

Older Run

by GARY PAULSEN

Standards R2.1, R2.4, R3.7, LC1.2

Connect to Your Life

Not Alone! Think about a time when you felt alone. Did someone come to help you? Describe the experience to a partner.

Build Background

HISTORY Mushing, or sled racing, is one of the oldest official sports in Canada. It was registered in 1908, even before hockey!

In recent years, long-distance racing and touring in the wilderness have become popular. "Sled" dogs are often hooked to skiers, bicycles, or four-wheelers.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview


anticipate	ricochet
embankment	seasoned
exceeding	spectator
maneuver	transpire
marvel	trestle

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS ANECDOTE

An **anecdote** is a short, entertaining story or report about one event. The event and characters can be either real or fictional. Paulsen's essay "Older Run" is an anecdote about a day in his life of training sled dogs. As you read, notice smaller anecdotes, or amusing events, within the larger one.

ACTIVE READING RECOGNIZING CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Two events have a **cause and effect** relationship when one event brings about the other. The event that happens first in time is the cause. The second event is the effect. Paying attention to causes and effects will help you understand why an event happened or what happened as a result of an event. As you read "Older Run," take notes in your  **READER'S NOTEBOOK** about the causes and effects the author describes.

Older Run

by Gary Paulsen

Illustrations by Ruth Wright Paulsen

“HELP.”

It was, in an impossible situation on an impossible night in an impossible life, the only possible thing to say.

I had never been in such an untenable,¹ completely bizarre situation.

The night had started easy, ridiculously easy, and I should have taken warning from the ease. Generally, when running dogs and sleds, a good moment or two will be followed by eight or nine hours of panic and disaster.

1. untenable (ŭn-tĕn'ə-bəl): impossible to maintain or defend.



It was early on in training Cookie's pups. They were already trained, knew how to run, where to run, when to run and were having a ball. I was still in that phase of my life when I thought I had some semblance of control over the team, did not yet understand that the dogs ran the show—all of it—and, if I was extremely lucky and didn't hit a tree, I was allowed to hang on the back of the sled and be a spectator. The problem was that my education was coming so slowly that I had fallen behind the dogs—say a couple of years—and it was becoming difficult to keep up.

This night had begun cleanly, wonderfully. It was midwinter, clear, fifteen or twenty below, a full moon—absolutely beautiful. I put Cookie on the front end and took three of the seasoned dogs and six of the pups, a total of ten dogs, counting Cookie.

Exceeding seven dogs was risky—more than seven dogs meant it would be difficult to stop them or control them, in fact it could not be done unless they wanted to stop—but I knew that and loaded the sled heavily with gear and four fifty-pound sacks of dog meat to help me control them.

WORDS	spectator (spĕk'tā'tər) <i>n.</i> someone who watches an event
TO	seasoned (sē'zend) <i>adj.</i> made skillful by practice; experienced season <i>v.</i>
KNOW	exceeding (ĭk-sē'dīng) <i>n.</i> having more than exceed <i>v.</i>

Cookie held the gang line² out while I harnessed the rest of them, the pups last because they were so excited they kept jumping over the gang line and getting tangled, and when I popped the quick-release holding the sled to a post near the kennel we snapped out in good order.

That's how I thought of it—almost in a stuffy English manner. *Abh yes, we left the kennel in good order, everything quite, that is to say, quite properly lined up.*

The weight of the sled did not seem to bother them at all. This, of course, should have been a warning to me, a caution that I had exceeded my limits of ability and understanding, but it was a smashing night (still in the English mode), clear and quite, that is to say, quite beautiful, and I gave them their head (as if I had any choice).

We climbed the shallow hills out back of the kennel and moved into the forest. I had a plan to run a hundred miles—take twelve, fourteen hours with a rest stop—and see how the young dogs did with a slightly longer run. They had been to fifty twice and I didn't anticipate any difficulty. If they did get tired, I would just stop for a day and play—God knows I was carrying enough extra food.

I also decided to make it an "open" run and stay away from thick forests and winding trails. Young dogs tend to forget themselves in the excitement and sometimes run into trees on tight corners because they don't remember to swing out. It doesn't hurt them much, but it isn't pleasant and running should, of all things, be fun for them.

So I took the railroad grades. In northern Minnesota there used to be trains through the forests for hauling wood and supplies to the

logging camps and to service the hundreds of small towns. Most of the towns are gone now, and much of the wood is hauled on trucks, but the railroad grades are still there.

In a decision so correct it seems impossible that government could have made it, they decided to pull the tracks and ties off the embankments and maintain them for wilderness trails. In the summer they use them for bicycles and hikers, in the winter for skiers and snowmobilers and now dogsledders.

