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 frizzles me up and frizzles 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

Continued on next page.
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 8, after which she didn't speak to anyone except her brother for 4 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.

**Ideas for Connected Writing Activities**
- Explain how Maya Angelou's grandmother taught her about complaining. Give two important pieces of evidence from the article AND explain how each supports the lesson her grandmother was trying to teach her.

**Purpose:** To express how the author was taught a valuable life lesson about complaining.
See especially: Questions 6, 7, 8, 10

**Relationships:** Mother to daughter, adult to childhood, and women to their lives.
See especially: Questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 9
Teacher Guide for FAST-R Passage:

Complaining

Autobiographical narrative

The annotated answer key below highlights common reasons students might choose each answer, and the sidebar gives more insight into the question types, to help you understand patterns of student responses. Always make time to follow up with students in conferences or small groups to probe their thinking, teach in response to patterns, and help them apply effective reading and thinking strategies to their everyday reading.

Note: You may find it helpful to refer to the "Types and Levels of Questions on FAST-R" sheet from your teacher resource folder as you examine your students' responses. The icon in the right-hand column, below, corresponds to that sheet's more detailed explanations of the kinds of thinking each type of question asks of readers.

1. In paragraph 1, the word “conspiratorially” is used to describe
   A. the known complainer. (OOP2, ¶1)
   B. the narrator's behavior. (OOP2)
   ✓ C. the way the grandmother spoke. (OOP)
   D. the grandmother's sister. (OOB)

   MI1: Determine implicit meaning from words in context

2. According to the passage which of the following is an example of a “known complainer”?
   A. Mamma (OOP2, ¶5)
   B. Brother Thomas (¶2)
   ✓ C. kids aged 3-13 (OOP2, ¶5)
   D. Sister Henderson (OOP2, ¶2)

   FE2: Recognize the explicit meaning from varied wording in the text

3. How did the grandmother treat known complainers who came into her store?
   ✓ A. She would listen to what they had to say. (¶2, 3)
   B. She would ignore them. (OOP1, ¶2, 3)
   C. She would kick them out of the store. (OOB)
   D. She would confront them about their complaining. (OOP2, ¶4)

   MI1: Determine implicit meaning from words in context

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. (OOP1, ¶4)
   ✓ B. She would call her into the store when she saw a complainer coming. (¶1)
   C. She said “Don’t complain.” (OOP1, ¶4)
   D. She said whining is graceless and dangerous. (OOP2, ¶5)

   MI3: Determine implicit meaning by understanding the organization of information in the text

5. How did the narrator's grandmother feel about people like Brother Thomas?
   ✓ A. disapproving (¶4)
   B. sympathetic (OOB)
   C. stoic (OOP1, ¶2, 3)
   D. puzzled (OOP2)

   MI1: Determine implicit meaning from words in context

6. In paragraph 4, the references to “cooking boards” and “winding sheets” are the grandmother's way of saying that the people she is talking about are
   A. waiting. (OOB)
   B. frazzled. (OOP2)
   C. sleeping. (OOP1)
   ✓ D. dead.

   MI1: Determine implicit meaning from words in context
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>7. What does the grandmother believe the author should do when she doesn't like something?</td>
<td>✓ B. change it (¶4)</td>
<td>FE1: Identify evidence explicitly stated in the text</td>
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<td>8. The last paragraph gives this warning: “Whining is not only graceless, but can be dangerous.” What does the author mean by this?</td>
<td>✓ C. Complaining suggests weakness, so people might mistreat you. (OOB)</td>
<td>MI1: Determine implicit meaning from words in context</td>
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<td>9. What is the author's attitude toward her grandmother and the lesson about complaining?</td>
<td>✓ B. appreciative (¶5)</td>
<td>MI2: Determine a single implicit meaning from the total of the text</td>
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<td>10. What is the author's purpose in writing this passage?</td>
<td>✓ A. to show how her grandmother taught her a valuable lesson</td>
<td>MI2: Determine meaning by using an understanding of literary concepts</td>
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