

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Gift”, Day 1



Key Paragraph, p. 148

“...Behind him, in the tall sagebrush, the birds were scampering on the ground, making a great noise among the dry leaves; the squirrels piped shrilly on the side-hills. Jody looked along at the farm buildings. He felt an uncertainty in the air, a feeling of change and of loss and of the gain of new and unfamiliar things. Over the hillside two big black buzzards sailed low to the ground and their shadows slipped smoothly and quickly ahead of them. Some animal had died in the vicinity. Jody knew it. It might be a cow or it might be the remains of a rabbit. The buzzards overlooked nothing. Jody hated them as all decent things hate them, but they could not be hurt because they made away with carrion” (p. 148).

Writing Prompt

Steinbeck uses plants and animals to provide sensory details that show how alive the land is. He writes continually about this area of California that he was so attached to.

Think about a place that is important to you, or just a place you really, really like. Close your eyes and imagine how it feels, looks, smells, tastes, and sounds. **Write a paragraph describing your place in vivid detail. Try to make sure you have all the parts of a good paragraph, and use as many good location words as you can.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Gift”, Day 2



Key Paragraph, p. 159

“And Jody trembled when he thought of the time when he would first sit in the saddle. The pony would probably throw him off. There was no disgrace in that. The disgrace would come if he did not get right up and mount again. Sometimes he dreamed that he lay in the dirt and cried and couldn’t make himself mount again. The shame of the dream lasted until the middle of the day” (p. 159).

Writing Prompt

Jody is afraid to ride his pony, because he isn’t sure how he will react to adversity. He really wants to ride, but doesn’t want to embarrass himself. **Write a paragraph about a time when, like Jody, you were afraid to do something you were looking forward to because of what might happen. How did you feel about the situation? Be sure to use a very clear topic sentence.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Gift”, Day 3



Key Passage, p. 174

“Carl Tiflin wiped the blood from the boy’s face with a red bandana. Jody was limp and quiet now. His father moved the buzzard with his toe. ‘Jody,’ he explained, ‘the buzzard didn’t kill the pony. Don’t you know that?’

‘I know it,’ Jody said wearily.

It was Billy Buck who was angry. He had lifted Jody in his arms, and had turned to carry him home. But he turned back to Carl Tiflin. “Course he knows it,’ Billy said furiously, ‘Jesus Christ man, can’t you see how he’d feel about it?’” (p. 174).

Writing Prompt

Jody knows that the buzzard didn’t kill his pony, but his anger leads to violence against the innocent bird. Think about a time when you were very, very angry. **Write a paragraph that describes when and why you were angry, and how you reacted. Make sure you have a strong topic sentence. Arrange the sentences in chronological order.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Great Mountains”, Day 4



Key Paragraph, p. 175-6

“The bird looked much smaller dead than it had alive. Jody felt a little mean pain in his stomach, so he took out his pocket-knife and cut off the bird’s head. Then he disemboweled it, and took off its wings; and finally he threw all the pieces onto the brush. He didn’t care about the bird, or its life, but he knew what older people would say if they had seen him kill it; he was ashamed because of their potential opinion. He decided to forget the whole thing as quickly as he could, and never to mention it” (p. 175-176).

Writing Prompt

Jody kills twice—once in anger, once in boredom. Although the act was the same, the two events were very different.

Think of something that you did or that happened to you twice, for example, getting a bad grade on a report card, breaking up with a boy/girl friend, or getting angry with someone in your family.

Write a paragraph comparing and contrasting two events in your life that were similar. Use a topic sentence, organized body sentences, and a good closing sentence.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Promise”, Day 5



Key Paragraph, p. 193

“He went to his work with unprecedented seriousness. This night he did not dump the can of grain to the chickens so that they had to leap over each other and struggle to get it. No, he spread the wheat so far and so carefully that the hens couldn’t find some of it at all. And in the house, after listening to his mother’s despair over boys who filled their lunch pails with slimy, suffocated reptiles, and bugs, he promised never to do it again. Indeed, Jody felt that all such foolishness was lost in the past. He was far too grown up ever to put horny-toads in his lunch pail any more. He carried in so much wood and built such a high structure with it that his mother walked in fear of an avalanche of oak. When he was done, when he had gathered eggs that had remained hidden for weeks, Jody walked down again past the cypress tree, past the bunkhouse toward the pasture. A fat warty toad that looked out at him from under the watering trough had no emotional effect on him at all” (p. 193.)

Writing Prompt

Jody is feeling more grown up. He decides to take responsibility around the farm, and changes his behavior. Think about a time when you felt particularly grown up. Did you, like Jody, suddenly become responsible and do the things you were supposed to do?