The trails make for classic runs. It's possible to leave the kennel and run a week, hundreds and hundreds of miles, without seeing the same country twice.

The one problem is the trestles. Minnesota is a land of lakes and rivers and every eight or ten miles the trains would cross a river. They made wooden trestles for the tracks and the trestles are still there. They are open, some of them sixty or seventy feet high, and bare wood—although they took the tracks themselves off so it was possible to see down through the ties.

Because they were open they would not hold snow so the snowmobile clubs covered them with one-inch treated plywood to close them in and provide a base for the snow.

The first few times we crossed one, the dogs hesitated, especially on the higher ones, but I took it easy and the older dogs figured it out and passed confidence to the team and it worked all right.

We had by this time run the trestles many times, knew where each one was, and the dogs whizzed across when we came to them.

Until now.

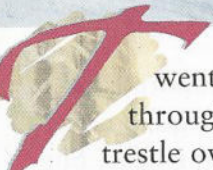
2. **gang line**: the rope by which a team of sled dogs are attached to a sled.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

anticipate (ăn-tîs'ə-pât') *v.* to look forward to; foresee

embankment (ēm-bāngk'mənt) *n.* a long mound of earth or stone, sometimes built to raise a roadway or railroad above the surrounding land

trestle (trēs'əl) *n.* a framework built to support a bridge



Twenty-five miles into the run, smoking through the moonlight, we came to a trestle over an open rushing river. I had turned my head lamp off to let them run in the moonlight, which they preferred, and was thinking ahead, way ahead of a place we were going to camp to rest the pups. It was one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen, a quiet brook kept open by small warm springs, winding through a stand of elegant spruce and tall Norway pines. It was a place to make-you whisper and think of churches, and I liked to stop and sit by a fire, and I was thinking of how it would be to camp there and be peaceful when the dogs suddenly stopped.

Dead in the middle of the trestle.

I hit the brakes with my right foot and almost killed myself. Some maniac had come and stolen all the plywood from the trestle and when I jammed the two hardened steel teeth of the brake down instead of sliding on the plywood surface to a gradual stop, they caught on an open cross tie and stopped the sled instantly.

I, however, did not stop.

In a maneuver that would have looked right in an old Mack Sennett³ comedy, I slammed into the cross handlebar with my stomach, drove all the wind out of my lungs, flew up and over the sled in a cartwheel, hit to the right of the wheel dogs, bounced once on the iron-hard cross ties of the trestle, ricocheted neatly into space, and dropped twenty feet into a snow bank next to the river, headfirst, driving in like a falling arrow.

All of this occurred so fast I couldn't mentally keep up with it and still somehow thought that I must be on the sled when I was upside down in the snow bank. As it was I had hit perfectly. Had I gone a few feet farther I

would have landed in the river and probably have drowned or frozen, ten feet sooner and I would have missed the snow bank and hit the bare packed ice, which would have broken my neck. It was the only place for me to land and not kill myself, but at the moment I was having trouble feeling gratitude.

I pushed my way out of the snow, cleared my eyes—it had happened so fast I hadn't had time to close them and they were full of snow—and peered up at the underside of the trestle where I could look through the ties and see the team still standing there, the dogs balanced precariously, teetering over open space.

"Easy," I called up. "Just easy now. Easy, easy, easy . . ."

Cookie had hit the trestle without stopping and run out, thinking that's what I wanted, until the whole team was out on the open ties. What stopped her was the pups. Somehow the adult dogs had kept up, stepping on the ties as fast as possible to keep going, but the young dogs had less experience and had tripped and gone down. Thank heaven they weren't injured and Cookie stopped when she felt them fall.

But the problem was still there. The team was spread along the trestle, each dog on a tie, and it seemed an impossible situation. To swing a dog team around requires a great deal of space. If they are dragged back on top of each other they get dreadfully tangled and tend to fight, and I couldn't imagine a dogfight at night with ten dogs on a narrow railroad trestle twenty feet off the ground.

An answer did not come to me immediately. I climbed the bank back up onto the trestle.

3. **Mack Sennett**: an early director of silent movies, especially slapstick comedies.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

maneuver (mə-nōō'vər) *n.* a movement or change in direction
ricochet (rīk'ə-shā') *v.* to bounce off a surface

Cookie was frozen out in front of the team holding them, her back legs jammed against one cross tie and her front feet clawed on the one in front, and the snow hook had fallen in the impact of the stop and had set itself in the ties under the sled so the team was held in place while I decided what to do.

I couldn't turn them around.

I couldn't drive them over the trestle without injuring dogs.

"I can't do anything," I said aloud to Cookie, who was looking back at me waiting for me to solve the thing.

