

# Seventh Grade

by GARY SOTO

## Connect to Your Life

**Being Yourself** How do seventh graders try to impress each other? Think about what you and your friends do to make others admire you. Do you behave differently with boys than with girls? Discuss your ideas with your classmates.

## Build Background

### GEOGRAPHY

The story "Seventh Grade" takes place in Fresno, California. Fresno is located in the San Joaquin Valley, southeast of San Francisco. Fresno's dry, hot summers and cool, humid



winters are excellent for growing grapes. A large number of Hispanics whose families are originally from Spanish-speaking countries are employed in Fresno's vineyards.

### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

bluff      ferocity      quiver      sheepishly  
conviction      linger      scowl      trudge  
elective      portly

## Focus Your Reading

### LITERARY ANALYSIS SETTING

A story's **setting** is the time and the place in which events in the story occur. "Seventh Grade" takes place on the first day of class in a middle school in Fresno, California. The author provides several details to help you picture the school in your imagination. See how a small detail about Victor's first day helps establish the time and the place on the first day of school.

*On the first day of school, Victor stood in the line half an hour before he came to a wobbly card table.*

As you read, find the details that best help you picture the setting.

### ACTIVE READING CONNECTING


When you read a story, **connect** the characters, the setting, and the plot to information you already know and to your own experience. Pay special attention to

- details about the setting and the characters
- statements the characters make
- events that happen in the plot

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read, use a chart to help you find connections between Victor's


| What Victor and I have in common | How Victor and I are different      |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| We both had summer jobs.         | Victor took French; I took Spanish. |

experiences and your own.



# Seventh Grade

by Gary Soto



On the first day of school, Victor stood in line half an hour before he came to a wobbly card table. He was handed a packet of papers and a computer card on which he listed his one elective, French. He already spoke Spanish and English, but he thought some day he might travel to France, where it was cool; not like Fresno, where summer days reached 110 degrees in the shade. There were rivers in France, and huge churches, and fair-skinned people everywhere, the way there were brown people all around Victor.

Besides, Teresa, a girl he had liked since they were in catechism classes<sup>1</sup> at Saint Theresa's, was taking French, too. With any luck they would be in the same class. Teresa is going to be my girl this year, he promised himself as he left the gym full of students in their new fall clothes. She was cute. And good in math, too, Victor thought as he walked down the hall to his homeroom. He ran into his friend, Michael Torres, by the water fountain that never turned off.



Illustration by Pamela Daly.

They shook hands, *raza*-style,<sup>2</sup> and jerked their heads at one another in a *saludo de*

### ACTIVE READER

**CONNECT** Do you and your friends have a special way of greeting each other? What is it?

*vato*.<sup>3</sup> “How come you’re making a face?” asked Victor.

“I ain’t making a face, *ese*.<sup>4</sup> This *is* my face.”

Michael said his face had changed during the summer. He had read a *GO* magazine that his older brother had borrowed from the Book Mobile and noticed that the male models all had the same look on their faces. They would stand, one arm around a beautiful woman, and *scowl*. They would sit at a pool, their rippled stomachs dark with shadow, and *scowl*. They would sit at dinner tables, cool drinks in their hands, and *scowl*.

“I think it works,” Michael said. He scowled and let his upper lip *quiver*. His teeth showed along with the *ferocity* of his soul. “Belinda Reyes walked by a while ago and looked at me,” he said.

Victor didn’t say anything, though he thought his friend looked pretty strange. They talked about recent movies, baseball, their parents, and the horrors of picking grapes in order to buy their fall clothes. Picking grapes was like living in Siberia, except hot and more boring.

2. *raza*-style (rā’sā) *Spanish*: in the familiar manner that local Chicanos greet each other.

3. *saludo de vato* (sā-lōō’dō dē bā’tō) *Spanish*: greeting between Chicano buddies.

4. *ese* (ē’sē) *Spanish*: a slang term used when addressing someone, as in “Hey, man.”