Write a narrative paragraph about a time when you began to feel more grown up, how you acted, and what you did. Try to make it a strong narrative paragraph that includes who, what, where, when and why.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Promise”, Day 6



Key Paragraph, p. 208

“Billy’s face and arms and chest were dripping red. His body shivered and his teeth chattered. His voice was gone; he spoke in a throaty whisper. ‘There’s your colt. I promised. And there it is. I had to do it—had to.’ He stopped and looked over his shoulder into the box stall. ‘Go get hot water and a sponge,’ he whispered. ‘Wash him and dry him the way his mother would. You’ll have to feed him by hand. But there’s your colt, the way I promised’” (p. 208).

Writing Prompt

Billy does something he knows is wrong in order to follow through on his promise to Jody. He felt like killing the mother horse was his only option.

Write a paragraph describing a time when you thought you had no choice, or didn’t like any of the choices you had. Describe the situation and what you were thinking. You might want to start by drawing an open mind portrait for yourself at that time. When you write your paragraph, make sure you have a clear topic sentence, an organized body, and a strong closing sentence. Include as many personal and sensory details (“*showing*” writing) as possible to make your writing exciting.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Leader of the People”, Day 7



Key Paragraph, p. 216

“No, not much—but then later, when the troops were hunting Indians and shooting children and burning teepees, it wasn’t much different from your mouse hunt” (p. 216).

Writing Prompt

Jody’s father isn’t thrilled about his father-in-law’s visit, because he only talks about one thing – Indians. Think of a family member, friend, or teacher who likes to tell stories, maybe even the same ones over and over.

Write a narrative paragraph *showing* what it is like to listen to a person in your life tell a story. Write the paragraph from the point of view of a listener. How do you feel when you are listening to the story? Try to put your narrative paragraph in chronological order. Make sure you have a clear topic sentence, an organized body, and a good closing sentence.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, The Red Pony, “The Leader of the People”, Day 8



Key Paragraph, p. 224

“It wasn’t Indians that were important, nor adventures, nor even getting out here. It was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast. And I was the head. It was westering and westering. Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering. I was the leader, but if I hadn’t been there, someone else would have been the head. The thing had to have a head” (p. 224).

Writing Prompt

Jody’s grandfather is talking about being a leader. He says it wasn’t necessarily important who was the leader, but that the group had to have a person to lead and control it as it crossed the country.

Think about a time when you were in a leadership position. How did it make you feel? **Write a strong narrative paragraph with a topic sentence that tells your story about being a leader. Be sure to describe the group you were leading, as well as how you felt as their leader. Use at least one concluding word in your closing sentence.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The White Quail”, Day 9



Key Paragraph, p. 18

“That’s the enemy,’ Mary said one time. ‘That’s the world that wants to get in, all rough and tangled and unkempt. But it can’t get in because the fuchsias won’t let it. That’s what the fuchsias are there for, and they know it. The birds can get in. They live out in the wild, but they come to my garden for peace and for water.’ She laughed softly. ‘There’s something profound in all that, Harry. I don’t know quite what it is. The quail are beginning to come down now. At least a dozen were at the pool this evening’” (p. 18).

Writing Prompt

Mary’s garden is her refuge. She has built an elaborate fantasy world around her garden. It has become her entire life.

Think about a place you go for “refuge.” **Write a paragraph describing a place that you go for refuge, and explain what it means to you to have such a place. This place might be a room, park, store, or almost any place in your life that makes you feel good. Remember to use sensory details. Arrange your sentences in order of importance.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The White Quail”, Day 10



Key Paragraph, p. 26

“Harry walked slowly over to her and picked her up. ‘I didn’t mean to kill it,’ he said to himself. ‘I just wanted to scare it away’” (p. 26).

Writing Prompt

Although he does not consciously plan to kill the bird, Harry shoots the white quail. His life with Mary is desperately lonely—she lavishes all of her feeling, affection, and love on her garden, leaving her devoted husband starved for affection. Unconsciously, Harry kills Mary’s alter-ego, the white quail, as a way to avenge his hurt feelings and empty home life.

Think about a time you wanted to make someone feel bad, get revenge, or get even with someone for something. **Write a paragraph or two telling what happened and how you felt about it. What did the offending party do? Why did you feel the need for revenge? Did the revenge make you feel any better? Would you make the same choice today? Remember to include a beginning, middle, and end to your story.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The Chrysanthemums”, Day 11



Key Paragraph, p. 3

“There was a little square sandy bed kept for rooting the chrysanthemums. With her trowel she turned the soil over and over, and smoothed it and patted it firm. Then she dug ten parallel trenches to receive the sets. Back at the chrysanthemum bed she pulled out the little crisp shoots, trimmed off the leaves of each one with her scissors and laid it on a small orderly pile” (p. 3).

