

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 1



Key Passage, p. 6

“Look, Alfred, you don’t owe them anything.”

‘They gave me a job,’ said Alfred, surprised at how far away his own voice sounded.

‘Big job,’ said Hollis.

Alfred swallowed hard. ‘They was the only ones gave me a job when I quit school,’ he yelled.

They fell silent.

‘You come on, Alfred,’ said James softly. ‘Whitey been stealing from us for three hundred years. We just going to take some back’ (p. 6).

Writing Prompt

In this chapter, James tries to convince Alfred that burglarizing the Epstein’s store is okay. He justifies this by saying whites have been stealing from African American for three hundred years.

In an explanatory paragraph, write if you believe stealing is wrong. Can you be a whole person and steal from someone else? Are we justified in doing something bad to someone because of a past wrong?

After completing the paragraph above, take out a new sheet of paper. **Write an informative list about a time when you did (or considered doing) something that you knew wasn’t right, but you justified it because of a past wrong.**

On one side, write what you told yourself to justify your actions. On the other list, write how you could have justified a different result. End your writing by creating a paragraph by reflecting on what a person of integrity would have thought or done.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 2



Key Passage, p. 21

“James was in jail. He burrowed deeper into the bed. It was his fault, letting it slip about the money in the cash register. His fault again not remembering about the new burglar alarm. Nice bed, soft and safe, away from all of them, he thought. Major and Hollis out on the street, looking to get me. The Epstein’s, they’ll be asking questions on Monday morning. They know James was my best friend. *Was* my best friend. No partner, nothing. Stay in bed, man, curl up like a baby, close your eyes, make the world go away” (p. 21).

Writing Prompt

Have you ever felt that you couldn’t face the world or that your problems were just too big? **Write an explanatory paragraph about a time when you felt like hiding from the world. What was the situation that made you feel that way? What did you do to finally get back on track and get up and get going again?**

If there is time for a second writing activity, learn more about Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson. After reading about the famous boxers, **write an informative paragraph paper on their stories and traits that made them admirable. Explain what details about their approach led to their success? Are there specific quotes you can find that show their way of thinking?**

*If students do not have access to the Internet, the teacher can print out articles to handout to them during this time.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 3



Key Passage, p. 35

“Everybody wants to be a champion. That’s not enough. You have to start by wanting to be a contender, the man coming up, the man who knows there’s a good chance he’ll never get to the top, the man who’s willing to sweat and bleed to get up as high as his legs and his brains and his heart will take him. That must sound corny to you.’

‘No.’

‘It’s the climbing that makes the man. Getting to the top is an extra reward’” (p. 35).

Writing Prompt

Everyone wants to be a champion in one area or another, but first most people need to be a contender. **In an explanatory paragraph, detail the ways you are a contender? What do you really want to accomplish? Write an additional explanatory paragraph telling the energy and sacrifices you are willing to make to reach your goal. Will you be defeated if you are unable to reach this goal or will your efforts as a contender make you a better person?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 4



Key Passage, p. 46

“But he always heard about Jeff, winning all the prizes at high school graduation, a scholarship to college. And he had to look at all the pictures – Jeff in a tuxedo at his freshman prom, Jeff being sworn in as president of his sophomore class, Jeff shaking hands with somebody important. He sank deeper into the chair, feeling all the good food lying heavily on his stomach” (p. 46).

Writing Prompt

Alfred compares himself to his older cousin who seems to have everything: recognition, an education, doting parents, and a future. It makes him feel uncomfortable, dissatisfied with his life, and less of a person in comparison. Do you sometimes compare yourself to others? What are the traits that others have that you would like also? **Write an explanatory paragraph about four traits that you would like to have and explain why they are important to you.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 5



Key Passage, p. 55

"You're a good boy, Alfred; we all think you're a good boy. I told the police not to bother you. But sometimes it's hard to....well, we trust you, but for your own sake there's no point in tempting fate. You understand" (p. 55).

Writing Prompt

Have people ever treated you as guilty by association? Have they judged you by the people you hang out with? **Write an explanatory paragraph about a time when you were treated poorly because of whom you were with. Was it fair? What solutions can you come up with to change people's perception of you? Will this experience make you think twice before making quick judgments about others? Use descriptions and details to convey the situation to your reader.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 6



Key Passage, p. 72

“Nobody ever said it was easy. Got to come up here day after day, got to put out, and some days nobody even looks at you ‘cept to say you’re doin’ something wrong.’

He looked at the satchel. ‘That’s part of it. You hungry enough, you keep at it.’”
(p. 72).

Writing Prompt

In an argumentative writing style, write what it takes to reach your goals. Do you need applause and recognition on the way? Write an explanatory follow up statement about what are you “hungry enough” to go after.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 7



Key Passage, p. 75

“He’s Willie, y’know what I mean? Mr. Donatelli’s in there, telling him just how to fight Becker and Willie is nodding his head and, everybody knows, sure as hunger, Willie’s gonna go in there and do it *his* way” (p. 75).

