

Hard to Say

A girl searches for connection to her family, her culture, and the place where she was born

About the Story

Lexile: 680L

For qualitative complexity factors, go to Scope Online.

Learning Objective:

to write a well-organized paragraph that explains the relationship between the story and its title

Key Skills: inference, word choice, character, text structure, symbolism, interpreting text

Essential Questions:

- How can we communicate without using language?
- What does it mean to belong?
- What role does family play in our lives?

Standards:

The article and lesson support these Common Core anchor standards: R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.5, W.2, W.3, W.5, W.9, SL.1, L.4, L.5, L.6

For more standards information—including TEKS—go to Scope Online.



Your Teaching Support Package

Find your full suite of support materials at scope.scholastic.com.

Audio:

- Author read-aloud
- Vocabulary
- Text-to-speech

Video:

- Author chat with Sharon Morse

Connected readings from the Scope archives:

- Fiction: "Home"
- Fiction: "Aftershocks"
- Fiction: "The Perfects"
- Poem: "Ode to Family Photographs"

Skill Building Activities to print, project, or share digitally:

- Preparing to Write: Hard to Say
- Close Reading and Critical Thinking
- Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice
- Literary Elements: Theme Anticipation Guide
- Core Skills Workout: Text Evidence*
- Choice Board
- Quiz*
- Contest Entry Form

*Available on two levels

Step-by-Step Lesson

Close Reading, Critical Thinking, Skill Building

1. Preparing to Read

15 minutes

Do-Now: Anticipation Guide (5 minutes)

- Project the **Theme Anticipation Guide** on your whiteboard or share the Google Form version with each student (both are available in your Resources tab). Have students decide whether they agree or disagree with each statement, then discuss. After reading the story, ask students how they think the characters would respond to the statements in the Theme Anticipation Guide.

Preview Vocabulary (10 minutes)

- Project the **Vocabulary: Definitions and Practice** on your whiteboard. Review the definitions as a class. (Optionally, have students complete the practice activity for homework.) Words: *conjugation, raucous, retort, sacrilegious, staples, tirade, visas*

2. Reading and Discussing

1 hour

- Read the As You Read box on page 27 or at the top of the digital story page.
- Point out the directions at the top of the column on the far right side of page 27 and read them aloud to your students.
- Let students know that they will start by following along as they listen to author Sharon Morse read her story aloud. (This will give students who do not speak Spanish a chance to hear how the Spanish names and words in the story are pronounced.) The **audio read-aloud** is located in the Resources tab in Teacher View and at the top of the story page in Student View.
- Divide students into groups to read the story again, pausing to discuss the close-reading questions that appear in the margins of the print magazine or by clicking on the bolded words on the digital story page. Have students record their answers in their own document or on the **Close-Reading Questions activity**.

Close-Reading Questions

(20 minutes)

The close-reading questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. **What feelings does Val seem to have about her life in Venezuela? How do you know?** (inference) *Val seems to have positive feelings about her life in Venezuela: She recalls tropical breezes and the smiling face of her preschool teacher. At the same time, though, thinking about her life in Venezuela seems to fill Val with a sense of loss, as she describes her memories as “hazy,” “loosely tied,” and “dreamlike.” That Val describes her memories and her first language as “lost” suggests that she feels regret or sadness when she thinks about the place she was born.*
2. **Consider the author’s use of the word *intact*. What does this suggest about how Val sees her own memories compared with her sister’s?** (word choice) *The word intact means “complete and undamaged,” and this is how Val views her sister’s memories of Venezuela. In comparison, Val views her own memories as incomplete and damaged.*
3. **What does this breakfast scene reveal about Val’s family?** (inference) *This sweet, joyful scene reveals that Val’s family is happy and close. You can tell that Val’s mom cares deeply about her daughters from her tradition of making them special last-day-of-school pancakes and the way she is already thinking about how hard it will be when Val leaves home. The way the family members laugh and joke together also helps establish their close relationship.*
4. **Why is Val’s mom cleaning surfaces that are already clean?** (character) *Val’s mom is cleaning surfaces that are already clean because she is distracted and nervous. The phone conversation Val’s dad is having is clearly a serious one, and Val’s mom is concerned about it.*
5. **What purpose does this empanada scene serve in the story? How does it develop Val’s conflict?** (text structure) *The purpose of this scene is to show Val being left out by her family. Everyone else is having a wonderful time, sharing food that is meaningful to them in a meal filled with laughter and “raucous interruptions and gestures.” But Val can’t fully participate, because she doesn’t speak Spanish fluently. Feeling excluded—and like no one seems to notice—is Val’s main conflict in the story.*
6. **Why might Val wish that she hadn’t asked her parents to stop using her nickname?** (inference) *Val is struggling to connect with her grandparents and is jealous of how easily her sister can communicate with them. Val’s nickname was given to her by her grandparents before she left Venezuela, so perhaps she wishes she still used it because it represents a connection to her place of birth, her Venezuelan culture, and her family. (Answers will vary.)*
7. **Food appears multiple times in the story. What does the author use food to symbolize?** (symbolism) *The author uses food as a symbol of family and culture—and the preservation of*

