



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS
Reading Process & Literary Analysis
Benchmark LA.1112.1.7.3 Determine the main idea or essential message in grade-level or higher texts....

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.2 Use information from the text to answer questions or to state the main idea or provide relevant details.

NOTABLE QUOTE

"Memory feeds imagination."

FYI

Did you know that Amy Tan ...

- plays in a band called the Rock Bottom Remainers with Stephen King and other literary celebrities?
- has visited the White House five times?
- has had her works translated into more than 20 languages?

AuthorOnline

For more on Amy Tan, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

Mother Tongue

Essay by Amy Tan



Amy Tan

born 1952

In 1989, Amy Tan's first book, *The Joy Luck Club*, spent 40 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Praised for its authentic dialogue and its rich portrayal of Chinese history, the book established Tan as an insightful chronicler of the Chinese-American experience and of the fierce and conflicted love between mothers and daughters.

Troubled Times Born in Oakland, California in 1952, Tan spent her early childhood in the San Francisco Bay area. She enjoyed her first literary success at the age of eight, winning first prize in an elementary school contest for her essay "What My Library Means to Me." Six years later, Tan's life took a tragic turn when both her father and her brother died from brain tumors. Her grief-stricken mother moved teenaged Amy and her surviving brother to Europe, settling in Montreux, Switzerland, where Tan graduated from high school in 1969.

Although her mother had pushed her to become a neurosurgeon, the rebellious Tan defied her mother's wishes and studied literature and linguistics in college. In 1974, she enrolled in a doctoral program in linguistics, but she abandoned her studies after a close friend was murdered. Tan then put her expertise to work as a language development consultant for programs serving disabled children. Five years later, she adopted a new career as a freelance technical writer.

Confronting the Past Tan took up writing fiction as a form of therapy, hoping to curb her workaholic tendencies. Her first short story, "End Game," appeared in *Seventeen* magazine, bringing her to the attention of prominent literary agent Sandra Dijkstra. With Dijkstra's encouragement, Tan began writing a series of stories that evolved into *The Joy Luck Club*. For this tightly woven collection of short stories, Tan drew upon her personal story, exploring the generational and cultural gap between Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters.

Two years later, Tan published her second book, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, a novel inspired by her mother's life in China. Though she switched her focus from mother-daughter love to sisterhood in her third novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, she once again drew on her mother's life story in her fourth, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. As Tan explains, "My books have amounted to taking her stories—a gift to me—and giving them back to her. To me, it was the ultimate thing I ever could have done for myself and my mother."

● LITERARY ANALYSIS: PERSONAL ESSAY

Amy Tan could have written a research paper to get across her points about language and cultural identity. Instead, she chose to write a **personal essay**, where she combines her insights on the topic with details from her own life.

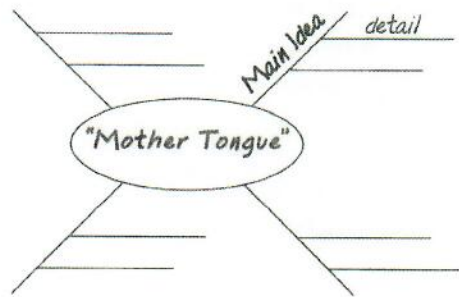
Just last week, as I was walking down the street with [my mother], I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I do use with her.

Unlike a scholarly paper or a newspaper article, a personal essay gives you a snapshot of the writer's life or personality as well as his or her thoughts on a specific topic. As you read this essay, note how Tan connects her ideas about the power of language with her own experiences.

● READING SKILL: IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS

Amy Tan's essay is organized into a series of paragraphs, most of which develop one **main idea**, or central point. Facts, descriptions, or examples that are related to the main idea are called **supporting details**. When a main idea is not directly stated, you can figure it out by asking yourself how these supporting details fit together.

Amy Tan uses vivid supporting details to make her points. As you read, use a diagram like the one shown to record the main idea of each paragraph and list its supporting details.



What LANGUAGES do you speak?

KEY IDEA Think about how you change the way you speak based on where you are and whom you're with. You might use slang when talking with friends but polite, formal language with adults. You might speak English at school and another language at home. In "Mother Tongue," you will read one writer's thoughts on her own different languages.

QUICKWRITE Make a list of places and situations where you use a different language or way of speaking. Then, for each situation, write a brief quotation that captures the sound of the language you use in that context.



Mother Tongue

Amy Tan

I am not a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others.

I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with. **A**

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I was
10 giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, *The Joy Luck Club*, and it was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like “the intersection of memory and imagination” and “There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus”—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized¹ forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, forms of standard English that I had learned
20 in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

1. **nominalized** (nŏm'ē-nēl-īz'd) **forms:** nouns formed from other parts of speech.

