

# Comprehension

## Genre

An **Autobiographical Story** tells of a specific period of a person's life written and often embellished by that person.



## Evaluate

### Author's Purpose

As you read, use your Author's Purpose Chart.

Clues	Author's Purpose

## Read to Find Out

How does Francisco's drive help him succeed?





# BREAKING THROUGH

by Francisco Jiménez



**F**rancisco Jiménez has written several books about growing up in California after leaving Mexico. In this chapter, he writes about a special teacher and how she helped him to learn to enjoy reading, a discovery that changed his life.

**A**t the end of my freshman year,

I received good grades in all subjects except English, even though I had worked the hardest in it. Writing was difficult for me. My freshman English teacher told me that my writing was weak. She suggested that I read more, that reading would improve my writing. “At least read the newspaper every day,” she told me. “Read for enjoyment.” I had little time to read. I read only for information for my classes, and I could barely keep up. Besides, we had no reading material at home and we didn’t get the newspaper. I never got more free time to read all during high school, but I did learn to read for enjoyment. It happened in my sophomore year, in English class.

Miss Audrey Bell, my teacher, had a **reputation** for being hard. When she walked into the class the first day and wrote her name on the board, I heard moans from classmates sitting next to me. “I am sunk!” one of them said. “Hello, F,” another **uttered**. Now I was even more worried.

Miss Bell had a round face, a small turned-up nose, full lips, and lively blue eyes, and she wore wire-rimmed glasses. Her smile never left her, even when she was upset. When she wrote on the board, her upper arm shook like jelly, just like Mamá’s arms. The back of her hands were covered with small brown spots the size of raisins, and her shiny nails looked like the wings of red beetles. She teased students and often made comments that made the class laugh. I laughed too, even though sometimes I did not understand her jokes.

No one laughed at her homework assignments, though. Every week she gave us vocabulary and spelling lists and a poem to memorize. I wrote the poems on notecards and attached them to the broom handle or placed them in my shirt pocket and memorized them as I cleaned the offices after school. I did the same thing with spelling and vocabulary words. I had a harder time with reading and writing. I was a slow reader and often had to read each assignment twice. At times my mind wandered off as I worried about Papá.





**A typical school and  
classroom from the 1950s**



When we discussed the readings in class, I was surprised to find out that I had not really understood what I read.

Writing was even more difficult for me. Miss Bell asked us to write short compositions analyzing short stories we read for class. I was happy whenever I understood the plot and summarized it, but this was not good enough. “Don’t tell me the story,” she would say, smiling. “I know it. I want you to analyze it.” I thought I knew what she meant, so in my next composition I wrote about the lesson I learned from reading the story. I hoped this was what she wanted. The stories I had heard from Papá and Mamá, Tío Mauricio, and other **migrant** workers all had a lesson in them about right and wrong, like “La Llorona,” “The Boy and His Grandfather,” or “The Three Brothers.”

When Miss Bell returned our compositions, I fixed my eyes on the stack of papers as she walked around the aisles passing them out, trying to spot mine. The one with the most writing in red was sure to be mine. My papers always came back looking as though she had poured red ink on them. My heart pounded faster with each step she took toward me. She grinned as she handed me my paper. I quickly grabbed it. It had fewer corrections than my previous papers, but the grade was only a disappointing C. I stuck it in my binder, and for the rest of the class I had a hard time concentrating. During study hall, I took out the paper. She had written “Good progress” at the bottom of it. I felt better. I then went over the corrections carefully to make sure I understood them. I did not want to make the same mistakes in my next writing assignment, which Miss Bell announced the following day.



### Author's Purpose

Why does the author focus on his writing skills?



“Our next unit is on autobiography, the history of a person’s life written or told by that person,” she explained. “So for your next composition, I want you to write about a personal experience, something that happened to you.” I liked the assignment, but it was harder than I expected. I thought of writing about being deported, but I did not want my teacher to know that my family had crossed the border **illegally** and that I was born in Mexico.

An idea finally came to me late that evening. As I was sitting at the kitchen table trying to figure out what to write, Trampita entered the room, pulling up his white shorts. “What are you doing up?” I asked.



