Sample Performance Tasks for Informational Texts: History/Social Studies & Science, Mathematics, and Technical Subjects

- Students compare the similarities and differences in point of view in works by Dee Brown and Evan Connell regarding the Battle of Little Bighorn, analyzing how the authors treat the same event and which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts. [RH.9–10.6]

From Chapter 1: “Their Manners Are Decorous and Praiseworthy”

The decade following establishment of the “permanent Indian frontier” was a bad time for the eastern tribes. The great Cherokee nation had survived more than a hundred years of the white man’s wars, diseases, and whiskey, but now it was to be blotted out. Because the Cherokees numbered several thousands, their removal to the West was planned to be in gradual stages, but the discovery of Appalachian gold within their territory brought on a clamor for their immediate wholesale exodus. During the autumn of 1838, General Winfield Scott’s soldiers rounded them up and concentrated them into camps. (A few hundred escaped to the Smoky Mountains and many years later where given a small reservation in North Carolina.) From the prison camps they were started westward to Indian Territory. On the long winter trek, one of every four Cherokees died from the cold, hunger, or disease. They called the march their “trail of tears.” The Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles also gave up their homelands in the South. In the North, surviving remnants of the Shawnees, Miamis, Ottawas, Hurons, Delawares, and many other once mighty tribes walked or traveled by horseback and wagon beyond the Mississippi, carrying their shabby goods, their rusty farming tools, and bags of seed corn. All of them arrived as refugees, poor relations, in the country of the proud and free Plains Indians.

Scarcely were the refugees settled behind the security of the “permanent Indian frontier” when soldiers began marching westward through Indian country. The white men of the United States—who talked so much of peace but rarely seemed to practice it—were marching to war with the white men who had conquered the Indians of Mexico. When the war with Mexico ended in 1847, the United States took possession of a vast expanse of territory reaching from Texas to California. All of it was west of the “permanent Indian frontier.”
In 1848 gold was discovered in California. Within a few months, fortune-seeking easterners by the thousands were crossing the Indian Territory. Indians who lived or hunted along the Santa Fe and Oregon trails had grown accustomed to seeing an occasional wagon train licensed for traders, trappers, or missionaries. Now suddenly the trails were filled with wagons, and the wagons were filled with white people. Most of them were bound for California gold, but some turned southwest for New Mexico or northwest for the Oregon country.

To justify these breaches of the “permanent Indian frontier”, the policy makers in Washington invented Manifest Destiny, a term which lifted land hunger to a lofty plane. The Europeans and their descendants were ordained by destiny to rule all of Americans. They were the dominant race and therefore responsible for the Indians-along with their lands, their forests, and their mineral wealth. Only the New Englanders, who had destroyed or driven out all their Indians, spoke against Manifest Destiny.

In 1850, although none of the Modocs, Mohaves, Paiutes, Shastas, Yumas, or a hundred other lesser-known tribes along the Pacific Coast were consulted on the matter, California became the thirty-first state of the Union. In the mountains of Colorado gold was discovered, and new hordes of prospectors swarmed across the Plains. Two vast new territories were organized, Kansas and Nebraska, encompassing virtually all the country of the Plains tribes. In 1858 Minnesota became a state, its boundaries being extended a hundred miles beyond the 95th meridian, the “permanent Indian frontier.”

And so, only a quarter of a century after the enactment of Sharp Knife, Andrew Jackson’s Indian trade and Intercourse Act, white settlers had driven in both the north and south flanks of the 95th meridian line, and advance elements of white miners and traders had penetrated the center.

It was then, at the beginning of the 1860s, that, the white men of the United States went to war with one another—the Bluecoats against the Graycoats, the great Civil War. In 1860 there were probably 300,000 Indians in the United States and Territories, most of them living west of the Mississippi. According to varying estimates, their numbers had been reduced by one-half to two-thirds since the arrival of the first settlers in Virginia and New England. The survivors were now pressed between expanding white populations on the East and along the Pacific coasts—more than thirty million Europeans and descendants. If the remaining free tribes believed that the white man’s Civil War would bring any respite from this pressure for territory they were soon disillusioned.