**WORDS TO KNOW** **scowl** (skoul) *v.* to look angry by drawing the eyebrows together and frowning  
**quiver** (kwīv’er) *v.* to shake with a slight, rapid movement  
**ferocity** (fē-rōs’ī-tē) *n.* extreme fierceness; intensity

*He felt himself blushing again.*

"What classes are you taking?" Michael said, scowling.

"French. How 'bout you?"

"Spanish. I ain't so good at it, even if I'm Mexican."

"I'm not either, but I'm better at it than math, that's for sure."

A tinny, three-beat bell propelled students to their homerooms. The two friends socked each other in the arm and went their ways, Victor thinking, man, that's weird. Michael thinks making a face makes him handsome.

On the way to his homeroom, Victor tried a scowl. He felt foolish, until out of the corner of his eye he saw a girl looking at him. Umm, he thought, maybe it does work. He scowled with greater conviction.

In homeroom, roll was taken, emergency cards were passed out, and they were given a bulletin to take home to their parents. The principal, Mr. Belton, spoke over the crackling loudspeaker, welcoming the students to a new year, new experiences, and new friendships. The students squirmed in their chairs and ignored him. They were anxious to go to first period. Victor sat calmly, thinking of Teresa, who sat two rows away, reading a paperback novel. This would be his lucky year. She was in his homeroom, and would probably be in his English and math classes. And, of course, French.

The bell rang for first period, and the students herded noisily through the door. Only Teresa lingered, talking with the homeroom teacher.

"So you think I should talk to Mrs. Gaines?" she asked the teacher. "She would know about ballet?"

"She would be a good bet," the teacher said. Then added, "Or the gym teacher, Mrs. Garza."

Victor lingered, keeping his head down and staring at his desk. He wanted to leave when she did so he could bump into her and say something clever.

He watched her on the sly. As she turned to leave, he stood up and hurried to the door, where he managed to catch her eye. She smiled and said, "Hi, Victor."

He smiled back and said, "Yeah, that's me."

#### ACTIVE READING

**QUESTION** Why do you think Victor answers Teresa so rudely?

His brown face blushed. Why hadn't he said, "Hi, Teresa," or "How was your summer?" or something nice?

As Teresa walked down the hall, Victor walked the other way, looking back, admiring how gracefully she walked, one foot in front of the other. So much for being in the same class, he thought. As he trudged to English, he practiced scowling.

In English they reviewed the parts of speech. Mr. Lucas, a portly man, waddled down the aisle, asking, "What is a noun?"

"A person, place, or thing," said the class in unison.

"Yes, now somebody give me an example of a person—you, Victor Rodriguez."

"Teresa," Victor said automatically. Some of the girls giggled. They knew he had a crush on Teresa. He felt himself blushing again.

"Correct," Mr. Lucas said. "Now provide me with a place."

Mr. Lucas called on a freckled kid who answered, "Teresa's house with a kitchen full of big brothers."

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**conviction** (kən-vīk'shən) *n.* a strong belief; assuredness  
**linger** (lɪŋg'gər) *v.* to continue to stay; delay leaving  
**trudge** (trūj) *v.* to walk heavily; plod  
**portly** (pɔrt'le) *adj.* stout or overweight

## Then he saw her.

After English, Victor had math, his weakest subject. He sat in the back by the window, hoping he would not be called on. Victor understood most of the problems, but some of the stuff looked like the teacher made it up as she went along. It was confusing, like the inside of a watch.

After math he had a fifteen-minute break, then social studies, and, finally, lunch. He bought a tuna casserole with buttered rolls, some fruit cocktail, and milk. He sat with Michael, who practiced scowling between bites.

Girls walked by and looked at him.

"See what I mean, Vic?" Michael scowled. "They love it."

"Yeah, I guess so."

They ate slowly, Victor scanning the horizon for a glimpse of Teresa. He didn't see her. She must have brought lunch, he thought, and is eating outside. Victor scraped his plate and left Michael, who was busy scowling at a girl two tables away.