those things. At the beginning of the story, it's revealed that last-day-of-school cinnamon pancakes are a tradition in Val's family, and the pancakes represent the closeness and love within the family. The empanadas are a traditional food in Venezuela and represent the family's culture; by cooking empanadas, Val's dad and grandmother are preserving that culture. Chimichurri represents the family's Argentinean heritage, which is why it's important to Ita to teach Clari the traditional way to prepare it; in preparing chimichurri, Clari will participate in and preserve her Argentinean heritage. Throughout the story, food is also a symbol of the family's love and sense of connection. (Answers will vary.)

8. **Why is Ita showing Val old photographs?** (inference) *Ita seems to understand that Val has been left out. Because Val came to the U.S. at such a young age, many of her memories of Venezuela have been lost. By showing her photographs, Ita is helping Val remember. She is also showing Val where she comes from and that her childhood was a happy and joyful time, and she is assuring Val that she is a valued member of the family.*
 9. **What does the last line mean? Why is it significant?** (interpreting text) *The last line means that like cooking and speaking, painting is a way to communicate and connect. Val even notes that Ita shows her how to angle the brush to "translate" (express from one language to another) the sand onto the canvas. Throughout the story, Val has struggled to communicate with her family. Through painting, she and Ita are at last able to connect, to speak the same language. In that sense, the brushstrokes really are "their own language."*
- As a class, discuss the following questions.

Critical-Thinking Questions

(10 minutes)

The following questions can be shared in printable or interactive form.

1. **This story is told from Val's perspective and focuses on the challenges that Val experiences. But other people in this story are facing challenges too. What are they?** *Val's grandparents have just left behind their whole lives—almost everyone they know and everything they own—and moved to a new country where the only people they know are Val, Clari, and the sisters' parents, and where many people do not speak their language. Plus, they were in a difficult situation in Venezuela, where there was violence and a shortage of food and medicine, and they are surely still dealing with that experience. Having Ita and Ito move in is a big change for Val's parents too, and it is likely stressful for them. Clari, meanwhile, no longer has her own room in her family's house and is troubled by Val's unhappiness.*
2. **What ideas or events in this story do you think many readers might relate to, even if they speak the same language as all of their family members?** *Students might suggest that many readers will relate to the idea of feeling left out or like they don't fit in with the rest of their family or some other group. Many readers might also relate to the idea of feeling like they can't connect*

with certain people—even if they do speak the same language. Many readers may also relate to Val's relationship with Clari, about which Val says "We aren't really close, but we don't fight either. We're just . . . sisters." Still others might relate to worrying about loved ones who are in a dangerous or difficult situation, or having loved ones who are far away, or dealing with big changes in the family situation, such as Val's grandparents coming to live with her. Still others might relate to the power of connection through food or art.

3. **What do you think Val could do to continue strengthening her relationship with her grandmother and solve her problem of feeling left out?** *Answers will vary. Ideas might include continuing to have painting sessions with her grandma; doing other activities with her grandparents and the rest of her family that don't require talking, such as listening to music, going to an art museum, or watching a sunset; reminding herself that she is loved when she feels left out; and continuing to work on speaking Spanish.*
- Show students the **Author Chat video** in which Sharon Morse talks about writing and how "Hard to Say" connects to her own life experience.

3. Skill Building and Writing

20 minutes

- Have students complete **Preparing to Write: Hard to Say**. This activity will help them organize their ideas in preparation for the writing prompt on page 31 in the printed magazine and at the bottom of the digital story page.
- Alternatively, have students choose a culminating task from the **Choice Board**, a menu of differentiated activities.

Connected readings from the *Scope* archives with themes related to home and family:

Fiction: ["Home"](#) (September 2020)
 Fiction: ["Aftershocks"](#) (February 2020)
 Fiction: ["The Perfects"](#) (February 2019)
 Poem: ["Ode to Family Photographs"](#) (September 2021)