

have to GENERALIZE, of course, but try to keep your broad statements grounded in a reality your readers will share.)

3. **CRITICAL WRITING.** Dillard's narration of the chase is only six paragraphs long (pars. 10–15), but it seems longer, as if almost in real time. What techniques does Dillard use in these paragraphs to hold our attention and re-create the breathlessness of the chase? Look at concrete details, repetition, PARALLELISM, and the near absence of time-marking transitions. In ANALYZING Dillard's techniques, use plenty of quotations from the essay.
4. **CONNECTIONS.** Dillard's essay and Brad Manning's "Arm Wrestling with My Father" (p. 126) both deal with childhood values and how they are transformed as one grows older. In an essay, compare and contrast the two writers' treatment of this subject. How does the TONE of each essay contribute to its effect?

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## Annie Dillard on Writing

Writing for *The Brief Bedford Reader*, Dillard has testified to her work habits. Rarely satisfied with an essay until it has gone through many drafts, she sometimes goes on correcting and improving it even after it has been published. "I always have to condense or toss openings," she affirms; "I suspect most writers do. When you begin something, you're so grateful to have begun you'll write down anything, just to prolong the sensation. Later, when you've learned what the writing is really about, you go back and throw away the beginning and start over."

Often she replaces a phrase or sentence with a shorter one. In one essay, to tell how a drop of pond water began to evaporate on a microscope slide, she first wrote, "Its contours pulled together." But that sentence seemed to suffer from "tortured abstraction." She made the sentence read instead, "Its edges shrank." Dillard observes, "I like short sentences. They're forceful, and they can get you out of big trouble."

### For Discussion

1. Why, according to Dillard, is it usually necessary for writers to revise the opening paragraphs of what they write?
2. Dillard says that short sentences "can get you out of big trouble." What kinds of "big trouble" do you suppose she means?

## SHERMAN ALEXIE

SHERMAN ALEXIE is a poet, fiction writer, and filmmaker known for witty and frank explorations of the lives of contemporary Native Americans. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, Alexie was born in 1966 and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He spent two years at Gonzaga University before transferring to Washington State University in Pullman. The same year he graduated, 1991, Alexie published *The Business of Fancysdancing*, a book of poetry that led the *New York Times Book Review* to call him "one of the major lyric voices of our time." Since then Alexie has published many more books of poetry, including *I Would Steal Horses* (1993) and *One Stick Song* (2000); the novels *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996); and the story collections *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). Alexie also wrote and produced *Smoke Signals*, a film that won awards at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival, and he wrote and directed *The Business of Fancysdancing* (2002), a film about the paths of two young men from the Spokane reservation. Living in Seattle with his wife and children, Alexie occasionally performs as a stand-up comic and holds the record for the most consecutive years as World Heavyweight Poetry Bout Champion.

## Indian Education

Alexie attended the tribal school on the Spokane reservation through the seventh grade, when he decided to seek a better education at an off-reservation all-white high school. As this year-by-year account of his schooling makes clear, he was not firmly at home in either setting. The essay first appeared in Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

### First Grade

My hair was too short and my US Government glasses were horn-rimmed, ugly, and all that first winter in school, the other Indian boys chased me from one corner of the playground to the other. They pushed me down, buried me in the snow until I couldn't breathe, thought I'd never breathe again.

They stole my glasses and threw them over my head, around my outstretched hands, just beyond my reach, until someone tripped me and sent me falling again, facedown in the snow.

I was always falling down; my Indian name was Junior Falls Down. Sometimes it was Bloody Nose or Steal-His-Lunch. Once, it was Cries-Like-a-White-Boy, even though none of us had seen a white boy cry.

Then it was a Friday morning recess and Frenchy SiJohn threw snowballs at me while the rest of the Indian boys tortured some other top-yogh-yaught

kid, another weakling. But Frenchy was confident enough to torment me all by himself, and most days I would have let him.

But the little warrior in me roared to life that day and knocked Frenchy to the ground, held his head against the snow, and punched him so hard that my knuckles and the snow made symmetrical bruises on his face. He almost looked like he was wearing war paint.

But he wasn't the warrior. I was. And I chanted *It's a good day to die, it's a good day to die*, all the way down to the principal's office.

### Second Grade

Betty Towle, missionary teacher, redheaded and so ugly that no one ever had a puppy crush on her, made me stay in for recess fourteen days straight.

"Tell me you're sorry," she said.

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"Everything," she said and made me stand straight for fifteen minutes, eagle-armed with books in each hand. One was a math book; the other was English. But all I learned was that gravity can be painful.

For Halloween I drew a picture of her riding a broom with a scrawny cat on the back. She said that her God would never forgive me for that.

Once, she gave the class a spelling test but set me aside and gave me a test designed for junior high students. When I spelled all the words right, she crumpled up the paper and made me eat it.

