

The School Play

Short Story by Gary Soto

What do you FEAR most?

Have you ever jumped at the sight of a harmless bug? Or, maybe you have waited a long time to ride a roller coaster only to change your mind when it was your turn. Things that frighten people range from big to small, from living to nonliving, from the seen to the unseen. In “The School Play,” a student struggles to overcome a fear many people face.

SURVEY What are you most afraid of? Some of the most common fears people have are listed in the survey in the side column. Rank the fears from one to ten, with one being the thing you are most afraid of. Then survey the class to find out what is the most common fear in your classroom.

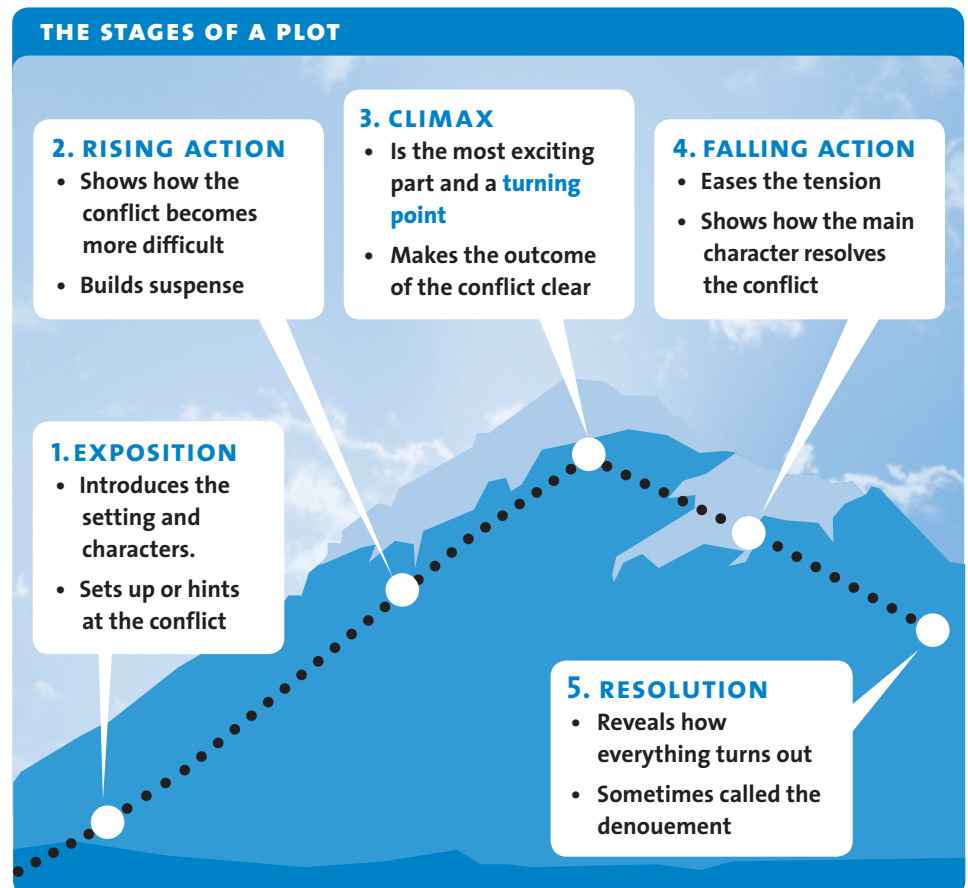
Face Your Fears!

Rank the following fears 1–10 to see what scares you the most:

- _____ Heights
- _____ Spiders and Insects
- _____ Being in the Dark
- _____ Dentists
- _____ Thunder and Lightning
- _____ Failing a Test
- _____ Being Bullied
- _____ Airplane Rides
- _____ Public Speaking
- _____ Being in a Crowd

Text Analysis: Plot Elements

Everything in a story happens for a reason. The series of events is the story’s **plot**. The plot usually follows a pattern, as shown in this graphic.



As you read “The School Play,” notice the events that occur in each stage of the story’s plot.

Reading Strategy: Monitor

Have you ever forgotten what you just read? To avoid this problem, **monitor** your reading by pausing occasionally to check your understanding. One way to monitor is to ask yourself questions about what you are reading. Sometimes you'll need to reread to find the answer. Other times you'll find the answer later on in the story.

