Read a chapter from Maya Angelou’s autobiography. Wouldn’t Take Nothing For My Journey Now, which describes events from the author’s childhood. Answer the questions that follow.

Complaining
by Maya Angelou

1. When my grandmother was raising me in Stamps, Arkansas, she had a particular routine when people who were known to be whiners entered her store. Whenever she saw a known complainer coming, she would call me from whatever I was doing and say conspiratorially, “Sister, come inside. Come.” Of course I would obey.

2. My grandmother would ask the customer, “How are you doing today, Brother Thomas?” And the person would reply, “Not so good.” There would be a distinct whine in the voice. “Not so good today, Sister Henderson. You see, it’s this summer. It’s this summer heat. I just hate it. Oh, I hate it so much. It just frazzles me up and frazzles me down. I just hate the heat. It’s almost killing me.” Then my grandmother would stand stoically, her arms folded, and mumble, “Uh-huh, uh-huh.” And she would cut her eyes at me to make certain that I had heard the lamentation.

3. At another time a whiner would mewl, “I hate plowing. That packed-down dirt ain’t got no reasoning, and mules ain’t got good sense. ... Sure ain’t. It’s killing me. I can’t never seem to get done. My feet and hands stay sore, and I get dirt in my eyes and up my nose. I just can’t stand it.” And my grandmother, again stoically with her arms folded, would say, “Uh-huh, uh-huh,” and then look at me and nod.

4. As soon as the complainer was out of the store, my grandmother would call me to stand in front of her. And then she would say the same thing she had said at least a thousand times, it seemed to me. “Sister, did you hear what Brother So-and-So or Sister Much to Do complained about? You heard that?” And I would nod. Mamma would continue, “Sister, there are people who went to sleep all over the world last night, poor and rich and white and black, but never wake again. Sister, those who expected to rise did not, their beds became their cooling boards, and their blankets became their winding sheets. And those dead folks would give anything, anything at all for just five minutes of this weather or ten minutes of that plowing that person was grumbling about. So you watch yourself about complaining, Sister. What you’re supposed to do when you don’t like a thing is change it. If you can’t change it, change the way you think about it. Don’t complain.”

5. It is said that persons have few teachable moments in their lives. Mamma seemed to have caught me at each one I had between the age of three and thirteen. Whining is not only graceless, but can be dangerous. It can alert a brute that a victim is in the neighborhood.

Spotlight On: Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou (1928-) is not only a successful writer but also an important figure in the Civil Rights Movement.

Her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood were all difficult. She was abused at age eight, after which she didn’t speak to anyone except her brother for four years. In order to scrape together a living as a young mother, Angelou took on a number of odd jobs, including waitressing, acting, singing, and dancing, all the while writing lyrics and poems.

In the 1950s, she moved to New York, where she connected with other black artists and got involved with the Civil Rights Movement. After the assassinations of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, both of whom she was close with, she began writing in earnest.

Her memoir and most famous book, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, was published in 1970. From there, her fame as a writer grew enormously. At President Clinton’s request, she composed a poem for his presidential inauguration.
Directions: Fill in the circle for the best answer on your answer sheet.

1. In paragraph 1, the word “conspiratorially” is used to describe
   A. the known complainer.
   B. the narrator’s behavior.
   C. the way the grandmother spoke.
   D. the grandmother’s sister.

2. According to the passage which of the following is an example of a “known complainer”?
   A. Mamma
   B. Brother Thomas
   C. kids aged 3-13
   D. Sister Henderson

3. How did the grandmother treat known complainers who came into her store?
   A. She would listen to what they had to say.
   B. She would ignore them.
   C. She would kick them out of the store.
   D. She would confront them about their complaining.

4. What’s the first clue that the grandmother wanted the narrator to learn a lesson about complaining?
   A. She compared complaining to being dead.
   B. She would call her into the store when she saw a complainer coming.
   C. She said “Don’t complain.”
   D. She said whining is graceless and dangerous.

5. How did the narrator’s grandmother feel about people like Brother Thomas?
   A. disapproving
   B. sympathetic
   C. stoic
   D. puzzled
6. In paragraph 4, the references to “cooling boards” and “winding sheets” are the grandmother’s way of saying that the people she is talking about are
   A. waiting.
   B. frazzled.
   C. sleeping.
   D. dead.

7. What does the grandmother believe the author should do when she doesn’t like something?
   A. complain about it
   B. change it
   C. find others who feel the same way
   D. talk to someone about it

8. The last paragraph gives this warning: “Whining is not only graceless, but can be dangerous.” What does the author mean by this?
   A. Complaining can cause people who might otherwise like you to avoid you.
   B. If you complain too much, you will not get much done.
   C. Complaining suggests weakness, so people might mistreat you.
   D. If you complain too much, you will not live very long.

9. What is the author’s attitude toward her grandmother and the lesson about complaining?
   A. disrespectful
   B. appreciative
   C. resentful
   D. cautionary

10. What is the author’s purpose in writing this passage?
    A. to show how her grandmother taught her a valuable lesson
    B. to warn kids about the dangers of complaining
    C. to show how her grandmother disliked complainers
    D. to describe what it was like to work in her grandmother’s store
Teachers: Please duplicate and use this answer sheet only for students for whom you did not receive a pre-printed answer sheet!

**FAST-R Answer Sheet**  

Name ___________________________  School ___________________________  

Date ___________________________  Grade ___________________________  Class ___________________________

Passage Title ___________________________  Teacher Name ___________________________

Completely fill the circle for the correct answer. Write your answer to the open response prompt in the lined space below, if your teacher directs you to do so.

1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  
6.  
7.  
8.  
9.  
10.  

**OFFICE USE ONLY**  

RESEARCH:  Y  N  

OPEN RESPONSE:  1  2  3  4