ANALYZE VISUALS

In this painting, the artist represents an apple in three different ways. What point about language might the artist be making?

A PERSONAL ESSAY

Reread lines 1–8.

What do you learn about the author in these opening lines?

Apple (1983), Andy Warhol.
Synthetic polymer paint and
silkscreen ink on canvas, 14" × 11".
© 2007 The Andy Warhol Foundation
for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New York. © The
Andy Warhol Foundation, Inc./Art
Resource, New York.

Just last week, as I was walking down the street with her, I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture, and I heard myself saying this: “Not waste money that way.” My husband was with us as well, and he didn’t notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It’s because over the twenty years we’ve been together I’ve often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew
30 up with.

So that you’ll have some idea of what this family talk sounds like, I’ll quote what my mother said during a conversation that I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation, she was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had the same last name as her family’s, Du, and how in his early years the gangster wanted to be adopted by her family, who were rich by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer than my mother’s family, and he showed up at my mother’s wedding to pay his respects. Here’s what she said in part: **B**

“Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off-the-street kind. He is Du
40 like Du Zong—but not Tsung-ming Island² people. The local people call *putong*. The river east side, he belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn’t look down on him, but didn’t take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don’t stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom. Chinese social life that way. If too important won’t have to stay too long. He come to my wedding. I didn’t see, I heard it. I gone to boy’s side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was nineteen.”

You should know that my mother’s expressive command of English belies how
50 much she actually understands. She reads the *Forbes*³ report, listens to *Wall Street Week*, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads Shirley MacLaine’s books⁴ with ease—all kinds of things I can’t begin to understand. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand fifty percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand eighty to ninety percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother’s English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It’s my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world. **C**

Lately I’ve been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks.
60 Like others, I have described it to people as “broken” or “fractured” English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than “broken,” as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if

B GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 31–33. Note how Tan addresses her readers as *you*, as though in conversation. This use of **informal language** helps her create a warm, personal voice.

C MAIN IDEAS

Reread lines 49–58. What **supporting details** does Tan include to describe the way her mother uses English?

2. **Tsung-ming** (tsóŋ-míng) **Island**: an island near the mouth of the Yangtze River, near Shanghai, in eastern China.

3. **Forbes**: a financial magazine.

4. **Shirley MacLaine’s books**: works by the American actress Shirley MacLaine (born 1934), many of which deal with reincarnation.

it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the limited-English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother's "limited" English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English. I believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly, her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of
70 empirical evidence⁵ to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and in restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her. **D**

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was a teenager, she used to have me call people on the phone and pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio, and it just so happened we were going to New York the next week, our first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan."

80 My mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money."

And then I said in perfect English on the phone, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived."

Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, "I can't tolerate any more excuses. If I don't receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I'm in New York next week." And sure enough, the following week, there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there
90 red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

We used a similar routine more recently, for a situation that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment to find out about a CAT scan⁶ she had had a month earlier. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not apologize when they informed her they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and her son had died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information
100 until the next time and she would have to make another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn't budge. And when the doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English—lo and behold—we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake.

5. **empirical evidence:** evidence derived from observation.

6. **CAT scan:** a three-dimensional image of structures inside the human body.

D PERSONAL ESSAY

Reread lines 59–72.

Explain Tan's point about the term "broken English." What personal experiences does she draw on to make her point?

I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that a person's developing language skills are more influenced by peers than by family. But I do think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families
110 which are more insular,⁷ plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, IQ tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged poor, compared with math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B's, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved A's and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call,
120 a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, "Even though Tom was _____, Mary thought he was _____." And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations, for example, "Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming," with the grammatical structure "even though" limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites,⁸ so you wouldn't get answers like, "Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous." Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that. **E**

130 The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words for which you were supposed to find some sort of logical semantic relationship, for instance, "Sunset is to nightfall as _____ is to _____." And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which showed the same kind of relationship: *red* is to *stoplight*, *bus* is to *arrival*, *chills* is to *fever*, *yawn* is to *boring*. Well, I could never think that way. I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair, *sunset* is to *nightfall*—and I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain of stars. And all the other pairs of words—*red*, *bus*, *stoplight*, *boring*—just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to see
140 that saying "A sunset precedes nightfall" was as logical as saying "A chill precedes a fever." The only way I would have gotten that answer right was to imagine an associative situation,⁹ such as my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turned into feverish pneumonia as punishment—which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother's English, about achievement tests. Because lately I've been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian-Americans represented in American literature. Why are

7. **insular**: isolated.