Writing Prompt

Eliza works in a diligent and orderly fashion to plant her chrysanthemums. She has a routine to ensure that the little plants are properly planted and cared for.

Think of a task or chore that you do on a regular basis and make a list of the steps that are necessary to complete that task. **Take the list and turn it into a paragraph explaining to a peer how you complete that task. Remember to keep all the steps of the action in order.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “Flight”, Day 12



Key Passage, p. 35

“Pepé turned back to Mama. He seemed to look for a little softness, a little weakness in her. His eyes were searching, but Mama’s face remained fierce. ‘Go now,’ she said. ‘Do not wait to be caught like a chicken.’

Pepé pulled himself into the saddle. ‘I am a man,’ he said” (p. 35).

Writing Prompt

Pepé acted on impulse, and was irresponsible. As a result, he now chooses to leave his home and his family, rather than face justice.

Write a paragraph describing a time you acted irresponsibly, and had to pay the consequences later. Did you regret your irresponsible action? What did you learn? Revise and edit your paragraph to improve your storytelling.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt *The Long Valley*, “Flight”, Day 13



Key Paragraph, p. 44

“Pepé was pushing the rifle with his left hand now. Little drops of sweat ran to the ends of his coarse black hair and rolled down his cheeks. His lips and tongue were growing thick and heavy. His lips writhed to draw saliva into his mouth. His little dark eyes were uneasy and suspicious. Once when a grey lizard paused in front of him on the parched ground and turned its head sideways he crushed it flat with a stone” (p. 44).

Writing Prompt

In the end of “Flight,” Pepé faces death head on. Steinbeck ends the story in a tragic way, but it is an ending that the reader expects. How did Steinbeck “set up” the reader so that Pepé’s death wasn’t a complete surprise? What clues did the author leave in the story that told us the main character was going to die in the end?

Write an analytical paragraph that explains how Steinbeck foreshadowed Pepé’s death throughout the story. List at least three clues that Steinbeck left for the reader. Use one strong quote from the story that was a literary device intended to develop the story.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The Snake”, Day 14



Key Paragraph, p. 55

“He shrugged his shoulders. ‘I see. You want to watch how rattlesnakes eat. All right. I’ll show you. The rat will cost twenty-five cents. It’s better than a bullfight if you look at it one way, and it’s simply a snake eating his dinner if you look at it another.’ His tone had become acid. He hated people who make sport of natural processes. He was not a sportsman but a biologist. He could kill a thousand animals for knowledge, but not an insect for pleasure. He’d been over this in his mind before” (p. 55).

Writing Prompt

Steinbeck often uses animal imagery to describe people. In this case, the snake is compared to Dr. Phillips’ female guest. Think of someone you know who reminds you of an animal of some kind. **Write a paragraph in which you describe this person in terms of the animal imagery. Revise your paragraph using the * and √ method.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “Breakfast”, “Katy the Virgin”, Day 15



Key Passage, p. 64: “Breakfast”

“That’s all. I know, of course, some of the reasons why it was pleasant. But there was some element of great beauty there that makes the rush of warmth when I think of it” (p. 64).

Key Passage, p. 141: “Saint Katy the Virgin”

“As for Katy, she came forward stamping and champing, ready to snatch it and tread it under her feet. The face of Katy was a tiger’s face. Just as she reached the cross, the sharp shadow of it fell on her face, and the cross itself was reflected in her yellow eyes. Katy stopped—paralyzed. The air, the tree, the earth shuddered in an expectant silence, while goodness fought with sin.

Then, slowly, two great tears squeezed out of the eyes of Katy, and before you could think, she was stretched prostrate on the ground, making the sign of the cross with her right hoof and mooing in anguish at the realization of her crimes.

Brother Paul dangled the cross a full minute before he hoisted himself back on the limb.

All this time Roark had been watching from his gate. From that day on, he was no longer a bad man; his whole life was changed in a moment. Indeed, he told the story over and over to anyone who would listen. Roark said he had never seen anything so grand and inspiring in his life” (p. 141).

Writing Prompt for “Breakfast”

Steinbeck conveys a lot of information about the workers and the narrator in this short description of the simple act of sharing a meal.