"It's impossible . . ."

You, her eyes said, *got us into this, and you'd better get us out.*

Her message hung that way for half a minute, my thoughts whirling, and I finally decided the only way to do it was to release each dog, one at a time, and let them go forward or backward on their own. I thought briefly of carrying them out, one by one, but I had no extra rope to tie them (it was the last run I made without carrying the extra rope) when I got across the trestle.

I would have to let them go.

I started with the older dogs. I let them loose and set the ties and was amazed to see that each of them went on across the trestle—the longer way—rather than turn and go back. They didn't hesitate but set out, moving carefully from tie to tie until they were across. Whereupon they didn't stop and instead, as I had feared, took off down the railroad grade. They had been here before and knew the way home. I let the young dogs go then and they were slower and more frightened, especially when they looked down, but as soon as they crossed they took off as well and vanished in

the night as they tried to catch up with the rest of the dogs.

"Well," I said to Cookie. "It's you and me . . ."

I let her loose and was amazed to see her take off after the team. We were good friends, had been for years, and I was sure she would stay with me, but she was gone in an instant.

"*Traitor.*" I said it with great feeling. The truth is she could not have pulled the sled anyway. It was too heavy for one dog. But it would have been nice to have company. I worried that they would have trouble, get injured somehow, run out on a highway and get hit by a car.

It was like watching my body leave me, my family, and I gathered up the gang line and unhooked the snow hook and dragged the sled across the trestle. Once I got it on the snow it slid a bit easier and I

thought that it must be thirty, thirty-five miles to home the shortest way and it would take me three days—or three miserable days, as I considered it then. I had a thermos of tea on the sled and I took time to have a cup, feeling at intervals sorry for myself and hoping silently that I would someday meet up with the man who stole the plywood from the trestle.

It was putting the inevitable off and I finally accepted it and put away the thermos and moved to the front of the sled and put the gang line around my waist and started pulling. Once it broke free it slid well enough and I set a slow pace. I had thought of hiding the sled in some way and coming back for it later but it was coming on a weekend and the snowmobilers would be on the trails and there



**"Easy," I called up.
"Just easy now. Easy,
easy, easy . . ."**

were hundreds of them. Surely, the sled—boiled white ash and oak with plastic runner shoes—would be too tempting.

I pulled half an hour on the embankment, trudging along—it seemed like a week—and I developed an updated gratitude for the dogs; their effortless strides covered miles so fast that I felt like with my own puny efforts I was on a treadmill. It seemed to take ten minutes to pass a tree.

Fifteen more minutes, I thought, then I'll take a break. I had also decided to throw out some of the dog food and let the wolves have it. It was commercial meat and had cost money but at the rate I was moving I wouldn't get it home until I was an old man anyway.

Ten minutes passed and I said to heck with it and sat down on the sled and was sitting there, sipping half a cup of tea, when I heard a sound and Minto, a large red dog who had a pointed face, came trotting up and sat down facing me.

"Hello," I said. "Get lonely?"

He cocked his head and I petted him, and while rubbing his ears another dog, named Winston, trotted up.

"What is this?" I asked. "Loyalty?"

The truth is they shouldn't have been there. I had lost dogs several times and had them leave me and run home. Trapline teams,⁴ or teams that are lived with and enjoyed recreationally, sometimes are trained to stay with the musher;⁵ and indeed Cookie had brought a team to me when I was injured once while trapping. But that is rare. Mostly they go home. And race teams, trained for only one thing, to go and go and never stop, simply do not come back. These were not trapline dogs but race dogs, and while I sat marveling

at them four more came back, then one more, then the last two pups and, finally, Cookie.

I stood and spread out the gang line and hooked up their harnesses, which were still on the dogs, putting Cookie in first and then the rest, and I wanted to say something and I finally did manage to get "thank you" out. But in truth I couldn't speak. I had a lump the size of a football in my throat. I stood on the back of the sled and they lined out and took off and I still wondered how it could be.

I do not know what happened out there—although some of the dogs had slight wounds in the end of their ears clearly made by bites. I did not see nor could I even guess what had transpired.

I know how it looked. I had been alone, Cookie had run after them, and they had come back. All of them, some bleeding slightly from bitten ears. They all got in harness and we finished the run in good order and when I was sitting in the kitchen later, sipping a cup of hot soup and trying to explain it to Ruth, I shook my head.

"I know it sounds insane but it looked like Cookie went after them, caught them and sent them back to me. I've never heard of anything like it."

"Well, if it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and walks like a duck . . ."

I nodded. "I agree, but it's so incredible."

"I don't know about that, but I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

"You aren't paying her nearly enough . . ." ❖

4. **trapline teams:** teams of working sled dogs that provide transportation for animal trappers.