8. **semantic opposites**: words opposite in meaning.

9. **associative situation**: a circumstance or story based on mental connections.

E PERSONAL ESSAY

Reread lines 107–129.


According to Tan, in what ways did her mother's use of English influence her own performance on standardized tests?

there few Asian-Americans enrolled in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions I can't begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian-American students, as a whole, do significantly better on math achievement tests than on English tests. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as “broken” or “limited.” And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my boss at the time that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management. **F**

But it wasn't until 1985 that I began to write fiction. At first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here's an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into *The Joy Luck Club*, but without this line: “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state.”¹⁰ A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won't get into here, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided on was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.” 

F **MAIN IDEAS**
Identify the main idea of lines 157–161. What details support this main idea?

10. my mental quandary . . . state: my mental predicament in its earliest form.



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD
Reading Process
Benchmark LA.1112.1.7.3 Determine the main idea or essential message in grade-level or higher texts through inferring, paraphrasing, summarizing, and identifying relevant details and facts.

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** What words does Tan typically use to describe her mother's English?
- 2. Summarize** In general, how did people react to Mrs. Tan's use of English?
- 3. Recall** According to Tan, what aspects of language do achievement tests fail to reveal?

Literary Analysis

- 4. Identify the Main Idea** Review the diagram you created as you read. Based on your notes, what is the main idea of the entire essay? Explain your answer.
- 5. Compare Roles** Tan describes situations in which she was forced to act as a go-between for her mother, as in the anecdote in lines 80–91. Describe the roles of Tan and her mother in these situations. In what ways do these interactions differ from the typical mother-daughter relationship? Be specific in your answer.
- 6. Make Judgments** Tan describes her mother's English as "vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery." Reread the story Tan's mother tells in lines 39–48. Do you agree with Tan's opinion of her mother's speech? Why or why not?
- 7. Analyze a Personal Essay** Describe Tan's changing perceptions of her mother's use of English. In what way did her changing views toward her mother influence her observations about the power of language? Include details from the essay in your answer.
- 8. Interpret Title** Tan uses the expression "mother tongue" as the title of her essay. State the usual meaning of this expression. Then, use each of the following examples to develop a different or expanded meaning for this term:
 - the idea of family talk (lines 28–30)
 - Tan's description of her mother's speech (lines 55–58)
 - Tan's thoughts on language development (lines 107–110)
- 9. Evaluate Author's Position** Tan claims that the language spoken within the family does more to shape the way a child speaks than the language spoken by his or her peers. Recall your answers to the opening activity on page 1205. Do you agree with Tan's opinion? Why or why not?

Literary Criticism

- 10. Different Perspectives** Look at the essay again through the eyes of the following individuals. What important lessons about life and the uses of language might each draw from this essay?
 - an immigrant
 - a doctor
 - the child of an immigrant
 - a teacher

Reading-Writing Connection

WRITING PROMPT

WRITE AN ESSAY Choose a topic that lets you draw on your personal experiences—a longtime hobby, a trip you took, your family history. Write an **one-page essay** that communicates your unique perspective on this subject. Be sure to include relevant details from your own experiences in the essay.

SELF-CHECK

A successful essay will . . .

- open in a way that captures the reader's attention
- ▶ • include appropriate and effective personal details
- create a compelling voice that conveys your personality

GRAMMAR AND STYLE

USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 1208. For this essay, Tan chooses a casual, conversational style that lets her establish a strong connection with her readers. One strategy that helps Tan create this distinctive style is her use of **informal language** that contains **contractions** and idiosyncratic terms like *Englishes*. She also addresses her readers in a personal voice, using the **pronoun** *you*, as in the following excerpt:

You should know that my mother's expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands. She reads the Forbes report, listens to Wall Street Week, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads Shirley MacLaine's books with ease—all kinds of things I can't begin to understand. (lines 49–52)

Whenever you write, consider the audience you are addressing and choose the appropriate level of formality.

PRACTICE Rewrite each of the following sentences using the kind of informal language Tan might have used.

EXAMPLE

It is often difficult to make sense of the rules of effective language.
Sometimes it's hard to understand what makes language work well.

1. A lack of education caused my mother to speak a damaged, limited kind of English.
2. To demonstrate my use of these techniques, I have included some excerpts from my recent work.
3. A substantial portion of my fiction relates to my background and personal experiences.



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD Writing Process

Benchmark LA.1112.3.3.1 Evaluating the draft for development of ideas and content, logical organization, voice, point of view, word choice, and sentence variation.

WRITING TOOLS

For prewriting, revision, and editing tools, visit the **Writing Center** at ClassZone.com.