

## Before You Read

### *An Hour with Abuelo*

#### Connect to the Short Story

Arturo, the narrator in this story, visits his grandfather in a nursing home. Think about a time you visited an elderly relative or friend.

**Write a Journal Entry** Write about the time you spent with your relative or friend. What did you talk about? How did you feel about the situation?

#### Build Background

This story is set in Brooklyn, New York, where Arturo's grandfather lives in a nursing home. The grandfather is from a small village in Puerto Rico, where he spent most of his life.

- Puerto Rico is an island about 1,000 miles southeast of Florida.
- Puerto Rico has its own government but is a commonwealth of the United States. Its people are United States citizens.
- Spanish is the main language in Puerto Rico.

#### Vocabulary

**diploma** (di plō' mə) *n.* a certificate indicating that a person has graduated from a school or a program (p. 270).

*You need a college diploma for many careers today.*

**ignorant** (ig' nər ənt) *adj.* without an education or knowledge (p. 270).

*Reading the newspaper daily prevents a person from being ignorant about world affairs.*

#### Meet Judith Ortiz Cofer



#### Mastering a New Language

English was not Judith Ortiz Cofer's first language. Born in Puerto Rico, she learned English only after her family moved to the United States. "It was a challenge," she said, "not only to learn English, but to master it enough to teach it and—the ultimate goal—to write poetry in it." Although she writes in English, Cofer's Puerto Rican heritage inspires most of her work.

**Literary Works** Cofer writes stories, poetry, and essays. "An Hour with Abuelo" comes from the book *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio*.

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born in 1952.



Glencoe Online

**Author Search** For more about Judith Ortiz Cofer, go to [glencoe.com](http://glencoe.com) and enter QuickPass code GL29763u2.

# Set Purposes for Reading

## BQ BIG Question

As you read, ask yourself, how might a grandfather from Puerto Rico and a grandson from the United States connect to each other?

## Literary Element Style

**Style** is an author's personal way of using language through word choice, sentence length, sentence patterns, and much more. Style includes the narration of a story and the dialogue spoken by characters. The author of this story uses one style for Arturo's thoughts and another style for the grandfather's story.

Understanding an author's style is important because style helps reveal an author's purpose for writing. Style can also show how the author feels about his or her subject and audience.

As you read, ask yourself, what words does the author use to help me understand Arturo? What words does the author use to describe the grandfather? Notice how Cofer's choice of words, narration, and dialogue affects your understanding and appreciation of the story.

## Reading Skill Recognize Author's Purpose

An **author's purpose** is his or her reason for writing. An author may write to tell a story, to explain, to persuade, to entertain, or to inform. In fact, an author may write one text for more than one purpose.

An author's purpose affects how he or she writes. Authors who write to explain or inform usually include facts and details. Authors who write to persuade include reasons that influence readers to agree with their arguments. Authors who write to entertain may describe funny or exciting situations. Authors who write to convey a message often explore a theme within a story. As you read, ask yourself why the author wrote this story. What was her purpose?

Use a graphic organizer like the one below to help you figure out the author's purpose. Note the differences between what Arturo and his grandfather say and think.

	Says	Thinks
Arturo		
Abuelo		

The author's reason for including these details was \_\_\_\_\_.

## Learning Objectives

For pages 264–273

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

**Literary Study:** Analyzing style.

**Reading:** Recognizing author's purpose.

## TRY IT

### Recognize Author's Purpose

You recognize people's reasons for writing or speaking every day, even if you don't realize it. For example, your science teacher might describe how a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. What is your teacher's purpose for speaking? Suppose that your friend invites you to go to an amusement park. Why does your friend emphasize how much fun the trip will be?