As you read "The School Play," record questions about what is happening in the story in a chart like the one shown.

My Questions	Answers
<i>What is inside the cardboard box?</i>	

Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order in which they appear in the story.

prop (prɒp) *n.* an object an actor uses in a play

*The main **prop** in the play is a map of the West.*

smirk (smûrk) *v.* to smile in an insulting way

*Belinda wanted to **smirk** when the actor forgot his lines.*

relentless (rĭ-lĕnt'ľs) *adj.* refusing to stop or give up

*The audience's **relentless** talking distracts the actors.*

narrative (nă-r'ə-tĭv) *n.* a story

*Robert's friend delivers the **narrative** about the background of the play.*

Vocabulary Practice

Review the vocabulary words and think about their meanings. Then write a prediction about the conflict you think the main character of "The School Play" will face.



SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

Read this short story to discover how one young actor deals with his stage fright.

THE SCHOOL PLAY

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BACKGROUND In this story, sixth-grade students perform a play about a group of settlers known as the Donner Party. While trying to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains in eastern California, the Donner Party was trapped in a snowstorm. The travelers ran out of food and some died of starvation. In desperation, some group members ate the bodies of the dead.

A PLOT: EXPOSITION

Pause at line 10. What background information have you learned about Robert? Circle what you learn about Belinda.

In the school play at the end of his sixth-grade year, all Robert Suarez had to remember to say was, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” to a pioneer woman, who was really Belinda Lopez. Instead of a pioneer woman, Belinda was one of the toughest girls since the beginning of the world. She was known to slap boys and grind their faces into the grass so that they bit into chunks of wormy earth. More than once Robert had witnessed Belinda staring down the janitor’s pit bull, who licked his frothing chops but didn’t
10 dare mess with her. **A**



The class rehearsed for three weeks, at first without costumes. Early one morning Mrs. Bunnin wobbled into the classroom lugging a large cardboard box. She wiped her brow and said, "Thanks for the help, Robert."

Robert was at his desk scribbling a ballpoint tattoo that spelled DUDE on the tops of his knuckles. He looked up and stared, blinking at his teacher. "Oh, did you need some help?" he asked.

20 She rolled her eyes at him and told him to stop writing on his skin. "You'll look like a criminal," she scolded.

Robert stuffed his hands into his pockets as he rose from his seat. "What's in the box?" he asked.

She muttered under her breath. She popped open the taped top and brought out skirts, hats, snowshoes, scarves, and vests. She tossed Robert a red beard, which he held up to his face, thinking it made him look handsome.

"I like it," Robert said. He sneezed and ran his hand across his moist nose.

30 His classmates were coming into the classroom and looked at Robert in awe. "That's bad," Ruben said. "What do I get?"

Mrs. Bunnin threw him a wrinkled shirt. Ruben raised it to his chest and said, "My dad could wear this. Can I give it to him after the play is done?"

Mrs. Bunnin turned away in silence. **PAUSE & REFLECT**

Most of the actors didn't have speaking parts. They just got cutout crepe-paper snowflakes to pin to their shirts or crepe-paper leaves to wear.

40 During the blizzard in which Robert delivered his line, Belinda asked, "Is there something wrong with your eyes?" Robert looked at the audience, which at the moment was a classroom of empty chairs, a dented world globe that had been dropped by almost everyone, one limp flag, one

PAUSE & REFLECT

Reread lines 19–35. Underline words and phrases that tell what Mrs. Bunnin is like. What kind of relationship does Mrs. Bunnin have with her students? Use words that you've underlined in your response.



Monitor Your Comprehension

prop (prŏp) *n.* an object an actor uses in a play

B PLOT: RISING ACTION

Reread lines 50–66. What **conflict**, or struggle, is developing?

smirk (smûrk) *v.* to smile in an insulting way

Why does Belinda **smirk**?

C MONITOR

What is the actual line Belinda is supposed to say?

wastebasket, and a picture of George Washington, whose eyes followed you around the room when you got up to sharpen your pencil. Robert answered, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

Mrs. Bunnin, biting on the end of her pencil, said, “Louder, both of you.”