Francisco, José Francisco (Trampita),  
and Roberto, Tent City, Santa Maria, California



Papá, Trampita, and neighbor Don Pancho at Bonetti Ranch, Santa Maria, California

“I am getting a glass of water,” he responded, half asleep. His small body cast a thin shadow on the wall. We called him “Trampita,” “little tramp,” because Mamá had dressed him in baby clothes we found in the city dump. As he passed me on his way back to bed, I noticed his bulging navel, the size of an egg, that had **ruptured** when he was a few months old.

We had been living in a farm labor camp in Santa Rosa. It was winter. Papá and Mamá worked at an apple cannery at night and left Roberto to take care of Trampita and me while they were gone. One evening, before leaving for work, Mamá prepared the milk bottle for Trampita and laid him on a wide



mattress that was on the dirt floor. After my parents left, Roberto and I sat on the mattress and told ghost stories until we got sleepy. We said our prayers and went to bed next to Trampita. We kept our clothes on because it was freezing cold. At dawn, we woke up, frightened by our parents' screams. "Where's Trampita?" Mamá cried out. "Where is he?" Papá shouted. They had terror in their eyes when they saw Trampita was gone.

"I don't know, Mamá," Roberto stuttered, shivering from the cold. Papá noticed an opening at the foot of the tent near the mattress. He rushed out. Seconds later he returned with Trampita in his arms. My baby brother was stiff and purple.



(left) José Francisco (Trampita) and Roberto, picking plums in Orosi, California. (right) José Francisco



I decided to write about that experience. I wrote three drafts, making sure I did not make any mistakes. I turned it in feeling confident. When I got my paper back, I was disappointed to see the red marks again. I had made a few errors. I felt worse when I read Miss Bell's note at the bottom of the paper, asking me to see her after class. *She must be pretty upset with the mistakes I made*, I thought. I half listened to what she said during the rest of class. When class was over, I waited until everyone had left the room before I approached her, folding the paper in half to hide the red marks.

"Is what you wrote a true story?" Miss Bell asked.

"Yes," I answered, feeling anxious.

"I thought so," she said, smiling. "It's a very moving story. Did your brother die?"

"Oh, no!" I exclaimed. "He almost did, but God saved him. He rolled off the mattress, landed outside the tent, and cried so much that he hurt his navel."

"His hernia must have really hurt," she said thoughtfully. "I am sorry." She looked away and cleared her throat. "Now, let's look at your paper." I handed it to her, lowering my head. "You're making a lot of progress," she said. "Your writing shows promise. If you're able to overcome the difficulties like the one you described in your paper and you continue working as hard as you have, you're going to succeed." She gave me back the paper and added, "Here, take it home, make the corrections, and turn it in to me tomorrow after class."

"I will. Thank you, Miss Bell." I floated out of the room, thinking about how lucky I was to be in her class. She reminded me of Mr. Lema, my sixth-grade teacher, who had helped me with English during the lunch hour.

That evening when I got home I worked on the paper. I looked at the mistakes I had made and corrected them, following Miss Bell's suggestions. As I retyped it on the kitchen table, Mamá came over and sat next to me. "It's late, Panchito," she said softly. "Time for bed."



An old typewriter  
from the 1950s

"I am almost finished."

"What are you working on, *mijo*?"

"It's a paper I wrote for my English class on Trampita. My teacher liked it," I said proudly.

"On Trampita!" she exclaimed.

She got up and stood behind me. She placed her hands on my shoulders and asked me to read it. When I finished, I felt her tears on the back of my neck.

The next day after class I turned in my revised paper to Miss Bell. She glanced at it, placed it on a pile of papers on her desk, and picked up a book. "Have you read *The Grapes of Wrath*?" she asked. "It's a wonderful novel by John Steinbeck."

"No," I said, wondering what the word *wrath* meant.

"I'd like for you to read it." She handed it to me. "I think you'll enjoy it. You can read it for your book report."

*When am I going to find time to read such a thick book?* I thought, running my fingers along its spine. I was planning to read a smaller book for my report. Miss Bell must have noticed the pain in my face because she added, "And you'll get extra credit because it's a long book." I felt better.



“Thanks!” I said. “It’ll give me a chance to improve my grade.” Her gentle smile reminded me of Mamá and the blessing she gave every morning when I left the house.