# an hour with Abuelo

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Just one hour, *una hora*, is all I'm asking of you, son." My grandfather is in a nursing home in Brooklyn, and my mother wants me to spend some time with him, since the doctors say that he doesn't have too long to go now. I don't have much time left of my summer vacation, and there's a stack of books next to my bed I've got to read if I'm going to get into the AP English class I want. I'm going stupid in some of my classes, and Mr. Williams, the principal at Central, said that if I passed some reading tests, he'd let me move up.

Besides, I hate the place, the old people's home, especially the way it smells like industrial-strength<sup>1</sup> ammonia and other stuff I won't mention, since it turns my stomach. And really the abuelo<sup>2</sup> always has a lot of relatives visiting him, so I've gotten out of going out

<sup>1</sup> Something *industrial-strength* is much stronger than normal.

<sup>2</sup> The Spanish word for *grandfather* is *abuelo* (ä bwe' lö).

#1

**Style** How does the author's choice of words let you know that a teenager is telling this story?



there except at Christmas, when a whole vanload of grandchildren are herded over there to give him gifts and a hug. We all make it quick and spend the rest of the time in the recreation area, where they play checkers and stuff with some of the old people's games, and I catch up on back issues of *Modern Maturity*. I'm not picky, I'll read almost anything.

Anyway, after my mother nags me for about a week, I let her drive me to Golden Years. She drops me off in front. She wants me to go in alone and have a "good time" talking to Abuelo. I tell her to be back in one hour or I'll take the bus back to Paterson. She squeezes my hand and says, "*Gracias, hijo*,"<sup>3</sup> in a choked-up voice like I'm doing her a big favor.

I get depressed the minute I walk into the place. They line up the old people in wheelchairs in the hallway as if they were about to be raced to the finish line by orderlies who don't even look at them when they push them here and there. I walk fast to room 10, Abuelo's "suite." He is sitting up in his bed writing with a pencil in one of those old-fashioned black hardback notebooks. It has the outline of the island of Puerto Rico on it. I slide into the hard vinyl chair by his bed. He sort of smiles and the lines on his face get deeper, but he doesn't say anything. Since I'm supposed to talk to him, I say, "What are you doing, Abuelo, writing the story of your life?"

It's supposed to be a joke, but he answers, "*Sí, how did you know, Arturo?*"

His name is Arturo too. I was named after him. I don't really know my grandfather. His children, including my mother, came to New York and New Jersey (where I was born) and he stayed on the Island until my grandmother died. Then he got sick, and since nobody could leave their jobs to go take care of him, they brought him to this nursing home in Brooklyn. I see him a couple of times a year, but he's always surrounded by his sons and daughters. My mother tells me that Don Arturo had once

<sup>3</sup> *Gracias, hijo* (grä' sēās ē' hō) is Spanish for "Thank you, son."

