

Prompt

Write a narrative that describes the experience of someone who is an early traveler on the Transcontinental Railroad (Pacific Railroad). Your writing should include a description of the railroad line as well as the character's feelings about traveling on the line.

Before you begin planning and writing your narrative, read the two passages:

1. "The Transcontinental Railroad"
2. "Pacific Railroad Completed!"

Passage # 1

The Transcontinental Railroad

1 In the early- to mid-1800s, few people lived in the West. Those who did lived at the military forts and trading posts, the Mormon settlement in Salt Lake City, Utah, and the Native American camps. However, the discovery of gold in California was bringing more travelers westward. Traveling to California on horseback or by wagon train required a journey of several months across a vast and dangerous land. A quicker and more efficient method of travel was needed.

2 The Transcontinental Railroad, originally known as the Pacific Railroad, was constructed between 1863 and 1869. It ran from Omaha, Nebraska, to Sacramento, California, covered more than more than 1,800 miles, and connected the well-developed railway network in the eastern United States to the West Coast. The new railroad carried people west to mine for gold, start farms and ranches, and start new towns and businesses. The Transcontinental Railroad made commerce between the coasts more efficient and cost effective, and helped grow the United States' economy. During the Civil War, the railroad maintained a physical link between California and the Union carrying supplies and soldiers to the west and home again. Telegraph lines constructed along the railroad tracks also enabled news to travel from east to west faster than ever before. This made the United States truly "united" for the first time.

3. Along with the progress in transportation and communication brought about by the Transcontinental Railroad, there were several negative effects impacting Native American and the environment. The railroad companies working on the railroad were paid for each mile of track they laid. Consequently, the railroad did not cover the shortest distance between Omaha and Sacramento. The meandering railroad track consumed more natural resources than was

necessary and reduced the territory controlled by Native Americans. Native Americans were forced to move from their lands to allow for the construction of the railway. The railroad also was a factor in the depletion of America's buffalo herds. During construction, buffalo were hunted for food to feed the railroad workers. After completion the railroad, hunting parties would shoot buffalo from trains running alongside the buffalo herds. Hunting these animals was said to be "necessary" for the safety of passengers.

4. The men laying railroad tracks faced daily dangers. There were physical dangers related to falling rocks, the use of explosives, and other practices. The living conditions and diet of workers were poor and access to medical care was inconsistent. Many workers on the railroad were Chinese immigrants. These men were paid less than white laborers, highlighting the inequalities that were common at the time.

5. The new railroad eventually made travel more affordable and accessible to the general public but travel was still plagued by problems and inconveniences. Mechanical issues, poor weather, and which "class" a person was travelling all created difficulties for passengers. Railroad employees, and sometimes even passengers, made repairs and had to shovel heavy snow from the track by hand. If the delay was long, passengers would have to travel to nearby towns for food. Only first-class passengers were assured their own seats; second- and third-class passengers sometimes had to share. During a several-week journey across the country, second and third class passengers shared areas for cooking meals, washing clothes, and maintaining personal hygiene. As a result, second and third class passengers often found themselves in filthy conditions by the end of the journey. To prepare customers for these conditions, the railroad wrote travel guides to teach passengers what to expect from rail travel.

6. The Transcontinental Railroad was considered an engineering marvel of the nineteenth century. It physically connected the eastern and western parts of the country for the first time, and was a unifying symbol of the United States' expanse and power. From today's perspective, the Transcontinental Railroad symbolizes the cultural and environmental struggles that are still part of the Western United States.

Passage # 2

DAILY HERALD

MAY 10, 1869

EXTRA

EXTRA

EXTRA

PACIFIC RAILROAD COMPLETED

Jacob Timmons
Correspondent

1 **Promontory Summit, Utah, May 10, 1869.** Cheers and applause filled the air as the last spike of the new Pacific Railroad was hammered into the tracks completing the first transcontinental railroad. After six years, the railroad is officially open for business. The new railroad stretches from Omaha, Nebraska to Sacramento, California. The railroad links the well-developed Eastern seaboard to the cattle ranches on the high plains and the gold fields of California.

2 As the last spike entered the ground, a message was sent to telegraph stations across the nation causing celebrations everywhere. The city of Boston fired cannons over the Atlantic Ocean, and New York, San Francisco, and Washington D.C., are planning parades, firework displays, and days of prayer to celebrate. The United States is finally united by tracks of steel and the promise of new commerce.

3 The Pacific Railroad is an engineering marvel that will reduce coast to coast travel from four months to one week. Travelers will no longer endure the dangers of travelling by covered wagons and horseback, or risk the storms of Cape Horn if travelling by boat. Passengers will travel across the west in safety and comfort.

4 The Pacific Railroad is the key to expanded commerce. Manufactured goods from the East can reach their destinations within days. Western mercantile stores can keep their shelves stocked for their customers. Beef and other meats will become more affordable as trains bring the meat from the west so quickly there will be no fear of rotting. Commerce on both coasts will expand with the rapid delivery of goods and natural resources.

5 At first, passenger rail travel will be expensive. A one way ticket from Omaha to Sacramento will cost between \$65 and \$100. So far, the cost is not scaring passengers away. One railroad laborer said, "I've had to save the last four months of pay to buy two tickets on the railroad. It will be worth it though, for my son and me to join the rest of the family in California." Another passenger said, "With the safer travel, I can journey to the West and see the Rocky Mountains, buffalo, and cowboys."

6 Buffalo can still cause problems for the Pacific Railroad. Buffalo herds crossing train tracks can cause wrecks or delays. Trains will be fitted with cow catchers, a pointed wedge of iron bars that lifts and pushes animals off the tracks. Hopefully, these cow catchers will keep the trains running on time.

7 The vision for the Pacific Railroad has been in place for decades. President Lincoln pushed for the construction of this railroad. It took the Central Pacific Railroad of California and the Union Pacific Railroad companies, with help from the United States government, to get the railroad built. The government provided the Union Pacific Railroad with funds to start laying tracks towards the east in 1863 and two years later, gave money to the Union Pacific Railroad to lay tracks headed to the west. The end of the Civil War freed up workers, equipment, and supplies to finish the railroad. Winter snowstorms and floods, mountains, labor trouble, and raids by Native Americans slowed construction.

Grade 8, Narrative prompt

Prompt

Write a narrative that describes the experience of someone who is an early traveler on the Transcontinental Railroad (Pacific Railroad). Your writing should include a description of the railroad line as well as the character's feelings about traveling on the line. Use information from both passages so that your narrative has relevant descriptive details.

Common Core State Standards that will be assessed by this writing prompt include Grade 8:

Reading Literature: 8.1-6

Writing 8.3 a-e

Grade 8, Narrative prompt