

Response to Literature

REMINDER

- Write your response to the writing prompt below.
- You may give your writing a title if you would like.
- You may NOT use a dictionary. If you do not know how to spell a word, sound the word out and do the best you can.
- You may either print or write in cursive.
- Write clearly! Any erasures or strike-throughs should be as clean as possible.

DIRECTIONS: Read the following narrative and then read the writing task.

from To Build a Fire by Jack London

For land travel or seafaring, the world over, a companion is usually considered desirable. In the Klondike, as Tom Vincent found out, such a companion is absolutely essential. But he found it out, not by precept ¹, but through bitter experience.

“Never travel alone,” is a precept of the north. He had heard it many times and laughed; for he was a strapping young fellow, big-boned and big-muscled, with faith in himself and in the strength of his head and hands.

It was on a bleak January day when the experience came that taught him respect for the frost, and for the wisdom of the men who had battled with it. . . .

To Tom Vincent’s eye the unbroken snow surface gave no warning of the lurking danger. As the crust was thicker at the edge [of the stream], he was well toward the middle before he broke through.

In itself it was a very insignificant mishap,—a man does not drown in twelve inches of water,—but in its consequences as serious an accident as could possibly befall him.

At the instant he broke through he felt the cold water strike his feet and ankles, and with half a dozen lunges he made the bank. He was quite cool and collected. The thing to do, and the only thing to do, was to build a fire. For another precept of the north runs: *Travel with wet socks down to twenty below zero; after that build a fire.* And it was three times twenty below and colder, and he knew it.

He knew, further, that great care must be exercised; that with failure at the first attempt, the chance was made greater for failure at the second attempt. In short, he knew that there must be no failure. . .

In a clump of pines on the rim of the bank the spring high-water had lodged many twigs and small branches. Thoroughly dried by the summer sun, they now waited the match.

It is impossible to build a fire with heavy Alaskan mittens on one's hands, so Vincent bared his, gathered a sufficient number of twigs, and knocking the snow from them, knelt down to kindle his fire. From an inside pocket he drew out his matches and a strip of thin birch bark. The matches were of the Klondike kind, sulphur matches, one hundred in a bunch. . . .

After the first quick, biting sensation of cold, his feet had ached with a heavy, dull ache and were rapidly growing numb. But the fire, although a very young one, was now a success; he knew that a little snow, briskly rubbed, would speedily cure his feet.

But at the moment he was adding the first thick twigs to the fire a grievous thing happened. . . .The snow from the topmost bough [of the tree above] . . . fell, hit Tom Vincent's head and shoulders and blotted out his fire.

He still kept his presence of mind, for he knew how great his danger was. He started at once to rebuild the fire, but his fingers were now so numb that he could not bend them, and he was forced to pick up each twig and splinter between the tips of the fingers of either hand.

When he came to the match he encountered great difficulty in separating one from the bunch. This he succeeded in managing, however, and also, by great effort, in clutching the match between his thumb and forefinger. But in scratching it, he dropped it in the snow and could not pick it up again.

He stood up, desperate. He could not feel even his weight on his feet, although the ankles were aching painfully. Putting on his mittens, he stepped to one side, so that the snow would not fall upon the new fire he was to build, and beat his hands violently against a tree-trunk.

This enabled him to separate and strike a second match and to set fire to the remaining fragment of birch bark. But his body had now begun to chill and he was shivering, so that when he tried to add the first twigs his hand shook and the tiny flame was quenched.

The frost had beaten him. His hands were worthless. But he had the foresight to drop the bunch of matches into his wide-mouthed outside pocket before he slipped on his mittens in despair, and started to run up the trail. One cannot run the frost out of wet feet at sixty below and colder, however, as he quickly discovered.

He came round a sharp turn of the creek to where he could look ahead for a mile. But there was no help, no sign of help, only the white trees and the white hills, and the quiet cold and the brazen silence! If only he had a comrade whose feet were not freezing, he thought, only such a comrade to start the fire that could save him!

He sank down, sobbing. All was over, and in an hour at best, in that terrific temperature, he would be an icy corpse. But the love of life was strong in him, and he sprang again to his feet. He was thinking quickly. What if the matches did burn his hands? Burned hands were better than dead hands. No hands at all were better than death. He floundered along the trail until he came upon another high-water lodgment. There were twigs and branches, leaves and grasses, all dry and waiting the fire. . . .

At the second scratch the bunch caught fire, and he knew that if he could stand the pain he was saved. He choked with the sulphur fumes, and the blue flame licked the flesh of his hands. . . An anxious five minutes followed, but the fire gained steadily. Then he set to work to save himself. Heroic measures were necessary, such was his extremity, and he took them.

Alternately rubbing his hands with snow and thrusting them into the flames, and now and again beating them against the hard trees, he restored their circulation sufficiently for them to be of use to him. With his hunting-knife he slashed the straps from his pack, unrolled his blanket, and got out dry socks and footgear.

For three hours he worked, till the worst effects of the freezing had been counteracted. All that night he stayed by the fire, and it was late the next day when he limped pitifully into the camp on the Cherry Creek Divide.

In a month's time he was able to be about on his feet, although the toes were destined always after that to be very sensitive to frost. But the scars on his hands he knows he will carry to the grave. And—“*Never travel alone!*” he now lays down the precept of the North.

¹ **precept:** rule or law

Writing Task:

In the selection “*from To Build a Fire,*” Tom Vincent reflects on precepts, or sayings, that he should have listened to before finding himself in a survival situation.

Write an essay in which you evaluate the impact of the contradictions and ironies of Tom’s quest to survive in the story. How do his actions contradict the precepts (sayings)? How does the author create irony for the reader? Use details and examples from the story to support your ideas.

Checklist for Your Writing

The following checklist will help you do your best work. Make sure you do the following:

- ✓ Read the description of the task carefully.
- ✓ Organize your writing with a strong introduction, body, and conclusion.
- ✓ Provide a thesis responsive to the task and support it fully with specific details and examples.
- ✓ Use words that are appropriate for your audience and purpose.
- ✓ Vary your sentences to make your writing interesting to read.
- ✓ Check for mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and sentence formation.