Build Understanding • Papa’s Parrot

Background
Parrots Parrots can learn to say words that are repeated over and over to them. Most of a parrot’s “vocabulary” is taught on purpose, but a parrot may learn words accidentally. In “Papa’s Parrot,” the bird’s accidental vocabulary plays a key part in the story.

Connecting to the Literature
Reading/Writing Connection In “Papa’s Parrot,” a boy’s behavior changes when he enters middle school. Write several sentences that describe ways in which young people’s behavior or attitudes might change as they get older. Use at least three of the following words: react, appreciate, communicate, mature.

Meet the Author
Cynthia Rylant (b. 1954)
Growing up in a small mountain town in West Virginia, Cynthia Rylant never thought about becoming a writer. Aside from comic books, she did not do much reading, and the only writing she did was for school assignments. A future career as an author was the farthest thing from her mind.

A Change of Plans When Rylant entered college, her plan was to become a nurse. Then, in a required English course, she read a story by Langston Hughes. The story “just knocked me off my feet,” Rylant has said. She decided to change her major to English. It was a good choice, as she has found great success as a writer.

Fast Facts
- Inspired by childhood memories, Rylant wrote When I Was Young in the Mountains in 1982.
- She has written picture books, novels, short stories, and biographies.
- An animal lover with many dogs in her home, Rylant often includes animals in her stories.

Go Online
Though his father was fat and merely owned a candy and nut shop, Harry Tillian liked his papa. Harry stopped liking candy and nuts when he was around seven, but, in spite of this, he and Mr. Tillian had remained friends and were still friends the year Harry turned twelve.

For years, after school, Harry had always stopped in to see his father at work. Many of Harry’s friends stopped there, too, to spend a few cents choosing penny candy from the giant bins or to sample Mr. Tillian’s latest batch of roasted peanuts. Mr. Tillian

Critical Viewing Based on the picture and the background, why might people find parrots appealing as pets? [Apply Prior Knowledge]
looked forward to seeing his son and his son’s friends every day. He liked the company.

When Harry entered junior high school, though, he didn’t come by the candy and nut shop as often. Nor did his friends. They were older and they had more spending money. They went to a burger place. They played video games. They shopped for records.\(^1\) None of them were much interested in candy and nuts anymore.

A new group of children came to Mr. Tillian’s shop now. But not Harry Tillian and his friends.

The year Harry turned twelve was also the year Mr. Tillian got a parrot. He went to a pet store one day and bought one for more money than he could really afford. He brought the parrot to his shop, set its cage near the sign for maple clusters, and named it Rocky.

Harry thought this was the strangest thing his father had ever done, and he told him so, but Mr. Tillian just ignored him.

Rocky was good company for Mr. Tillian. When business was slow, Mr. Tillian would turn on a small color television he had sitting in a corner, and he and Rocky would watch the soap operas. Rocky liked to scream when the romantic music came on, and Mr. Tillian would yell at him to shut up, but they seemed to enjoy themselves.

The more Mr. Tillian grew to like his parrot, and the more he talked to it instead of to people, the more embarrassed Harry became. Harry would stroll past the shop, on his way somewhere else, and he’d take a quick look inside to see what his dad was doing. Mr. Tillian was always talking to the bird. So Harry kept walking.

At home things were different. Harry and his father joked with each other at the dinner table as they always had—Mr. Tillian teasing Harry about his smelly socks; Harry teasing Mr. Tillian about his blubbery stomach. At home things seemed all right.

But one day, Mr. Tillian became ill. He had been at work, unpacking boxes of caramels, when he had grabbed his chest and fallen over on top of the candy. A customer had found him, and he was taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

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\(^1\) *records* (rek’ or不断地) *n.* thin grooved discs on which music is recorded and played on a phonograph, or record player.
Mr. Tillian couldn't leave the hospital. He lay in bed, tubes in his arms, and he worried about his shop. New shipments of candy and nuts would be arriving. Rocky would be hungry. Who would take care of things?

Harry said he would. Harry told his father that he would go to the store every day after school and unpack boxes. He would sort out all the candy and nuts. He would even feed Rocky.

So, the next morning, while Mr. Tillian lay in his hospital bed, Harry took the shop key to school with him. After school he left his friends and walked to the empty shop alone. In all the days of his life, Harry had never seen the shop closed after school. Harry didn't even remember what the CLOSED sign looked like. The key stuck in the lock three times, and inside he had to search all the walls for the light switch.

The shop was as his father had left it. Even the caramels were still spilled on the floor. Harry bent down and picked them up one by one, dropping them back in the boxes. The bird in its cage watched him silently.

Harry opened the new boxes his father hadn't gotten to. Peppermints. Jawbreakers. Toffee creams. Strawberry kisses. Harry traveled from bin to bin, putting the candies where they belonged.

"Hello!"

Harry jumped, spilling a box of jawbreakers.

"Hello, Rocky!"

Harry stared at the parrot. He had forgotten it was there. The bird had been so quiet, and Harry had been thinking only of the candy.