Writing Prompt

Willie is not really listening to advice—even expert advice from Mr. Donatelli. Write a paragraph about your own ability or inability to listen to advice. Are you open to receiving advice? **In an explanatory paragraph, describe a time when not listening to advice caused problems for you. How would listening have helped your situation?**

To immediately practice the art of receiving feedback, show your writing to a friend. Let them make suggestions and listen to why they recommend certain changes. Then try revising it based on their advice.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 8



Key Passage, p. 93

“Answer’s no,’ said Alfred.
‘Don’t have to decide now.’
‘I’ve decided now.’
Major’s voice was almost a scream. ‘But why?’
‘Because I don’t need to, that’s why,’ said Alfred, taking a second step toward the door.” (p. 93).

Writing Prompt

Major wants Alfred to disarm the alarm at the Epstein’s store so he can break in. He threatens to cut Alfred, but Alfred still turns him down. Alfred is able to stand up to Major. What does Alfred mean when he says, “Because I don’t need to”?

Write an informative paragraph describing what has changed inside of Alfred so that he can stand up to Major.

OR

Write an explanatory paragraph describing what you would need inside to be able to stand up to the people who try to bring you down.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 9



Key Passage, p. 106

“Go home to an empty house, eat dinner, watch television, go to sleep early like every other night. Too hot to sleep, he thought. Sleep for what? To run tomorrow and shadowbox and count out your life in sit ups?” (p. 106)

Writing Prompt

Alfred thinks that all his training is for nothing and that he is just wasting his time. Have you ever wanted something, practiced for it, and seen little rewards? Did you give up and quit or did you stick with it knowing the reward was worth it? If you gave up and quit, explain why. If you stuck it out, knowing the rewards were waiting for you at the end, what kept you motivated?

Write an explanatory paragraph about your experience using precise vocabulary from the book. Topics can include: focus, distraction, determination, and drive.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 10



Key Passage, p. 121

“Hollis pulled a packet of white powder out of his jacket pocket. Alfred stumbled over.

‘No, James, you don’t wanna mess with that stuff, you don’t wanna—’

‘Go ‘way, Unca Alfid.’ James was almost snarling.

‘No good, James,’ mumbled Alfred, feeling the room sway.

James took the packet and began fumbling with it. Alfred followed him into a corner, trying to clear his head, steady himself. ‘You and me, James, partners.’

‘That was kids stuff,’ said James as his fingers, trembling, tore at the packet” (p. 121).

Writing Prompt

Alfred tries to stop James from taking the drugs, but he is stoned and drunk himself. Have you ever heard the expression, “Do as I say, not as I do”? How does this expression apply to this situation?

Write an explanatory paragraph about a time someone gave you advice that the person did not apply to his or her own life. Did you take the person seriously? Or did you disregard the advice since the person giving it wasn’t following it him or herself? Make sure to use good descriptions.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 11



Key Passage, p. 132

"Thanks, Major, thanks a lot. How long ago now, a month, two months? That time Major used his fists and feet to bust me up. This time he....Don't blame him, man, he didn't pour all that stuff into you at the party. You did that. He didn't put a knife in your throat and make you take a ride. You got in the car. Major was just being friendly. I'll bet, said Henry. If they don't get you one way, they get you another" (p. 132).

Writing Prompt

Alfred joined Major and his friends at a party and then later went joyriding in a stolen car. He wanted to be accepted by the group. In doing so, he put aside his own values and undermined his hard work. In the movie theatre, he thinks over what he has done. First he blames Major, but realizes that he has no one to blame but himself.

He also realizes that Major and his group are out to pull him down. He has a goal and a focus. He is going somewhere, and that's not what Major and his friends want to see.

Do you surround yourself with people who bring you down or help you on your way up? **Write an informative paragraph about the people you associate with and how they influence you.**

OR

How do you handle setbacks and mistakes? Do you blame others when things go wrong? **Write an explanatory paragraph about a setback or mistake that you made. At the time, who did you blame for it? What was your role in the mistake or setback? How would you handle it today?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 12



Key Passage, p. 145

“Lou took a little black purse from his pocket, counted out some bills, and pressed them into Bud’s hand. ‘Don’t tell Ryan where it comes from, pride he always had’” (p. 145).

Writing Prompt

Lou Epstein hands money to Bud to give to Kid Ryan, an old ex fighter. **Write an explanatory page about what would motivate Lou to give the money to Kid Ryan without even getting credit for his generosity. What does this tell you about the kind of person Lou is? Use quotes from the text to link major sentences that build an argument to prove your point.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 13



Key Passage, p. 155

“‘My mom used to take me to the clinic in a cab.’

‘Oh.’

‘For my leg. I had polio,’ said Henry.

