

The Rights to the Streets of Memphis

Autobiography by Richard Wright

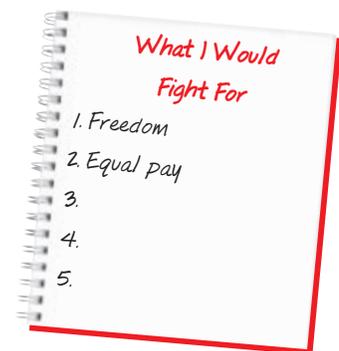
What is worth **FIGHTING FOR?**

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RI 3** Analyze how the author unfolds a series of events, including how they are introduced and developed and the connections that are drawn between them. **RI 4** Determine the figurative meaning of phrases as they are used in a text.

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.



● TEXT 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.

Cause	Effect
Father leaves.	Family is without food.

▲ 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	clamor	flay	stark
	dispirited	retaliate	

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*.

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.



Author
Online



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THE RIGHTS TO THE Streets OF Memphis

RICHARD WRIGHT

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
10 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. **A**

“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?”

20 “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.”

Analyze Visuals ▶

What impressions of tenement life does the painting on page 119 convey?

clamor (klām’ər) *n.* a noisy outburst; outcry

COMMON CORE RI.1

A CAUSE AND EFFECT

After only the first paragraph, you can already begin drawing conclusions about Wright’s early life and the ideas he expresses in this autobiography. At this point, what cause-and-effect relationship did Wright start to recognize? Cite evidence in your response.

Alley (1942), Jacob Lawrence. Courtesy of Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries. © 2007 Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



“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.

30 “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.

40 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.

50 “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?”

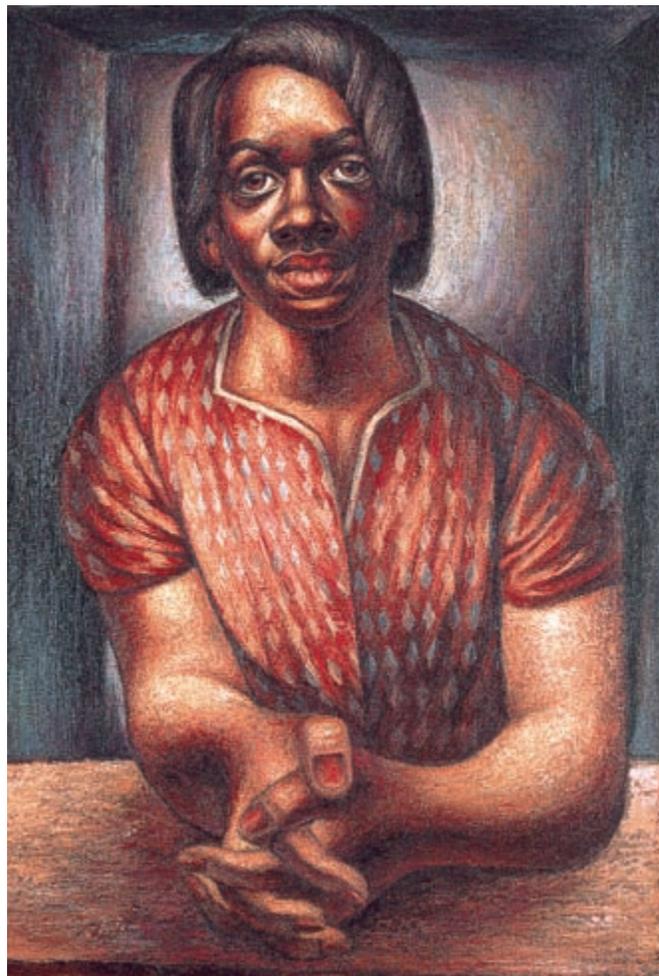
“I don’t know,” she said.

“But I’m hungry,” I whimpered, stomping my feet.

“You’ll have to wait until I get a job and buy food,” she said. **B**

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

60 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



Woman Worker (1951), Charles White. © 1951 The Charles White Archive.

B AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Reread lines 39–56.

What life-changing event does Wright reveal through **dialogue**?

dispirited (dĭ-spĭr'ĭ-tĭd)
adj. dejected

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
70 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
80 again. I crept down the steps and saw the same gang of boys playing down the street. I ran back into the house. **C**

“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.

90 “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. **D**

“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.

100 “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.

110 “Don’t you come into this house until you’ve gotten those groceries,” she said.

C AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Why do you suppose Wright includes such specific details about this experience?

D GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 91–94. Wright uses **strong verbs in a series**—like *yelled*, *pleaded*, and *kicked*—to help readers visualize the attack.

COMMON CORE RI.4

Language Coach

Idioms An **idiom** is an expression that cannot be understood literally. In lines 102–103, the expression “what she was about” is an idiomatic expression. Based on the clues in the story, what do you think this idiom means?

“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!”

120 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.

130 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
140 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.  **E**

retaliate (rĭ-tăĭ’ĕ-ăt’) v. to pay back an injury in kind

flay (flā) v. to whip or lash

stark (stărk) *adj.* complete or utter; extreme

E CAUSE AND EFFECT

What effect did the fighting have on Wright’s personality?

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?

Text 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? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
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.

Techniques	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes conflict • Uses believable dialogue • Builds suspense • Develops personalities 	

Text 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?

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. **RI 3** Analyze how the author unfolds a series of events, including how they are introduced and developed and the connections that are drawn between them.

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.

WORD LIST

clamor
dispirited
flay
retaliate
stark

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

- analyze
- element
- infer
- sequence
- structure

Analyze the selection to **infer**, or make an educated guess, about how old Wright was when this incident happened. Discuss your guess with a partner, providing evidence from the text for support. Use at least one of the Academic Vocabulary words in your response.

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.

COMMON CORE

L.4c Consult specialized reference materials to clarify a word's meaning.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central

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Language

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Emphasize Action

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 121. There, Wright uses **strong verbs in a series** to emphasize the actions taking place. By incorporating similar techniques into your own writing, you can help readers to easily visualize events, as Wright does.

Here is another example from the story:

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.
(lines 75–77)

Now study this model. Notice how the revisions in blue make the sentence much stronger, yet still concise. Revise your response to the prompt below by using the same techniques.

STUDENT MODEL

To help her son survive, Mrs. Wright ~~used several tactics to make~~ *urged, commanded, and finally compelled*
~~him~~ *to* face his deepest fears.

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

Extended Constructed Response: Interpretation

Mrs. Wright left her two young sons alone during the day. She ordered Richard to bring home groceries even if he has to fight a gang to do so. Why did she act as she did? Write a **three-to-five-paragraph response**, describing her actions and explaining her motives.

REVISING TIP

Review your response. Have you used strong verbs to describe Mrs. Wright’s actions? Have you explained the reasons for her actions? If not, revise your response.

COMMON CORE

L 3 Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for meaning or style.
W 5 Strengthen writing by revising, focusing on what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

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