The small, triangle-shaped campus bustled with students talking about their new classes. Everyone was in a sunny mood. Victor hurried to the bag lunch area, where he sat down and opened his math book. He moved his lips as if he were reading, but his mind was somewhere else. He raised his eyes slowly and looked around. No Teresa.

He lowered his eyes, pretending to study, then looked slowly to the left. No Teresa. He turned a page in the book and stared at some math problems that scared him because he knew he would have to do them eventually. He looked to the right. Still no sign of her. He stretched out lazily in an attempt to disguise his snooping.

Then he saw her. She was sitting with a girlfriend under a plum tree. Victor moved to a table near her and daydreamed about taking

her to a movie. When the bell sounded, Teresa looked up, and their eyes met. She smiled sweetly and gathered her books. Her next class was French, same as Victor's.

They were among the last students to arrive in class, so all the good desks in the back had already been taken. Victor was forced to sit near the front, a few desks away from Teresa, while Mr. Bueller wrote French words on the chalkboard. The bell rang, and Mr. Bueller wiped his hands, turned to the class, and said, "*Bonjour*."<sup>5</sup>

"*Bonjour*," braved a few students.

"*Bonjour*," Victor whispered. He wondered if Teresa heard him.

Mr. Bueller said that if the students studied hard, at the end of the year they could go to France and be understood by the populace.

One kid raised his hand and asked, "What's 'populace'?"

"The people, the people of France."

Mr. Bueller asked if anyone knew French. Victor raised his hand, wanting to impress Teresa. The teacher beamed and said, "*Très bien. Parlez-vous français?*"<sup>6</sup>

Victor didn't know what to say. The teacher wet his lips and asked something else in French. The room grew silent. Victor felt all eyes staring at him. He tried to bluff his way out by making noises that sounded French.

"La me vave me con le grandma," he said uncertainly.

Mr. Bueller, wrinkling his face in curiosity, asked him to speak up.

Great rosebushes of red bloomed on Victor's cheeks. A river of nervous sweat ran down his

5. *Bonjour* (bôn'zhōōr) French: Good day.

6. *Très bien. Parlez-vous français?* (trě byän pär'lā vōō frän'sě) French: Very good. Do you speak French?

palms. He felt awful. Teresa sat a few desks away, no doubt thinking he was a fool. Without looking at Mr. Bueller, Victor

### ACTIVE READER

**CONNECT** Have you ever done or said something to impress somebody that you later felt foolish about? What was it?

Victor repeated.

Mr. Bueller understood that the boy didn't know French and turned away. He walked to the blackboard and pointed to the words on the board with his steel-edged ruler.

"*Le bateau*," he sang.

"*Le bateau*," the students repeated.

"*Le bateau est sur l'eau*,"<sup>7</sup> he sang.

"*Le bateau est sur l'eau*."

Victor was too weak from failure to join the class. He stared at the board and wished he had taken Spanish, not French. Better yet, he wished he could start his life over. He had never been so embarrassed. He bit his thumb until he tore off a sliver of skin.

The bell sounded for fifth period, and Victor shot out of the room, avoiding the stares of the other kids, but had to return for his math book. He looked sheepishly at the teacher, who was erasing the board, then widened his eyes in terror at Teresa who stood in front of him. "I didn't know you knew French," she said. "That was good."

Mr. Bueller looked at Victor, and Victor looked back. Oh please, don't say anything, Victor pleaded with his eyes. I'll wash your car, mow your lawn, walk your dog—anything! I'll be your best student, and I'll clean your erasers after school.

mumbled, "Frenchie oh wewe gee in September."

Mr. Bueller asked Victor to repeat what he said.

"Frenchie oh wewe gee in September,"

Mr. Bueller shuffled through the papers on his desk. He smiled and hummed as he sat down to work. He remembered his college years when he dated a girlfriend in borrowed cars. She thought he was rich because each time he picked her up he had a different car. It was fun until he had spent all his money on her and had to write home to his parents because he was broke.