50 Belinda stepped up, nostrils flaring so that the shadows on her nose quivered, and said louder, “Sucka, is there something wrong with your eye-balls?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

“Louder! Make sure the audience can hear you,” Mrs. Bunnin directed. She tapped her pencil hard against the desk. She scolded, “Robert, I’m not going to tell you again to quit fooling with the beard.”

“It’s itchy.”

“We can’t do anything about that. Actors need **props**.
60 You’re an actor. Now try again.”

Robert and Belinda stood center stage as they waited for Mrs. Bunnin to call “Action!” When she did, Belinda approached Robert slowly. “Sucka face, is there anything wrong with your mug?” Belinda asked. Her eyes were squinted in anger. For a moment Robert saw his head grinding into the playground grass. **B**

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

Robert giggled behind his red beard. Belinda popped her gum and **smirked**. She stood with her hands on her hips.

70 “What? What did you say?” Mrs. Bunnin asked, pulling off her glasses. “Are you chewing gum, Belinda?”

“No, Mrs. Bunnin,” Belinda lied. “I just forgot my lines.” **C**

Belinda turned to face the snowflake boys clumped together in the back. She rolled out her tongue, on which rested a ball of gray gum, depleted of sweetness under her



relentless chomp. She whispered “sucka” and giggled so that her nose quivered dark shadows.

The play, *The Last Stand*, was about the Donner party just before they got hungry and started eating each other. Everyone who scored at least twelve out of fifteen on their spelling tests got to say at least one line. Everyone else had to stand and be trees or snowflakes.

Mrs. Bunnin wanted the play to be a success. She couldn’t risk having kids with bad memories on stage. The nonspeaking trees and snowflakes stood humming snow flurries, blistering wind, and hail, which they produced by clacking their teeth.

Robert’s mother was proud of him because he was living up to the legend of Robert De Niro, for whom he was named. Over dinner he said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” when his brother asked him to pass the dishtowel, their communal napkin. His sister said, “It’s your turn to do dishes,” and he said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.” His dog, Queenie, begged him for more than water and a dog biscuit. He touched his dog’s own hairy beard and said, “Nothing’s wrong. I can see.”

One warm spring night, Robert lay on his back in the backyard, counting shooting stars. He was up to three when David, a friend who was really his brother’s friend, hopped the fence and asked, “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I can see,” Robert answered. He sat up, feeling good because the line came naturally, without much thought. He leaned back on his elbow and asked David what he wanted to be when he grew up. **D**

“I don’t know yet,” David said, plucking at the grass. “Maybe a fighter pilot. What do you want to be?”

relentless (rĭ-lĕnt’lĭs) *adj.*
refusing to stop or give up

D MONITOR

Reread lines 89–106. Why does Robert respond with his line when anyone speaks to him at home? Think of a second question to add to the chart below. Look for answers to your questions as you read.

My Questions	
1.	<u>Why is this line so important to Robert?</u>
2.	_____

↓

Answers	
1.	_____

2.	_____



E MONITOR

Reread lines 119–137. Underline words and phrases that reveal how Robert feels the day before the play. List questions that you have about his behavior. You may need to read ahead to find your answers.

My Questions



Answers

“I want to guard the president. I could wrestle the
110 assassins and be on television. But I’d pin those dudes, and
people would say, “That’s him, our hero.”” David plucked at
a stalk of grass and thought deeply.

Robert thought of telling David that he really wanted
to be someone with a supergreat memory, who could
recall facts that most people thought were unimportant.
He didn’t know if there was such a job, but he thought it
would be great to sit at home by the telephone waiting for
scientists to call him and ask hard questions.

The three weeks passed quickly. The day before the play,
120 Robert felt happy as he walked home from school with no
homework. As he turned onto his street, he found a dollar
floating over the currents of wind.

“A buck,” he screamed to himself. He snapped it up and
looked for others. But he didn’t find any more. It was his
lucky day, though. At recess he had hit a home run on a
fluke bunt—a fluke because the catcher had kicked the
ball, another player had thrown it into center field, and the
pitcher wasn’t looking when Robert slowed down at third,
then burst home with dust flying behind him.

