herself and her children. Because his family moved often and his mother became ill, Wright attended school irregularly. He dropped out of high school after only a few weeks and then traveled the country, working at odd jobs. Brilliant but troubled, he read widely. He also wrote powerful stories that earned him respect and recognition.

French Citizenship
After establishing himself as a writer with the success of his novel Native Son, Wright moved to France in 1947 to get away from the racism he had experienced in the United States. He settled in Paris and became a French citizen, continuing to write until his death.

Background to the Selection
Memphis in the Early 1900s
This excerpt from Wright’s autobiography Black Boy deals with a time when Wright was living in a tenement in Memphis, Tennessee. In the early 1900s, African Americans experienced harsh economic conditions in Memphis and other cities throughout the South. Federal welfare efforts, such as subsidized housing, food stamps, and aid to dependent children, did not exist. Most of the jobs available to black men and women paid very low wages. Like Wright’s mother, many black women worked as poorly paid domestic servants.

Literary Analysis: Autobiography
An autobiography is the story of a person’s life, written by that person. Writers of autobiographies generally use the same narrative techniques that are found in fiction. This makes the events they relate come to life for the reader. As you read “The Rights to the Streets of Memphis,” notice how Richard Wright employs these and other narrative techniques:
• describes the conflict he faced
• builds suspense as events reach a climax
• uses realistic dialogue to reveal events and personalities

Reading Skill: Identify Cause and Effect
Writers of autobiographies often explain the causes and effects of important events in their lives in order to help readers understand the full significance of their experiences. For example, to describe the magnitude of his hunger, Wright explains:

The hunger I had known before this . . . had made me beg constantly for bread. . . . But this new hunger . . . scared me . . .

Recognizing cause-and-effect organizational patterns helps you connect events and make inferences and draw conclusions about important ideas in the narrative.

As you read Wright’s autobiography, jot down the cause-and-effect relationships he points out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father leaves.</td>
<td>Family is without food.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vocabulary in Context
Use an appropriate vocabulary word to complete each phrase. Then, in your Reader/Writer Notebook, write a brief definition of each word you’re familiar with.

**Word List**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>clamor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dispirited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retaliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stark</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. ______________, absolute fear
2. a loud ______________
3. ______________ with a whip
4. ______________, or get even
5. depressed and ______________

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent. Whenever I begged for food now my mother would pour me a cup of tea which would still the clamor in my stomach for a moment or two; but a little later I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached. I would grow dizzy and my vision would dim. I became less active in my play, and for the first time in my life I had to pause and think of what was happening to me.

“Mama, I’m hungry,” I complained one afternoon.
“Jump up and catch a kungry,” she said, trying to make me laugh and forget.
“What’s a kungry?”
“It’s what little boys eat when they get hungry,” she said.
“What does it taste like?”
“I don’t know.”
“Then why do you tell me to catch one?”
“Because you said that you were hungry,” she said, smiling. I sensed that she was teasing me, and it made me angry.
“But I’m hungry. I want to eat.”
“You’ll have to wait.”
“But I want to eat now.”
“But there’s nothing to eat,” she told me.
“Why?”
“Just because there’s none,” she explained.
“But I want to eat,” I said, beginning to cry.
“You’ll just have to wait,” she said again.
“But why?”
“For God to send some food.”
“When is He going to send it?”
“I don’t know.”
“But I’m hungry!”
She was ironing, and she paused and looked at me with tears in her eyes.
“Where’s your father?” she asked me.

I stared in bewilderment. Yes, it was true that my father had not come home to sleep for many days now and I could make as much noise as I wanted. Though I had not known why he was absent, I had been glad that he was not there to shout his restrictions at me. But it had never occurred to me that his absence would mean that there would be no food.

“I don’t know,” I said.
“Who brings food into the house?” my mother asked me.

“Papa,” I said. “He always brought food.”
“Well, your father isn’t here now,” she said.
“Where is he?”
“I don’t know,” she said.
“But I’m hungry,” I whimpered, stomping my feet.
“You’ll have to wait until I get a job and buy food,” she said.