Victor couldn't stand to look at Teresa. He was sweaty with shame. "Yeah, well, I picked up a few things from movies and books and stuff like that." They left the class together. Teresa asked him if he would help her with her French.

"Sure, anytime," Victor said.

"I won't be bothering you, will I?"

"Oh no, I like being bothered."

"*Bonjour*," Teresa said, leaving him outside her next class. She smiled and pushed wisps of hair from her face.

"Yeah, right, *bonjour*," Victor said. He turned and headed to his class. The rosebushes of shame on his face became bouquets of love. Teresa is a great girl, he thought. And Mr. Bueller is a good guy.

He raced to metal shop. After metal shop there was biology, and after biology a long sprint to the public library, where he checked out three French textbooks.

He was going to like seventh grade. ♦



7. *Le bateau est sur l'eau*. (lə bā'tō ɛ̃ sūr lō) French: The boat is on the water.

## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What was your reaction to Victor's lie? Explain.

### Comprehension Check

- What was the main reason that Victor wanted to take French?
- What happened when Victor told Mr. Bueller that he spoke French?
- Why does Victor go to the library? What is he going to do and why?

## Think Critically

2. Do you feel Victor should feel proud of or ashamed of his actions? Why or why not?

### Think About:

- why he claimed to know French
- what happens, or might happen, as a result of his claim

### 3. ACTIVE READING CONNECTING

Look at the chart that you made in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. In what ways did you connect to Victor's experience? Discuss this with a classmate.

4. The French teacher, Mr. Bueller, realizes that Victor is faking his knowledge of French. Why do you think he keeps the truth to himself?
5. It seems that Victor succeeds in impressing Teresa. What is your opinion of her? Support your answer with evidence from the story.

## Extend Interpretations

6. **Different Perspectives** How do you think this story would be different if it were told from Teresa's perspective instead of Victor's?
7. **Connect to Life** Why do people feel the need to create false impressions of themselves? Has anyone ever tried to impress you by saying or doing something you knew was dishonest? What happened? Discuss your experiences with a classmate.

## Literary Analysis

**SETTING** A story's **setting**—the time and the place of its action—may include the geographical location, the historical period, the time of day, and the beliefs, customs, and standards of a society. In some stories, such as "Seventh Grade," the setting is simple and straightforward. For example ". . . he thought some day he might travel to France, where it was cool: not like Fresno, where summer days reached 110 degrees in the shade."

**Activity** Make a list of at least three details in "Seventh Grade" that are examples of setting.


| Setting           |
|-------------------|
| Fresno            |
| 1st day of school |
| autumn            |

**DIALOGUE** A **dialect** is a form of language that is spoken in a certain place by a certain group of people. In "Seventh Grade" the author makes his characters more realistic by including dialogue that might be used by young people.

"What classes are you taking? . . ."  
 "French. How 'bout you?"  
 "Spanish. I ain't so good at it, even if I'm Mexican."

## CHOICES and CHALLENGES

### Writing

**Write a Letter** Put yourself in Victor's shoes. Write a letter that Victor might send to a good friend about his experience in French class. Remember that he "was too weak from failure," "had never been so embarrassed," "looked sheepishly." What did Victor learn about himself from those feelings? Address the one-page letter to someone you know, and use the first-person point of view ("I was so embarrassed today because . . ."). Place your draft in your **Working Portfolio**. 

### Speaking & Listening

**Comedy from Tragedy** Watching someone try to impress someone else can sometimes be pretty funny. Imagine that a character gets to meet a famous person he or she really admires. With a partner, write a short skit about what the character does to be impressive, only to end up doing something embarrassing instead. Include in your skit lots of specific gestures, actions, and dialogue. Then act it out for the class. Be sure you enunciate your words and vary the tone of your voice so the audience understands what's happening.