"You'll learn respect," she said.

She sent a letter home with me that told my parents to either cut my braids or keep me home from class. My parents came in the next day and dragged their braids across Betty Towle's desk.

"Indians, indians, indians." She said it without capitalization. She called me "indian, indian, indian."

And I said, *Yes, I am. I am Indian. Indian, I am.*

### Third Grade

My traditional Native American art career began and ended with my very first portrait: *Stick Indian Taking a Piss in My Backyard*.

As I circulated the original print around the classroom, Mrs. Schluter intercepted and confiscated my art.

*Censorship*, I might cry now. *Freedom of expression*, I would write in editorials to the tribal newspaper.

In third grade, though, I stood alone in the corner, faced the wall, and waited for the punishment to end.

I'm still waiting.

### Fourth Grade

"You should be a doctor when you grow up," Mr. Schluter told me, even though his wife, the third grade teacher, thought I was crazy beyond my years. My eyes always looked like I had just hit-and-run someone.

"Guilty," she said. "You always look guilty."

"Why should I be a doctor?" I asked Mr. Schluter.

"So you can come back and help the tribe. So you can heal people."

That was the year my father drank a gallon of vodka a day and the same year that my mother started two hundred different quilts but never finished any. They sat in separate, dark places in our HUD<sup>1</sup> house and wept savagely.

I ran home after school, heard their Indian tears, and looked in the mirror. *Doctor Victor*, I called myself, invented an education, talked to my reflection. *Doctor Victor to the emergency room*.

### Fifth Grade

I picked up a basketball for the first time and made my first shot. No. I missed my first shot, missed the basket completely, and the ball landed in the dirt and sawdust, sat there just like I had sat there only minutes before.

But it felt good, that ball in my hands, all those possibilities and angles. It was mathematics, geometry. It was beautiful.

At that same moment, my cousin Steven Ford sniffed rubber cement from a paper bag and leaned back on the merry-go-round. His ears rang, his mouth was dry, and everyone seemed so far away.

But it felt good, that buzz in his head, all those colors and noises. It was chemistry, biology. It was beautiful.

Oh, do you remember those sweet, almost innocent choices that the Indian boys were forced to make?

### Sixth Grade

Randy, the new Indian kid from the white town of Springdale, got into a fight an hour after he first walked into the reservation school.

Stevie Flett called him out, called him a squawman, called him a pussy, and called him a punk.

Randy and Stevie, and the rest of the Indian boys, walked out into the playground.

<sup>1</sup> Housing and Urban Development, a US government department. — EDS.

36 "Throw the first punch," Stevie said as they squared off.

37 "No," Randy said.

38 "Throw the first punch," Stevie said again.

39 "No," Randy said again.

40 "Throw the first punch!" Stevie said for the third time, and Randy reared  
back and pitched a knuckle fastball that broke Stevie's nose.

41 We all stood there in silence, in awe.

42 That was Randy, my soon-to-be first and best friend, who taught me the  
most valuable lesson about living in the white world: *Always throw the first  
punch.*

### Seventh Grade

43 I leaned through the basement window of the HUD house and kissed the  
white girl who would later be raped by her foster-parent father, who was also  
white. They both lived on the reservation, though, and when the headlines  
and stories filled the papers later, not one word was made of their color.

44 *Just Indians being Indians*, someone must have said somewhere and they  
were wrong.

45 But on the day I leaned through the basement window of the HUD  
house and kissed the white girl, I felt the good-byes I was saying to my entire  
tribe. I held my lips tight against her lips, a dry, clumsy, and ultimately stupid  
kiss.

46 But I was saying good-bye to my tribe, to all the Indian girls and women I  
might have loved, to all the Indian men who might have called me cousin,  
even brother.

47 I kissed that white girl and when I opened my eyes, she was gone from the  
reservation, and when I opened my eyes, I was gone from the reservation, living  
in a farm town where a beautiful white girl asked my name.

48 "Junior Polatkin," I said, and she laughed.

49 After that, no one spoke to me for another five hundred years.

### Eighth Grade

50 At the farm town junior high, in the boys' bathroom, I could hear voices  
from the girls' bathroom, nervous whispers of anorexia and bulimia. I could  
hear the white girls' forced vomiting, a sound so familiar and natural to me  
after years of listening to my father's hangovers.

51 "Give me your lunch if you're just going to throw it up," I said to one of  
those girls once.

52 I sat back and watched them grow skinny from self-pity.

53 Back on the reservation, my mother stood in line to get us commodities.  
54 We carried them home, happy to have food, and opened the canned beef that  
55 even the dogs wouldn't eat.

56 But we ate it day after day and grew skinny from self-pity.

57 There is more than one way to starve.

### Ninth Grade

58 At the farm town high school dance, after a basketball game in an over-  
59 heated gym where I had scored twenty-seven points and pulled down thirteen  
rebounds, I passed out during a slow song.