As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness.1

My mother finally went to work as a cook and left me and my brother alone in the flat each day with a loaf of bread and a pot of tea. When she returned at evening she would be tired and dispirited and would cry a lot. Sometimes, when she was in despair, she would call us to her and talk to us for hours, telling us that we now had no father, that our lives would be different from those of other children, that we must learn as soon as possible to take care of ourselves, to dress ourselves, to prepare our own food; that we must take upon ourselves the responsibility of the flat while she worked. Half frightened, we

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1. deep, biological bitterness: bitterness caused by the pangs of hunger.
would promise solemnly. We did not understand what had happened between our father and our mother and the most that these long talks did to us was to make us feel a vague dread. Whenever we asked why father had left, she would tell us that we were too young to know.

One evening my mother told me that thereafter I would have to do the shopping for food. She took me to the corner store to show me the way. I was proud; I felt like a grownup. The next afternoon I looped the basket over my arm and went down the pavement toward the store. When I reached the corner, a gang of boys grabbed me, knocked me down, snatched the basket, took the money, and sent me running home in panic. That evening I told my mother what had happened, but she made no comment; she sat down at once, wrote another note, gave me more money, and sent me out to the grocery again. I crept down the steps and saw the same gang of boys playing down the street. I ran back into the house.

“What’s the matter?” my mother asked.

“It’s those same boys,” I said. “They’ll beat me.”

“You’ve got to get over that,” she said. “Now, go on.”

“I’m scared,” I said.

“Go on and don’t pay any attention to them,” she said.

I went out of the door and walked briskly down the sidewalk, praying that the gang would not molest me. But when I came abreast of them someone shouted.

“There he is!”

They came toward me and I broke into a wild run toward home. They overtook me and flung me to the pavement. I yelled, pleaded, kicked, but they wrenched the money out of my hand. They yanked me to my feet, gave me a few slaps, and sent me home sobbing. My mother met me at the door.

“They b-beat m-me,” I gasped. “They t-t-took the m-money.”

I started up the steps, seeking the shelter of the house.

“Don’t you come in here,” my mother warned me.

I froze in my tracks and stared at her.

“But they’re coming after me,” I said.

“You just stay right where you are,” she said in a deadly tone. “I’m going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself.”

She went into the house and I waited, terrified, wondering what she was about. Presently she returned with more money and another note; she also had a long heavy stick.

“Take this money, this note, and this stick,” she said. “Go to the store and buy those groceries. If those boys bother you, then fight.”

I was baffled. My mother was telling me to fight, a thing that she had never done before.

“But I’m scared,” I said.

“Don’t you come into this house until you’ve gotten those groceries,” she said.
“They’ll beat me; they’ll beat me,” I said.
“Then stay in the streets; don’t come back here!”
I ran up the steps and tried to force my way past her into the house. A stinging slap came on my jaw. I stood on the sidewalk, crying.
“Please, let me wait until tomorrow,” I begged.
“No,” she said. “Go now! If you come back into this house without those groceries, I’ll whip you!”
She slammed the door and I heard the key turn in the lock. I shook with fright. I was alone upon the dark, hostile streets and gangs were after me. I had the choice of being beaten at home or away from home. I clutched the stick, crying, trying to reason. If I were beaten at home, there was absolutely nothing that I could do about it; but if I were beaten in the streets, I had a chance to fight and defend myself. I walked slowly down the sidewalk, coming closer to the gang of boys, holding the stick tightly. I was so full of fear that I could scarcely breathe. I was almost upon them now.
“There he is again!” the cry went up.
They surrounded me quickly and began to grab for my hand.
“I’ll kill you!” I threatened.
They closed in. In blind fear I let the stick fly, feeling it crack against a boy’s skull. I swung again, lamming another skull, then another. Realizing that they would retaliate if I let up for but a second, I fought to lay them low, to knock them cold, to kill them so that they could not strike back at me. I flayed with tears in my eyes, teeth clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow. I hit again and again, dropping the money and the grocery list. The boys scattered, yelling, nursing their heads, staring at me in utter disbelief. They had never seen such frenzy. I stood panting, egging them on, taunting them to come on and fight. When they refused, I ran after them and they tore out for their homes, screaming. The parents of the boys rushed into the streets and threatened me, and for the first time in my life I shouted at grownups, telling them that I would give them the same if they bothered me. I finally found my grocery list and the money and went to the store. On my way back I kept my stick poised for instant use, but there was not a single boy in sight. That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis.
Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why does Richard’s mother have no food for him?

2. **Recall** What choice does Richard have to make?

3. **Clarify** What does the **title** refer to?