The most numerous and powerful western tribe was the Sioux, or Dakota, which were separated into several subdivisions. The Santee Sioux lived in the
woodlands of Minnesota, and for some years had been retreating before the advance of settlements. Little Crow of the Mdewkanton Santee, after being taken on a tour of eastern cities, was convinced that the power of the United States could not be resisted. He was reluctantly attempting to lead his tribe down the white man’s road. Wabasha, another Santee leader, also had accepted the inevitable, but both he and Little Crow were determined to oppose any further surrender of their lands.

Farther west on the Great Plains were the Teton Sioux, horse Indians all, and completely free. There were somewhat contemptuous of their woodland Santee cousins who had capitulated to the settlers. Most numerous and most confident of their ability to defend their territory were the Oglala Tetons. At the beginning of the white man’s Civil War, their outstanding leader was Red Cloud, thirty-eight years old, a shrewd warrior chief. Still too young to be a warrior was Crazy Horse, an intelligent and fearless teenaged Oglala.

Among the Hunkpapas, a smaller division of the Teton Sioux, a young man in his mid-twenties had already won a reputation as a hunter and warrior. In tribal councils he advocated unyielding opposition to any intrusion by white men. He was Tatanka Yotanka, the Sitting Bull. He was mentor to an orphaned boy named Gall. Together with Crazy Horse of the Oglalas, they would make history sixteen years later in 1876.

Although he was not yet forty, Spotted Tail was already the chief spokesman for the Brulé Tetons, who lived on the far western plans. Spotted Tail was a handsome, smiling Indian who loved fine feasts and compliant women. He enjoyed his way of life and the land he lived upon, but was willing to compromise to avoid war.

Closely associated with the Teton Sioux were the Cheyennes. In the old days the Cheyennes had lived in the Minnesota country of the Santee Sioux, but gradually moved westward and acquired horses. Now the Northern Cheyennes shared the Powder River and the Bighorn country with the Sioux, frequently camping near them. Dull Knife, in his forties, was an outstanding leader of the Northern branch of the tribe. (To his own people Dull knife was known as Morning Star, but the Sioux called him Dull Knife, and most contemporary accounts use that name.)

The Southern Cheyennes had drifted below the Platte River, establishing villages on the Colorado and Kansas plains. Black Kettle of the Southern branch had been a great warrior in his youth. In his late middle age, he was acknowledged chief, but the younger men and the Hotamitaneos (Dog Soldiers) of the Southern Cheyennes were more inclined to follow leaders such as Tall Bull and Roman Nose, who were in their prime.
Sitting Bull. Sitting Bull.

In English this name sounds a little absurd, and to whites of the nineteenth century is was still more so; they alluded to him as Slightly Recumbent Gentleman Cow.

Exact Translation from the Sioux is impossible, but his name may be better understood if one realizes how plains Indians respected and honored the bull buffalo. Whites considered this animal to be exceptionally stupid. Col. Dodge states without equivocation that the buffalo is the dullest creature of which he has any knowledge. A herd of buffalo would graze complacently while every member was shot down. He himself shot two cows and thirteen calves while the survivors grazed and watched. He and others in his party had to shout and wave their hats to drive the herd away so the dead animals could be butchered.

Indians, however, regarded buffalo as the wisest and most powerful of creatures, nearest to the omnipresent Spirit. Furthermore if one says in English that somebody is sitting it means he is seated, balanced on the haunches; but the Sioux expression has an additional sense, not equivalent to but approximating the English words situate and locate and reside.

Thus from an Indian point of view, the name Sitting Bull signified a wise and powerful being who had taken up residence among them.

As a boy, he was called Slow, Hunkesni, because of his deliberate manner, and it has been alleged that his parents thought him ordinary, perhaps even a bit slow in the head. Most biographies state that he was known also as Jumping Badger; but Stanley Vestal, after talking to many Indians who knew him, said that none of them nor any member of Sitting Bull’s family could remember his being called Jumping Badger. In any event, Slow he was called, and Slow would suffice until he distinguished himself.

When he was fourteen he touched a slain Crow with coup stick. To touch a dead enemy with a stick may not sound impressive, but nineteenth-century Sioux thought otherwise: in honor of this deed his father provided a feast and bestowed his own name upon the boy.

That is one explanation of how he acquired the name, although some scholars think he chose it himself because of the buffalo’s wisdom and strength. Others think he saw a cloud resembling a seated buffalo.
If he did acquire the name from his father, which seems probable, one must ask how the father got that name.