130 That night, it was his sister’s turn to do the dishes.
They had eaten enchiladas with the works, so she slaved
with suds up to her elbows. Robert bathed in bubble bath,
the suds peaked high like the Donner Pass. He thought
about how full he was and how those poor people had had
nothing to eat but snow. I can live on nothing, he thought
and whistled like wind through a mountain pass, raking
flat the suds with his palm. **E**

The next day, after lunch, he was ready for the play,
red beard in hand and his one line trembling on his lips.
140 Classes herded into the auditorium. As the actors dressed



and argued about stepping on each other's feet, Robert stood near a cardboard barrel full of toys, whispering over and over to himself, "Nothing's wrong. I can see." He was hot, itchy, and confused when he tied on the beard. He sneezed when a strand of the beard entered his nostril. He said louder, "Nothing's wrong. I can see," but the words seemed to get caught in the beard. "Nothing, no, no. I can see great," he said louder, then under his breath because the words seemed wrong. "Nothing's wrong, can't you see?"

150 Nothing's wrong. I can see you." Worried, he approached Belinda and asked if she remembered his line. Balling her hand into a fist, Belinda warned, "Sucka, I'm gonna bury your ugly face in the ground if you mess up." **F**

"I won't," Robert said as he walked away. He bit a nail and looked into the barrel of toys. A clown's mask stared back at him. He prayed that his line would come back to him. He would hate to disappoint his teacher and didn't like the thought of his face being rubbed into spiky grass.

The curtain parted slightly, and the principal came out smiling onto the stage. She said some words about pioneer history and then, stern faced, warned the audience not to scrape the chairs on the just-waxed floor. The principal then introduced Mrs. Bunnin, who told the audience about how they had rehearsed for weeks.

160

Meanwhile, the class stood quietly in place with lunchtime spaghetti on their breath. They were ready. Belinda had swallowed her gum because she knew this was for real. The snowflakes clumped together and began howling.

170 Robert retied his beard. Belinda, smoothing her skirt, looked at him and said, "If you know what's good for you, you'd better do it right." Robert grew nervous when the curtain parted and his classmates who were assigned to do snow, wind, and hail broke into song.

F PLOT: RISING ACTION

Reread lines 138–153. Underline words and phrases that show that the tension is increasing. Explain why the tension is greater now.



narrative (nă-r'ə-tīv) n. a story

Alfonso stepped forward with his **narrative** about a blot on American history that would live with us forever. He looked at the audience, lost for a minute. He continued by saying that if the Donner party could come back, hungry from not eating for over a hundred years, they would be
180 sorry for what they had done.

The play began with some boys in snowshoes shuffling around the stage, muttering that the blizzard would cut them off from civilization. They looked up, held out their hands, and said in unison,¹ “Snow.” One stepped center stage and said, “I wish I had never left the prairie.” Another one said, “California is just over there.” He pointed, and some of the first graders looked in the direction of the piano.

“What are we going to do?” one kid asked, brushing
190 pretend snow off his vest.

“I’m getting pretty hungry,” another said, rubbing her stomach.

The audience seemed to be following the play. A ribbon of sweat ran down Robert’s face. When his scene came up, he staggered to center stage and dropped to the floor, just as Mrs. Bunnin had said, just as he had seen Robert De Niro do in that movie about a boxer. Belinda, bending over with an “Oh, my,” yanked him up so hard that something clicked in his elbow. She boomed, “Is there
200 anything wrong with your eyes?”

Robert rubbed his elbow, then his eyes, and said, “I can see nothing wrong. Wrong is nothing, I can see.” **G**

“How are we going to get through?” she boomed, wringing her hands together at the audience, some of whom had their mouths taped shut because they were known talkers. “My husband needs a doctor.” The drama

G PLOT: TURNING POINT/CLIMAX

The **climax** is the story’s most exciting moment, when you find out how the problem or conflict will be resolved. Underline the line that Robert delivers during the performance. How is his delivery of the line a turning point in the story?

1. **in unison** (yōō'nī-sən): at the same time.



advanced through snow, wind, and hail that sounded like chattering teeth.

Belinda turned to Robert and muttered, "You mess-up.
210 You're gonna hate life."

But Robert thought he'd done okay. At least, he reasoned to himself, I got the words right. Just not in the right order.

With his part of the play done, he joined the snowflakes and trees, chattering his teeth the loudest. He howled wind like a baying hound and snapped his fingers furiously in a snow flurry. He trembled from the cold.