"Hello," Harry said.

"Hello, Rocky!" answered the parrot.

Harry walked slowly over to the cage. The parrot's food cup was empty. Its water was dirty. The bottom of the cage was a mess.
Harry carried the cage into the back room.
“Hello, Rocky!”
“Is that all you can say, you dumb bird?” Harry mumbled. The bird said nothing else.
Harry cleaned the bottom of the cage, refilled the food and water cups, and then put the cage back in its place and resumed sorting the candy.
“Where’s Harry?”
Harry looked up.
“Where’s Harry?”
Harry stared at the parrot.
“Where’s Harry?”
Chills ran down Harry’s back. What could the bird mean? It was something from “The Twilight Zone.”
“Where’s Harry?”
Harry swallowed and said, “I’m here. I’m here, you stupid bird.”
“You stupid bird!” said the parrot.
Well, at least he’s got one thing straight, thought Harry.
“Miss him! Miss him! Where’s Harry? You stupid bird!”
Harry stood with a handful of peppermints.
“What?” he asked.
“Where’s Harry?” said the parrot.
“I’m here, you stupid bird! I’m here!” Harry yelled. He threw the peppermints at the cage, and the bird screamed and clung to its perch.
Harry sobbed, “I’m here.” The tears were coming.
Harry leaned over the glass counter.
“Papa.” Harry buried his face in his arms.
“Where’s Harry?” repeated the bird.
Harry sighed and wiped his face on his sleeve. He watched the parrot. He understood now: someone had been saying, for a long time, “Where’s Harry? Miss him.”
Harry finished his unpacking and then swept the floor of the shop. He checked the furnace so the bird wouldn’t get cold. Then he left to go visit his papa.

Apply the Skills

Papa’s Parrot

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Do you think Harry should tell his father what he learned from Rocky? Why or why not?

2. **(a) Recall:** In the past, why did Harry and his friends visit Mr. Tillian after school? **(b) Infer:** Why have Harry and his friends stopped visiting Harry’s father?

3. **(a) Recall:** Who is Rocky? **(b) Analyze Cause and Effect:** Why does Mr. Tillian buy Rocky?

4. **(a) Recall:** Explain how Harry reacts when Rocky says “Where’s Harry?” and “Miss him!” **(b) Analyze:** Why does Harry react as he does?

5. **(a) Analyze:** What does each main character need to understand about the other? **(b) Make a Judgment:** Which character has a greater responsibility to be understanding? Why? **(c) Discuss:** Share your response with a partner. Then, explain how looking at someone else’s response did or did not change your opinion.

Reading Skill

6. In a chart like this, write the italicized word in the left column. Then, write the **context clues** from the passage and decide what the word means. Check your response in a dictionary. **(a) Harry would **stroll** past the pet shop on his way to somewhere else...** Mr. Tillian was always talking to the bird. So Harry kept on walking. **(b) He checked the **furnace** so the bird wouldn’t get cold.**

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<tr>
<th>Unfamiliar Word</th>
<th>Context Clues</th>
<th>Possible Meaning</th>
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Literary Analysis

7. Identify a reason that the story is called a **narrative.**

8. The order of events is important in **narration.** **(a) Did Mr. Tillian buy his parrot before or after Harry stopped coming to the store?** **(b) Why is this important to the story?**

9. Briefly summarize the major events in “Papa’s Parrot” in chronological order.

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<td><strong>Who’s Who in the Story</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Harry:</strong> a young man</td>
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<td><strong>Mr. Tillian:</strong> Harry’s father</td>
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<td><strong>Rocky:</strong> Mr. Tillian’s parrot</td>
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| Context: the words and phrases surrounding a word. Context clues can help clarify an unfamiliar word. |

| Narrative Writing: any type of writing that tells a story |
Vocabulary Builder

**Practice** Answer each of the following questions based on your knowledge of the italicized words.

1. Would you *resume* a meeting before or after taking a break? Explain.
2. If you *ignored* what your brother said to you, would you respond to him? Explain.

**Writing**

Write a *brief essay* in which you compare and contrast Harry's behavior before and after he entered junior high school. Gather details from the story in a two-column chart.

- In the first column, list details that show what Harry was like before junior high school.
- In the second column, list details that show his behavior and thoughts once he entered junior high school.

Use details from your chart as you draft your essay.

For *Grammar, Vocabulary, and Assessment*, see *Build Language Skills*, pages 44–45.

**Extend Your Learning**

**Listening and Speaking** With a partner, perform a *dramatic reading* of "Papa's Parrot." Divide the text so that everyone can present a portion. As you rehearse, focus on these points:

- Speak clearly so that each word can be heard.
- Raise and lower your voice to express emotion where appropriate.
- Slow down and stress certain words for effect.

**Research and Technology** Use the Internet and library resources to find information about the process that enables parrots to learn to speak. Use the information in a brief *report* that explains the following:

- why the parrot knows how to say "Where's Harry?"
- why the parrot continues to ask, even though Harry is in the room.