Literary Analysis

4. **Identify Cause and Effect** Review the cause-and-effect relationships you listed as you read. What are the main causes of Richard’s predicament?

5. **Examine Language** Reread lines 1–10 and note the words and phrases that Wright uses to make hunger seem human. What effect does this **personification** have on the reader?

6. **Analyze Dialogue** Wright not only narrates events but also uses dialogue to bring a sense of reality to his narrative. Review the conversations between Wright and his mother. What does it suggest about their relationship and the way it changes?

7. **Predict** Reread the last paragraph of the selection. Will Richard be different after fighting the street gang? Cite evidence to support your prediction.

8. **Interpret Autobiography** In an autobiography, the writer must choose which life experiences to include and which to leave out. In your opinion, why did Wright choose to share this particular episode in his life? Support your opinion.

9. **Evaluate Narrative Techniques** Find examples of each narrative technique listed in the graphic shown. Which narrative techniques does Wright make the best use of in this autobiography? Explain your evaluation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describes conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses believable dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Builds suspense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develops personalities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Literary Criticism

10. **Critical Interpretations** When this autobiography was published in 1945, a critic wrote, “It is not easy for those who have had happier childhoods, with little restraint or fear in them, to face up to the truth of this childhood of Richard Wright.” Do you agree with this statement? Explain why or why not.

**What is worth FIGHTING FOR?**

What are the issues or values that you would fight to defend?
Vocabulary in Context

**VOCABULARY PRACTICE**

Write the word from the list that best completes each sentence.

1. Alone and hungry, Richard felt ____ as he walked the streets.
2. He knew it would be hard to rise above his family’s ____ poverty.
3. He tried to concentrate amid the ____ as several older boys shouted at him.
4. If they tried to harm him, he intended to ____ immediately.
5. He would ____ them with his stick if necessary.

**ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING**

- analyze  •  element  •  infer  •  sequence  •  structure

**WORD LIST**

- clamor
- dispirited
- flay
- retaliate
- stark

**VOCABULARY STRATEGY: SYNONYMS AND ANTONYMS**

**Synonyms** are words with the same, or almost the same, meaning. **Antonyms** are words with opposite meanings. Recognizing synonyms and antonyms can help you figure out the meanings of unknown words. For example, Wright says his mother felt “tired and dispirited.” Though **tired** is not an exact synonym of **dispirited**, it is close enough in meaning to help you figure out what **dispirited** means.

**PRACTICE** In each sentence, the boldfaced word is either a synonym or an antonym of the underlined word. Use the boldfaced word to help you figure out the meaning of the underlined word. Then write a definition of the underlined word. You may consult a thesaurus for help determining whether the words in each pair are synonyms or antonyms.

1. The table was **overflowing** with **bountiful** platters of food.
2. Though Alice was **nonplused** by his remarks, I was **unsurprised**.
3. The **affluent** Henleys were sometimes shunned by their **poorer** neighbors.
4. She wasn’t **deceiving** anyone with her **prevaricating**.
5. **Intransigence** and **stubbornness** won’t help us overcome this problem.
Conventions in Writing

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Use Subjunctive Mood

Review the Grammar and Style note on page 122. There, Wright uses the subjunctive mood to express the possibilities he faces after his mother sends him out to face the gang of boys again. You can use the subjunctive mood to express any of the following:

1. Doubts: If I were able to attend the celebration, I would.
2. Wishes: Kirk wishes that he had curly hair.
3. Possibilities: If I were a better swimmer, I could try out for the swim team.
4. Necessities: It is essential that we be on time for school tomorrow.

Notice how the revisions in blue make use of the subjunctive mood to express both possibilities and necessities.

STUDENT MODEL

If he were timid, he would not be able to survive on the streets of Memphis. It was necessary for him to act brave.

If he were timid, he would not be able to survive on the streets of Memphis. It was necessary for him to act brave.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION

Demonstrate your understanding of the characters in “The Rights to the Streets of Memphis” by responding to this prompt. Then use the revising tip to improve your writing.

WRITING PROMPT

Short Response: Write a Different Conclusion
How might things have been different if Richard had not been victorious? Imagine that Richard lost the fight and the grocery money despite his strong convictions. Then write one or two paragraphs about his defeat and its consequences.

REVISING TIP

Review your response. Have you used the subjunctive mood appropriately, where needed? If not, revise your response.

Interactive Revision
Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML9-125