60 As my white friends revived me and prepared to take me to the emergency  
61 room where doctors would later diagnose my diabetes, the Chicano teacher  
ran up to us.

62 "Hey," he said. "What's that boy been drinking? I know all about these  
63 Indian kids. They start drinking real young."

64 Sharing dark skin doesn't necessarily make two men brothers.

### Tenth Grade

65 I passed the written test easily and nearly flunked the driving, but still  
66 received my Washington State driver's license on the same day that Wally Jim  
killed himself by driving his car into a pine tree.

67 No traces of alcohol in his blood, good job, wife and two kids.

68 "Why'd he do it?" asked a white Washington State trooper.

69 All the Indians shrugged their shoulders, looked down at the ground.

70 "Don't know," we all said, but when we look in the mirror, see the history  
of our tribe in our eyes, taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears,  
we understand completely.

71 Believe me, everything looks like a noose if you stare at it long enough.

### Eleventh Grade

72 Last night I missed two free throws which would have won the game  
73 against the best team in the state. The farm town high school I play for is  
74 nicknamed the "Indians," and I'm probably the only actual Indian ever to play  
75 for a team with such a mascot.

This morning I pick up the sports page and read the headline: INDIANS LOSE AGAIN. 67

Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me very much. 68

### Twelfth Grade

I walk down the aisle, valedictorian of this farm town high school, and my cap doesn't fit because I've grown my hair longer than it's ever been. Later, I stand as the school-board chairman recites my awards, accomplishments, and scholarships. 69

I try to remain stoic for the photographers as I look toward the future. 70

Back home on the reservation, my former classmates graduate: a few can't read, one or two are just given attendance diplomas, most look forward to the parties. The bright students are shaken, frightened, because they don't know what comes next. 71

They smile for the photographer as they look back toward tradition. 72

The tribal newspaper runs my photograph and the photograph of my former classmates side by side. 73

### Postscript: Class Reunion

Victor said, "Why should we organize a reservation high school reunion? My graduating class has a reunion every weekend at the Powwow Tavern." 74

For a reading quiz, sources on Sherman Alexie, and annotated links to further readings on Native American education and reservation life, visit [bedfordstmartins.com/briefbedfordreader](http://bedfordstmartins.com/briefbedfordreader).

### Journal Writing

Alexie mingles positive and negative school experiences, each seeming almost to grow out of the other. Write down some of your own memorable school experiences, positive or negative. Which kind of memories seem to dominate? Are the experiences connected? (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on p. 112.)

### Questions on Meaning

1. What overall impression does Alexie create of life on the reservation? Point to specific EXAMPLES in the text that contribute to this impression.
2. Notice those places in the essay where Alexie describes how Native Americans face prejudice and negative stereotyping. What does this focus suggest about his PURPOSE?
3. The title "Indian Education" refers here to more than just formal schooling. What are some other implications of the title?
4. Alexie refers to his hair in the opening sentence of the essay and in the sections on second grade and twelfth grade. How, and of what, is his hair a SYMBOL?

### Questions on Writing Strategy

1. In this essay Alexie offers thirteen scenes: one for each school grade and a post-script reunion. Why do you think he set these scenes up in separate sections and labeled them with headings, instead of, say, running the sections together and introducing each with a phrase like "During first grade" or "When I was in second grade"? What is the EFFECT of Alexie's narrative technique?
2. Each section of the essay ends with a brief paragraph, usually a single sentence. What common function do all of these conclusions perform? How do their functions vary, and why?
3. How does the section on the seventh grade, almost exactly in the middle of the essay, serve as a thematic TRANSITION?
4. Why do you think Alexie ends with the section "Postscript: Class Reunion"? What is the effect of this final image?
5. **OTHER METHODS.** At several points in the essay, Alexie uses COMPARISON AND CONTRAST. Locate at least two examples, and explain what each contributes to the essay.

### Questions on Language

1. In paragraph 15 Alexie writes that his teacher said of him and his parents "Indians, indians, indians' . . . without capitalization." What is his point?
2. At the end of the seventh grade section (par. 49), Alexie writes that "no one spoke to me for another five hundred years." What does he mean? What is the effect of this hyperbole? (See *Figures of speech* in Useful Terms if you need a definition of *hyperbole*.)
3. Describe the IRONY in paragraphs 67 and 68.
4. Notice the similarities between the pairs of sentences composing paragraphs 29 and 31 and paragraphs 70 and 72. What point does Alexie make with the similarities?
5. If any of the following words are unfamiliar, be sure to look them up in a dictionary: horn-rimmed (par. 1); symmetrical (5); scrawny (11); circulated, intercepted, confiscated (18); ultimately (45); anorexia, bulimia (50); commodities (53); diabetes (57); valedictorian (69).