‘Yeah, I know. I been watching you lately, you don’t drag you leg so bad anymore.’

For the first time Alfred could remember, the grin completely disappeared from Henry’s face. He turned away. ‘Sometimes it gets a little better. Just temporary’” (p. 155).

Writing Prompt

Henry’s polio’s disease, as a child, has hindered Henry from being a boxer. Have you ever wanted something so bad but couldn’t have it because of health issues?

Write an explanatory paragraph describing what you wanted and how your health kept you from achieving what you had hoped to accomplish. Did you give up or try to accomplish your dream anyways?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

The Contender, Day 14



Key Passage, p. 160

“‘You teach school and go to school?’ asked Alfred.
‘The more you learn the more you want to know. You ought to think about night school for yourself,’ said Spoon” (p. 160).

Writing Prompt

Spoon has his teaching license but he is still taking courses for a master’s degree. It is hard for Alfred to believe that, despite completing his license, Spoon would still want to go to school. What does Spoon’s answer, “The more you learn the more you want to know,” mean?

Write an explanatory paragraph explaining what the quote means and how Alfred can apply it to his life. Or, write about how you can apply it to your life.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 15



Key Passage, p. 170

“‘You can’t listen to the crowd,’ Mr. Donatelli was saying, far, far away, ‘they just want to see blood and pain’” (p. 170).

Writing Prompt

How can Mr. Donatelli’s advice to Alfred after the fight apply to his life as a whole? How can this advice apply to your life? **Write an explanatory paragraph telling how the advice can apply to either your life or Alfred’s life.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 16



Key Passage, p. 181

“She was sobbing, ‘I don’t say I woulda been a star or anything. I don’t know what I’m saying.’

‘But you would of like to try,’ said Alfred.

‘Yes.’” (p. 181).

Writing Prompt

Aunt Pearl tells Alfred the story of her lost opportunity to sing. It still hurts after all these years. What message was she trying to give Alfred about his boxing? **Write an informative paragraph to Alfred as Aunt Pearl, talking about whether he should continue as a contender. Use the example from her life to make your point.**

OR

Write an explanatory paragraph about a missed opportunity in your life. Is the opportunity really gone now or can you still pursue it? If the opportunity is gone for good, what other goals can you substitute for it?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 17



Key Passage, p. 194

“You sort of seemed to, if you don’t mind me saying so, seemed to just drift along.’

‘Yeah. Sweet old Uncle Alfred.’

‘Sorry, Alfred, I didn’t hear what you said.’

‘I guess I had no ideas about anything, what I wanted to do, anything like that. Didn’t seem like any reason to stay in school. And I wasn’t doing good. But Spoon says---’

‘The teacher?’

‘Right. He used to box. He said if you can concentrate on learning to box, you can concentrate on learning anything’” (p. 194).

Writing Prompt

Alfred is talking to Jeff about how he used to be. He credits Spoon for his change. Have you ever had a person in your life like Spoon? Did you have someone to look out for you and help guide you in your life?

Write an explanatory paragraph about this person. What did they say that changed your life?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 18



Key Passage, p. 212

“‘Just one minute, mister,’ said Alfred. ‘Look, Mr. Donatelli, remember how you said the only way you’d ever know is if I got hurt, really hurt in the ring?’

‘But it doesn’t matter now.’

‘Does to me.’

‘You don’t have to prove anything to me, Alfred.’

‘To me I do’” (p. 212).

Writing Prompt

Alfred needs to know for himself that he’s finished boxing, even if it means getting hurt. **Write an explanatory paragraph about a time when you had to prove something to yourself—when you owed yourself one last chance at something even if you could have failed.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 19



Key Passage, p. 219

“All the way up the aisle, people were reaching out to touch Alfred’s robe. ‘Great fight, kid...beautiful...real heart, Brooks...’ The dressing room was jammed, Lou Epstein clutching his gloves, ‘Like the old days, like the...’ Jose and Angel screaming, Spoon reaching for him, Jelly and Pete Krakover, Denny slapping his back.” (p. 219).

Writing Prompt

People are praising Alfred for his efforts during the last fight. Elston Hubbard goes up to him and tells him, “You tough, baby.” Even though Alfred lost the fight, he won the respect of many who saw the fight. No one is upset with the loss.

In one sitting, write an explanatory paragraph as if you are Alfred. What’s going on in his head now? What has he learned?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
The Contender, Day 20



Key Passage, p. 226

“For start. Nothing’s promised you, man, but you ain’t gonna know till you try. Maybe get to build things like you always wanted.’

‘Whitey ain’t gonna—’

‘Dare him to stop you. Dare anybody if you and me partners again’” (p. 226).

Writing Prompt

Alfred is urging James to move on with his life. Are we really promised anything in life? What do we need to do to succeed?

Write an explanatory paragraph about the things that block you from your goals. Think of at least three things that you use as excuses for your failures. Write an answer or solution to each of them