It is said that the elder Sitting Bull occasionally would understand the language of animals and once on a hunting trip he was able to interpret the noise made by a bull. This bull was talking about the four ages of man; infancy, youth, maturity, old age. These ages were identified by metaphor, transmogrified from Dakota into English as Sitting Bull, Jumping Bull, Bull Standing with Cow, Lone Bull. The hunter knew that the buffalo was offering these names to him, so he chose one. He chose the first, which was the most important because it had been spoken first. Years later, after his son touched an enemy, he knew it was time to give the boy this name; and from then on the father called himself by the less important name of Jumping Bull.

Hereditary nomenclature was not unusual, even if whites prefer to think of Indians acquiring their names in dreams and visions. Little Big Man, for instance, was so-called to differentiate him from his father, Big Man. The Sioux form of Big Man is Chas—a abbreviation of Wichasha—Tonga. Literally: Man Big. Chikala, which means Little, was added to designate the son.

Thus: Old Man Afraid of His Horse, Young Man Afraid, etc.

The patriarch of this Man Afraid family was an Oglala chief born about 1815 whose descendants, like the offspring of other illustrious chieftains, evidently decide to polish up his name. He got that name, they said, not because he feared his horse but because he was such a redoubtable fighter. The mere sight of his horse was enough to make enemies tremble. In other words, a more accurate translation would be They Are Afraid of His Horse. Preposterous, according to that irascible scholar George Hyde. It is a story swallowed like a goldfish by gullible historians, In fact, the name has been traced back to about 1760 when the Sioux first acquired horses and had trouble managing them. Indians were quick to invent humorous nicknames; they were much more apt to do this than to bestow upon somebody an exalted title, so it is not hard to guess how this famous name originated. Dunn proves yet another version. The great chief’s name actually meant that he feared losing his horses. So valuable were they that during an attack by Shoshones he abandoned his family in order to save the pony herd.

As for Red Cloud, he might have been named after a meteorite which roared across Sioux territory the night of September 20, 1822, and colored the clouds spectacularly—a phenomenon recorded in a Sioux pictographic calendar and noted also by white men at Fort Snelling near the mouth of the Minnesota River. Or Red Cloud could have been a family name for several generations.
If twentieth-century Oglalas ever knew the origin of this famous name they have forgotten it, says Hyde, because they have offered at least a dozen stories on the subject. In one appealing legend, thousands of Oglala warriors sat on the hills wrapped in scarlet blankets so that from a distance they resembled a red cloud. Hyde calls this nonsense, pointing out that Red Cloud carried the name when he was a young man without followers, and by 1866 when he did have thousands of followers the Oglalas had not traded with whites for some time and owned very few blankets. Furthermore, Mr. Hyde continues as if he had just enjoyed a refreshing sip of vinegar, a lot of Indian children were named after that meteorite: “the word makhpiya may be translated either as cloud or sky; thus when the Sioux say blue cloud, they mean blue sky. In this instance the word may refer to the meteorite itself. Inkpaduta had twin sons born at that time, and he seems to have named them for this event. One was called Roaring Cloud, the other Fire Cloud.”

All of which leaves Indian nomenclature much in doubt. Only now and then is the origin of a name beyond dispute. For example, it seems fairly clear that the Cheyenne miracle man, Walks Above the Earth, became famous as Crazy Mule because, like a Christian ascetic indifferent to earthly conceit, he rode a mule instead of a horse and one day when he rode into a Sioux village somebody said, “Here comes that crazy Cheyenne on his mule.” Right away he was Crazy Cheyenne on a Mule, and pretty soon Crazy Mule.

Wooden Leg knew this magician. Once he saw Crazy Mule stand with his back against a tree and asked four Cheyennes to shoot him. All right, they said. One after another they walked up close and each fired a bullet into his body. Then he took off his moccasins and poured out four bullets. Wooden Leg had this to say: "He was known as a man whose mind was at all times on spiritual things, who gave little or no thought to ordinary earthly matters."

What held true for Crazy Mule could not be said of Sitting Bull, known to Unkpapas as a man of both worlds—earthly and spiritual. Unlike the famous magician, Sitting Bull grew up not as a remote mystic but as a participant in village life. There were those who resented the immense authority he acquired, while others disliked him for private reasons, but it is said that most Unkpapas found him to be affectionate and considerate. He had a powerful, resonant voice and became well known as a singer, often composing songs instead of merely repeating familiar chants.