

Hook Exercise: Creating a Persona (continued)

Task Two: This Mini-Q contains four documents about pioneer life on the Great Plains. After looking carefully at the documents, you will write a letter to your cousin Clara (or Clyde) back in Virginia. To do this, you will select one of the four children in the Hook photo and create a persona, or character, based on this person. Use the photograph as a jumping-off point but be creative. Answer the six questions below to create your character. Write using first-person pronouns such as I, me, and my. (Example: I feel closest to my brother Abel because we are only one year apart in age.)

Persona Creation Sheet

1. Which individual from the photograph did you select to be your persona?
2. Your full name and nickname:
3. Age:
4. Family member you feel closest to and why:
5. What you do to help around the farm:
6. Most prized possession:

Life on the Plains

There is a vast region in the middle of America that stretches from Missouri to the Rocky Mountains, and from Texas to Canada. This land is called the **Great Plains**. Today, many Americans only see this land through an airplane window as they fly high above. They see a flat land with few trees and few people. Between Omaha and Denver, there are a number of scattered towns but no large cities.

Up until the Civil War, the Great Plains was known as the “Great American Desert,” unfit for farms and towns. However, in 1862, Congress passed the **Homestead Act**, which offered 160 acres of free land to settlers on the Great Plains.

At the same time, railroad companies began to lay track across the “desert.” Word of free land and railroads got out quickly, and not just in America. Families from Ohio and Virginia were joined by families from Norway and Russia. The choicer parts of the Great Plains—in Kansas, Nebraska, and Dakota Territory—began to fill with settlers. The buffalo were killed. The Native Americans who survived were moved to reservations.

These newcomers soon learned that farming on the prairie was not easy. Crops like corn and wheat need at least 20 inches of rainfall to grow. This did not always happen.

Also, the tough prairie **sod** was hard to plow. Water was difficult to find and digging a well by hand was dangerous. With few trees for lumber, many settlers built their first homes out of sod.

To farm successfully, you had to be smart and tough. Prairie fires, hail, **drought**, blizzards—all could wipe out a year’s worth of work. Whether settlers stayed on the land five years—long enough to claim ownership—

depended on good luck, good health, good neighbors, and plain old grit.

You and your family have now been living on the Nebraska prairie for about one year. Your father has just been to town and picked up a letter from your cousin back home in

Virginia. You are pretty excited. You haven’t heard from Cousin Clara (or Cousin Clyde) since you left.

Now, in the character of the persona you created in the Hook exercise, write a reply to your cousin. Your cousin has especially asked you three questions: What is your family life like at home? What is school like? What is it like being out on the vast land of the Nebraska prairie? In your reply, combine your own creativity with details that you find in the documents. Be sure to give your cousin a real taste of *life on the Plains*.

