

How to Respond to an Informal, On-demand Writing Prompt/Quiz

Sample Prompt:

In Chapter 3 of *The Pearl*, what does Steinbeck mean by the “nervous system and a head and a shoulders and feet” of the town? Use textual evidence to explain your response clearly and completely.

1. Turn the main prompt into a claim statement: ANSWER THE QUESTION!

When Steinbeck refers to “the nervous system” of the town, he is referring to the way information travels in unseen channels, just as the nervous system of a human body sends messages about one part of the body to other parts.

2. Present textual evidence to support your answer:

Steinbeck continues, “How news travels through the town is a mystery not easily to be solved. News seems to move faster than small boys can scramble and dart to tell it, faster than women can call it over the fences.”

3. Offer Reasoning:

Like an animal’s nervous system carries information and impulses to different places in the body faster than the animal can think about it, so too the town’s gossip about Kino’s pearl seems to mysteriously move from place to place before anyone can run ahead to deliver the message. If you put your hand on a hot stove, you don’t have to leave it there to let the message travel to your brain and back – you know immediately and move your hand automatically, even before you think about it. That’s how the news in the town seems to travel, which indicates that this is seriously juicy gossip.

4. More Textual Evidence:

Before Kino and Juana arrive to tell it, “the nerves of the town were already pulsing and vibrating” with it.

5. More Reasoning/Textual Evidence:

Again we see how the news has already arrived at the destination before the impulse required to send it was activated, just like the nerve impulses within a body. Also, as with the nervous system of a body, the impulses result in reactions from different parts of the “body”:

6. More Textual Evidence/Reasoning:

The doctor “grew stern and judicious” and claimed Kino as a patient. The beggars “giggled with pleasure.” The priest thought of needed repairs to the church. The shopkeepers looked at men’s clothes that had not sold so well. “All manner of people grew interested in Kino – people with things to sell and people with favors to ask.” This shows that the reason for the news traveling so quickly is because it has a receptive audience of people who are only thinking of their own interests and who hope to take advantage of Kino’s good fortune.

7. Conclusion Statement:

By comparing the town to a “colonial animal” with head, shoulders, and feet connected by an invisible nervous system, Steinbeck is actually illustrating the selfish nature of most of the townspeople. They don’t really hope for Kino’s success and good fortune but rather only see how his “Great Pearl” can benefit them.

Here is the complete response to the sample question above. It includes some elements of writing (e.g., attention getter) that are not included in the step-by-step section above. If you have time to include these elements you should do so, but if time is limited, you should at least include the elements noted above.

“My precious!” says Gollum, talking to the *The Lord of the Rings*, which ultimately leads him to his own death. His greed to possess the ring is his undoing. Maybe Gollum could have learned a few things from Kino in *The Pearl*, a short allegorical novel by John Steinbeck, in which “The Pearl of the World” leads Kino to his own disaster.

In Chapter 3, the news of Kino’s discovery travels through the town like impulses in the nerves of a “colonial animal,” and Steinbeck describes the town as having “a head and shoulders and feet...a whole emotion.” When he refers to “the nervous system” of the town, he is referring to the way information travels in unseen channels, just as the nervous system of a human body sends messages about one part of the body to other parts. Steinbeck continues, “How news travels through the town is a mystery not easily to be solved. News seems to move faster than small boys can scramble and dart to tell it, faster than women can call it over the fences.” Like an animal’s nervous system carries information and impulses to different places in the body faster than the animal can think about it, so too the town’s gossip about Kino’s pearl seems to mysteriously move from place to place before anyone can run ahead to deliver the message. If you put your hand on a hot stove, you don’t have to leave it there to let the message travel to your brain and back – you know immediately and move your hand automatically, even before you think about it. That’s how the news in the town seems to travel, which indicates that this is seriously juicy gossip.

Before Kino and Juana arrive to tell it, “the nerves of the town were already pulsing and vibrating” with it. Again we see how the news has already arrived at the destination before the impulse required to send it was activated, just like the nerve impulses within a body. Also, as with the nervous system of a body, the impulses result in reactions from different parts of the “body”: The doctor “grew stern and judicious” and claimed Kino as a patient. The beggars “giggled with pleasure.” The priest thought of needed repairs to the church. The shopkeepers looked at men’s clothes that had not sold so well. “All manner of people grew interested in Kino – people with things to sell and people with favors to ask.” This shows that the reason for the news traveling so quickly is because it has a receptive audience of people who are only thinking of their own interests and who hope to take advantage of Kino’s good fortune.

By comparing the town to a “colonial animal” with head, shoulders, and feet connected by an invisible nervous system, Steinbeck is actually illustrating the selfish nature of most of the townspeople. They don’t really hope for Kino’s success and good fortune but rather only see how his “Great Pearl” can benefit them. Sadly, Kino does not recognize this himself because he is too proud of his “precious” discovery.