Think about a meal you shared with others. **Write a paragraph describing the meal. Try to convey any significance of things other than just the sharing of food that were occurring. Be sure to mention the who, what, where, when, and why of this meal.**

Writing Prompt for “Saint Katy the Virgin”

In this humorous story, Steinbeck tells about a truly evil character (Katy the pig) that repents her evil ways and becomes saint-like overnight.

Think about a time when you wanted to change something in your life or yourself. Were you able to change “overnight”? **Write a paragraph that tells the story of your attempted change. What was significant about the experience? Was the change easy or difficult? Was this a responsible choice?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The Raid”, Day 16



Key Paragraph, p. 72

“Take hold, kid! You take hold! And listen to me; if some one busts you, it isn’t him that’s doing it, it’s the System. And it isn’t you he’s busting. He’s taking a crack at the Principle. Can you remember that?” (p. 72).

Writing Prompt

Root is frightened about what is about to happen. He knows it will be difficult and dangerous, and is afraid despite his desire to prove himself.

Write a paragraph telling the story of a time when you were afraid of something and overcame it. Make sure you organize your thoughts and have a clear beginning, middle, and end of the story. In your conclusion, tell what you learned from this experience.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The Harness”, Day 17



Key Paragraph, p. 82

“Peter went on as though he was talking to himself. ‘Even if she could see me, and I didn’t do what she wanted, she ought to feel good because I did it when she was here. It ought to please her that she made a good man of me. If I wasn’t a good man when she wasn’t here, that’d prove she did it all, wouldn’t it? I was a good man, wasn’t I, Ed?’” (p. 82).

Writing Prompt

For the entirety of his marriage, Peter lived up to his wife’s standards. He worked hard to meet her expectations of what a man should be, even though it wasn’t what he wanted out of life.

Most people try to please another person at some point in life, whether it is for respect, love, money, or happiness. **Write a story about a time you tried to please someone by doing, wearing, or saying things that they wanted you to, but that you didn’t really want to do. Was it satisfactory for anyone? Make sure you have a thesis sentence that states your purpose clearly (a thesis statement is like a topic sentence). Revise the story so that it has energy and enthusiasm.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The Vigilante”, Day 18



Key Paragraph, p. 95

“Mike drank again and then looked through his beer and watched the beads of bubbles rising from the grains of salt in the bottom of the glass. ‘Everything,’ he said. ‘I was one of the first in the jail, and I helped pull on the rope. There’s times when citizens got to take the law in their own hands. Sneaky lawyer comes along and gets some fiend out of it’” (p. 95).

Writing Prompt

Steinbeck clearly communicates to the reader the mob’s justification of its actions. They use the cost of a trial as reason to hang a man who has not been convicted of any crime. Because the black man is dead when the story starts, the reader never gets to hear his point of view. What do you think he was thinking and feeling as the lynch mob broke into the jail?

In two or three paragraphs, rewrite the story of the lynching from the victim’s point of view. Be descriptive. What were the sights and sounds he experienced in the last moments of his life? What did he think about the men coming after him? Be sure to include some dialogue in your story.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “Johnnie Bear”, Day 19



Key Paragraph, p. 106

“Alex rolled a cigarette and lighted it. ‘He isn’t, but he loves whiskey. He knows if he listens in windows and comes here and repeats what he hears, someone will give him whiskey. He tries to palm off Mrs. Ratz’ conversation in the store, or Jerry Noland arguing with his mother, but he can’t get whiskey for that” (p. 106).

Writing Prompt

The men in Loma can’t get enough of the gossip that Johnny Bear’s talent provides. They buy him whiskey night after night, just so they can be entertained. They rarely think about who could be hurt as a result.

Think about time when someone was hurt by gossip, either you or someone you know. **Write a paragraph about the danger and hurtful power that gossip can have in a community. Use one example from the story, and one example from your life to make your point. Is gossiping a responsible act? What action can individuals take to counteract the effects of gossip? Be sure to include a strong thesis statement about gossip’s consequences.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Long Valley, “The Murder”, Day 20



Key Paragraph, p. 133

“‘You hurt me,’ she said. ‘You hurt me bad.’

He nodded gravely. ‘Bad as I could without killing you’” (p. 133).

Writing Prompt

In “The Murder,” neither Jim nor Jelka is a particularly moral person. Both make mistakes and suffer in a marriage that is lacking on both sides. Steinbeck carefully crafts his characters so that both have strong positive and negative qualities.

Use the Venn Diagram you completed today to write a paragraph comparing and contrasting Jim and Jelka. How are they the same, and how are they different? Both show responsibility at some times, but not at others. Focus on character traits when discussing these two individuals and their marriage.