### Art Connection

Look at Hugh Harrison's illustration on page 21. What does the posture of the boys tell you? Who do you think they are? What are they doing? Do you think this is a good illustration for "Seventh Grade"?

### Research & Technology

**Mexican Americans** Consult history books, encyclopedias, and other resources to find out about one of the contributions Mexican Americans have made to the culture of the United States, or to an individual state, such as California.

**Research and Technology Handbook** See p. R110.

### Vocabulary

**EXERCISE: ANTONYMS** For each group of words below, write the letter of the word that is most nearly opposite in meaning to the boldfaced Word to Know.

1. **elective:**  
(a) chosen (b) required (c) optional
2. **scowl:**  
(a) frown (b) grimace (c) smile
3. **quiver:**  
(a) tremble (b) vibrate (c) hold
4. **ferocity:**  
(a) aggressiveness  
(b) bravery  
(c) gentleness
5. **conviction:**  
(a) uncertainty (b) force (c) belief
6. **linger:**  
(a) struggle (b) hasten (c) prolong
7. **trudge:**  
(a) sprint (b) jump (c) amble
8. **portly:**  
(a) fluid (b) overweight (c) lean
9. **bluff:**  
(a) lie (b) admit (c) know
10. **sheepishly:**  
(a) shyly (b) boldly (c) easily

#### **Vocabulary Handbook**

See p. R26: Synonyms and Antonyms.



**Grammar in Context: Complete Subjects and Predicates**

Notice how Gary Soto uses a series of short sentences to create a feeling of Victor's anxiety.

Victor didn't know what to say. The teacher wet his lips and asked something else in French. The room grew silent. Victor felt all eyes staring at him.

A sentence consists of a subject and a predicate. The **complete subject** includes all the words that tell whom or what the sentence is about. The **complete predicate** includes all the words that tell what the subject is or does. The predicate contains the **verb** and any words that modify the verb.

The verb expresses an action, a condition, or a state of being. Sometimes the verb is a complete predicate. In other cases the verb is part of a longer predicate.

**WRITING EXERCISE** Read these incomplete sentences. Write a predicate for each subject. Underline the verbs.

**Example:** *Original* **Mr. Bueller**, the French teacher,

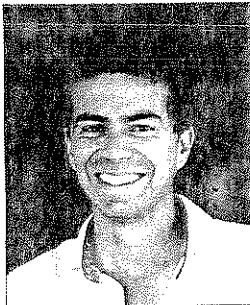
*Rewritten* **Mr. Bueller**, the French teacher, kept Victor's secret.

1. Talking to Teresa
2. At lunch **Victor**
3. The **students**
4. **Mr. Bueller**

**Connect to the Literature** Imagine a study session during which Victor tutors Teresa. Write complete sentences for their dialogue. Circle your subjects and underline your verbs.

**Grammar Handbook**

See p. R71: Writing Complete Sentences.



**Gary Soto**  
born 1952

*"I do get many of my ideas from remembering my own childhood in Fresno."*

**Mexican-American Roots** Gary Soto grew up in a Mexican-American community in Fresno, California. His father worked for a raisin company, and his mother peeled potatoes at a food-processing company. At various times during his childhood, Soto wanted to be a priest, a hobo, and a paleontologist (a scientist who studies fossils).

**Geography or Poetry?** In college, Soto planned to study geography, until he discovered poetry. "I don't think I had any literary aspirations when I was a kid," says Soto. "In fact, we didn't have books, and no one encouraged us to read. So my wanting to write poetry was a sort of fluke."

**Award-Winning Writer** Today Soto is a celebrated poet, essayist, and novelist. He has taught English and ethnic studies at the university level, and now devotes his time to writing for young people and working with students in the public schools. He has won numerous awards, including the American Book Award for *Living Up the Street* and the American Library Association's Andrew Carnegie Medal for excellence in filmmaking for his short film *The Pool Party*.