The play ended with Alfonso saying that if they came back to life, the Donner party would be sorry for eating
220 each other. "It's just not right," he argued. "You gotta suck it up in bad times." **H**

Robert figured that Alfonso was right. He remembered how one day his sister had locked him in the closet and he didn't eat or drink for five hours. When he got out, he hit his sister, but not so hard as to leave a bruise. He then ate three sandwiches and felt a whole lot better.

The cast then paraded up the aisle into the audience. Belinda pinched Robert hard, but only once because she was thinking that it could have been worse. As he passed
230 a smiling and relieved Mrs. Bunnin, she patted Robert's shoulder and said, "Almost perfect."



H PLOT: FALLING ACTION

Pause at line 221. What effect does Robert's delivery of his lines have on the end of the play?



**1 PLOT: RESOLUTION /
DENOUEMENT**

How do Robert, Belinda, and Mrs. Bunnin each feel about Robert's performance?

ROBERT

BELINDA

MRS. BUNNIN

Robert was happy. He'd made it through without passing out from fear. Now the first and second graders were looking at him and clapping. He was sure everyone wondered who the actor was behind that smooth voice and red, red beard. 1

Text Analysis: Plot Elements

The plot of “The School Play” centers on Robert’s fear of forgetting his line. In each box of the chart below, write down the important event or events that happen at each stage of the plot.

2. RISING ACTION

3. CLIMAX

4. FALLING ACTION

1. EXPOSITION

5. RESOLUTION

Review your side-column responses and your completed plot diagram. Do you think the plot of this story is realistic? Why or why not?

Reading Strategy: Monitor

Think about how you monitored your reading of “The School Play.” Evaluate your reading strategy by circling the most accurate response for each statement: N = Never, S = Sometimes, O = Often

I paused to check my understanding. N S O

I wrote questions on my chart about what I was reading. N S O

I answered my questions. N S O

I reread passages silently. N S O

I reread passages aloud. N S O

I looked for answers as I continued reading. N S O

Which aspect of the strategy was most helpful to you? Explain.

What do you FEAR most?

What advice would you give Robert to help him overcome his fear in the future?

Vocabulary Practice

Circle the letter of the word or phrase that has the same, or nearly the same, meaning as the boldfaced word.

1. a thrilling **narrative**: (a) argument, (b) story, (c) debate, (d) notice
2. **prop** for a play: (a) script, (b) costume, (c) object, (d) director
3. **relentless** noise: (a) constant, (b) deafening, (c) frightening, (d) occasional
4. to **smirk** at someone: (a) stare rudely, (b) laugh quietly, (c) yell loudly, (d) smile defiantly

Academic Vocabulary in Speaking

affect

analyze

evidence

impact

provide

TURN AND TALK With a partner, discuss the resolution of “The School Play.” How would the story be **affected** if Robert acted upset as he came offstage? Use at least two Academic Vocabulary words in your response. Definitions for these words are on page 3.

Assessment Practice

DIRECTIONS Use “The School Play” to answer questions 1–6.

- 1 In the exposition of “The School Play” readers learn that Robert is —
 - (A) willing to practice his line over and over
 - (B) distracted by his itchy beard
 - (C) intimidated by his scene partner Belinda
 - (D) interested in U. S. history
- 2 What does Robert do to try to remember his line?
 - (A) He writes it on his hand.
 - (B) He draws a picture of it.
 - (C) He recites it over and over.
 - (D) He dreams about it over and over.
- 3 When you monitor your reading you —
 - (A) check your reading speed
 - (B) pause occasionally to check your understanding
 - (C) visualize the characters and plot
 - (D) predict what will happen next
- 4 The conflict, or problem begins when —
 - (A) Robert does not help Mrs. Bunnin with the props
 - (B) Belinda pops her gum
 - (C) Belinda threatens to hurt Robert if he misspeaks his line
 - (D) Robert forgets his line
- 5 Robert’s conflict is resolved when he —
 - (A) finds a dollar
 - (B) practices his lines with family and friends
 - (C) tries on the red beard
 - (D) says his line without upsetting Belinda or Mrs. Bunnin
- 6 How has Robert changed by the end of the story?
 - (A) He is more critical of himself.
 - (B) He is more critical of Belinda.
 - (C) He is more accepting of himself.
 - (D) He is more accepting of Belinda.