5. **musher:** a person who drives a dogsled.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

marvel (mār'vəl) v. to feel amazement or wonder at the sight of
transpire (trăn-spīr') v. to happen; occur

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

How did you feel when the dogs returned?

Comprehension Check

- What causes Paulsen's accident?
- Why does Paulsen let the dogs go?
- What does Paulsen say race teams are trained to do?

Think Critically

2. What does Paulsen mean when he says, "I was still in that phase of my life when I thought I had some semblance of control over the team, did not yet understand that the dogs ran the show . . .?"

3. ACTIVE READING RECOGNIZING CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Look back at the causes and effects you listed in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. Compare your list with a classmate's.

4. How did reading Paulsen's story make you see the connection between dogs and people in a new way?

Extend Interpretations

5. **COMPARING TEXTS** In the story "Ghost of the Lagoon," on page 124, the main character faces danger together with a very loyal dog. How are the situations in that story and in "Older Run" similar or different?
6. **Different Perspectives** What do you think happened to the dogs when they ran away? What made them come back? Retell the scene after the accident from Cookie's point of view. Use details from the story and your own imagination.
7. **Connect to Life** Do you have qualities of an adventurer? Use examples from the story and from your own experience to explain your opinion.

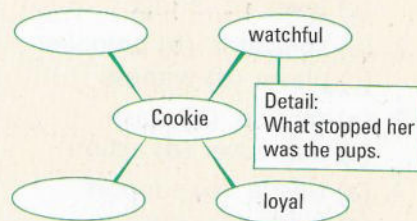
Literary Analysis

ANECDOTE An **anecdote** is a short, entertaining story, either **fiction** or **nonfiction**, about a single event. Usually an anecdote is rich with small details.

Writers often use an anecdote to throw a spotlight on a character. For example, in "Older Run," Paulsen uses an anecdote to show readers some traits of Cookie, his favorite dog. Notice what traits are shown in the following detail:

Cookie had bit the trestle without stopping and run out, thinking that's what I wanted, until the whole team was out on the open ties. What stopped her was the pups.

Group Activity With a small group, brainstorm some traits of both Cookie and Gary Paulsen. Choose a group member to record your ideas in two webs. Then have the group's recorder add a detail from the anecdote that would help readers to see each trait.



Grammar in Context: Subject-Verb Agreement

If a subject is singular, its verb must also be singular. If a subject is plural, its verb must also be plural. This is what is meant by **subject-verb agreement**.

Singular: One **dog jumps** ahead.
Plural: Two **dogs jump** ahead.

Notice that adding an *s* makes a subject plural: "one dog," but "two dogs." Notice that adding an *s* makes a verb singular: "one dog jumps," but "two dogs jump." Some common verbs, like *to be*, *to go*, and *to have*, follow their own rules for changing number.

Usage Tip: The verb should always agree in number with the subject. Don't be confused by the position of the subject or the verb, or by the words that fall between them:

There **were** still **problems**.
(Think "**Problems were** still there.")

WRITING EXERCISE Rewrite each sentence. Change each singular subject to plural, and each plural subject to singular. Then make the verb agree with the changed subject.

Example: Original The dog seems nervous.

Rewritten The dogs seem nervous.

1. The trail leads to an open field.
2. The bears bother the dogs.
3. The ravens peck the puppies away from the food pan.

Connect to the Literature Read the first paragraph on page 156 of the story. Notice the agreement between subjects and verbs in the paragraph. Then list all of the agreeing pairs.

Grammar Handbook

See p. R68: Making Subjects and Verbs Agree.

Vocabulary

EXERCISE A: WORD RECOGNITION On your paper, write the letter of the word that does not belong with the other words in each set. Use a dictionary if you need help.

1. (a) embankment (b) dam
(c) levee (d) bridge
2. (a) spectator (b) onlooker
(c) player (d) witness
3. (a) motion (b) crash
(c) maneuver (d) action
4. (a) trestle (b) support
(c) guide (d) structure
5. (a) accustomed (b) seasoned
(c) skillful (d) new

6. (a) surpassing (b) excelling (c) satisfying
(d) exceeding
7. (a) anticipate (b) expect (c) foresee
(d) ignore
8. (a) land (b) rebound (c) ricochet
(d) bounce
9. (a) happen (b) occur (c) miss (d) transpire
10. (a) marvel (b) thin (c) ponder (d) muse

EXERCISE B Write some tips for sports safety. Use at least five of the Words to Know.

Vocabulary Handbook

See p. R22: Synonyms and Antonyms.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

anticipate
embankment

exceeding
maneuver

marvel
ricochet

seasoned
spectator

transpire
trestle