After my last class, I picked up the books and binders I needed from my locker and walked to the public library to study before going to work at five o’clock. I double-checked to make sure I had the novel with me. On the way, I kept thinking about how I was going to get through such a long book. I felt its weight on my shoulders and the back of my neck. I **quicken**ed my pace, passing students left and right. The honking of car horns from students cruising by sounded far away. I rushed into the library and went straight to my table in the left back corner, away from the main desk. I piled my books and binders on the table.

I took a deep breath, picked up the novel, and placed it in front of me. I grabbed my worn-out pocket dictionary from the stack and set it next to it. I muttered the title, “*The Grapes of Wrath*.” The word *grapes* reminded me of working in the vineyards for Mr. Sullivan in Fresno. I looked up the word *wrath* and thought of the anger I felt when I lost my blue notepad, my *librito*, in a fire in Orosi. I began reading. It was difficult; I had to look up many words, but I kept on reading. I wanted to learn more about the Joad family, who had to leave their home in Oklahoma to look for work and a better life in California. I lost track of time. Before I knew it, five o’clock had passed. I was late for work.

When I got home that evening, I continued reading until one o’clock in the morning. That night I dreamed that my family was packing to move to Fresno to pick grapes. “We don’t have to move anymore! I have to go to school!” I kept yelling, but Papá and Mamá could not hear me. I woke up exhausted.



### Author’s Purpose

What is the author’s purpose in describing Francisco’s fascination with the book?

Saturday night I skipped the school dance and stayed home to read more of the novel. I kept struggling with the reading, but I could not put it down. I finally understood what Miss Bell meant when she told me to read for enjoyment. I could relate to what I was reading. The Joad family was poor and traveled from place to place in an old jalopy, looking for work. They picked grapes and cotton and lived in labor camps similar to the ones we lived in, like Tent City in Santa Maria. Ma Joad

was like Mamá and Pa Joad was a lot like Papá. Even though they were not Mexican and spoke only English, they had many of the same experiences as my family. I felt for them. I got angry with the growers who **mistreated** them and was glad when Tom Joad protested and fought for their rights. He reminded me of my friend Don Gabriel, the *bracero* who stood up to Díaz, the labor contractor, who tried to force Don Gabriel to pull a plow like an ox.

After I finished reading the novel, I could not get it out of my mind. I thought about it for days, even after I had turned in the book report to Miss Bell. She must have liked what I wrote, because she gave me a good grade. My success made me happy, but, this time, the grade seemed less important than what I had learned from reading the book.



Francisco, freshman at Santa Maria High School



# Meet the Author

**Francisco Jiménez's** family came to the United States from Mexico as migrant workers when he was four years old. Francisco worked in the fields, too. When he started school, he found it hard because he did not speak or understand English. He even failed first grade. But he soon realized that learning and knowledge were important. When he started writing, he wrote about how it felt to grow up in two cultures. Today he is a professor of modern languages at a university in California.



**Francisco Jiménez**



Find out more about  
Francisco Jiménez at  
[www.macmillanmh.com](http://www.macmillanmh.com)

## Author's Purpose

The author wants to persuade readers of the power of education, entertain readers with a story, and inform readers about migrant workers in the 1950s. Give an example from the story of each purpose.



# Comprehension Check

## Summarize

Summarize what happens in *Breaking Through*. Miss Bell suggests that reading will help improve a person's writing skills. How does her suggestion shape the events in the story?

## Think and Compare



1. Why does the author choose to tell about his time in Miss Bell's class? Use the Author's Purpose Chart to help you support your answer.

**Evaluate: Author's Purpose**

Clues	Author's Purpose

2. The narrator has a **reputation** for performing inadequately on written assignments. What is he doing or not doing in his writing that causes Miss Bell to give him only fair grades? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. **Analyze**
3. The teacher asks Francisco to read *The Grapes of Wrath* for his book report. What book has had the greatest impact on how you think and act? How did it change your ideas? **Apply**
4. How can writing change how people view themselves, other people, and the world? **Evaluate**
5. Read "My Friend Mateo" on pages 482-483. How are Mateo's family and the narrator's family in *Breaking Through* similar? **Reading/Writing Across Texts**