#2

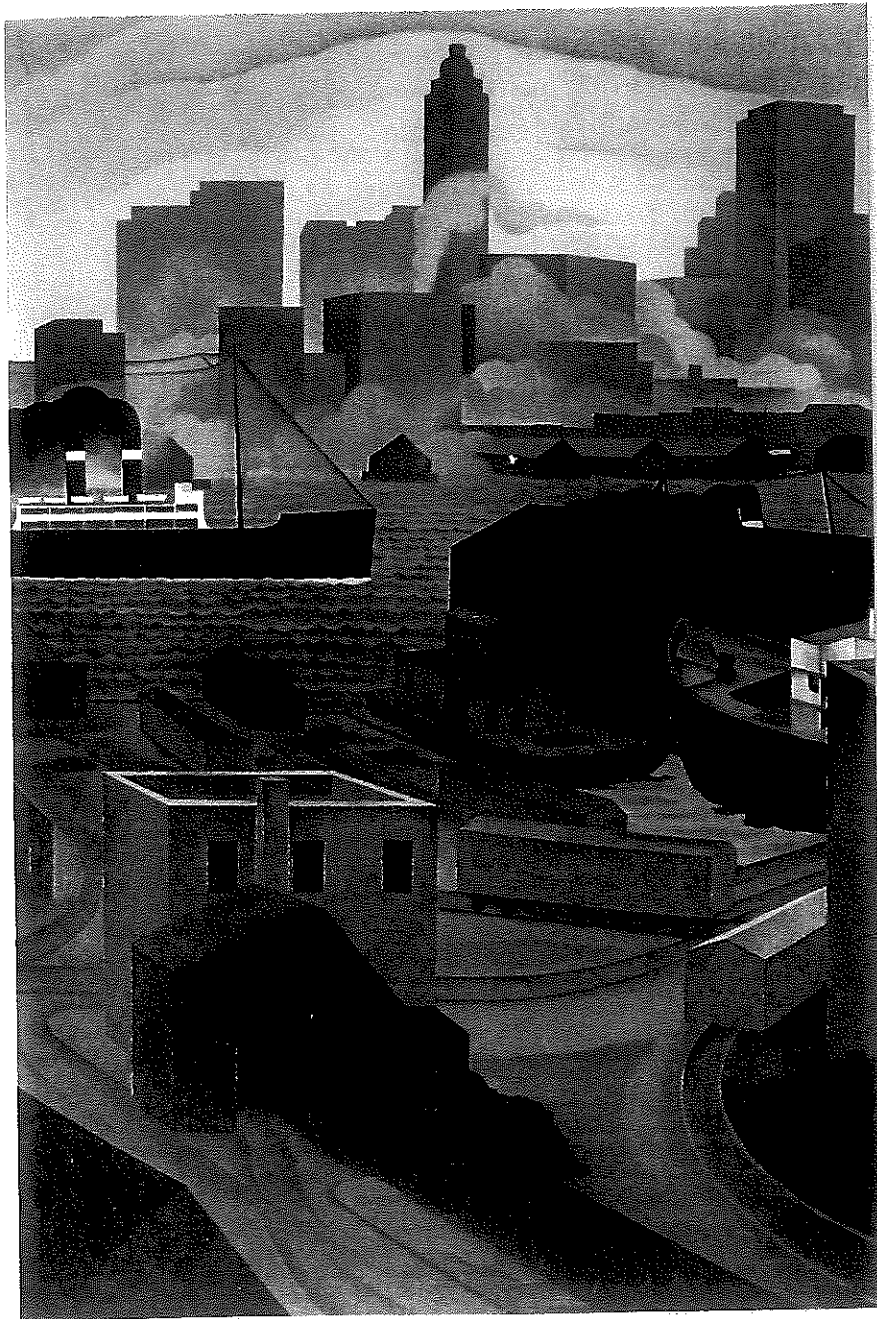
**Recognize Author's Purpose** Arturo's comment to his mother is sharp and funny. What does it tell you about the author's purpose?

#3

**Recognize Author's Purpose** What does Abuelo's response tell you about the author's purpose?

is the  
of words let  
a teenager is  
y?

“ His name is **Arturo** too.  
I was named after him. I don't really  
know my grandfather. ”



*From Brooklyn Heights, 1925. George Copeland Ault. Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 in. The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ.*



been a teacher back in Puerto Rico, but had lost his job after the war. Then he became a farmer. She's always saying in a sad voice, "Ay, bendito! What a waste of a fine mind." Then she usually shrugs her shoulders and says, "Así es la vida." That's the way life is. It sometimes makes me mad that the adults I know just accept whatever is thrown at them because "that's the way things are." Not for me. I go after what I want.

Anyway, Abuelo is looking at me like he was trying to see into my head, but he doesn't say anything. Since I like stories, I decide I may as well ask him if he'll read me what he wrote.

I look at my watch: I've already used up twenty minutes of the hour I promised my mother.

Abuelo starts talking in his slow way. He speaks what my mother calls book English. He taught himself from a dictionary, and his words sound stiff, like he's sounding them out in his head before he says them. With his children he speaks Spanish, and that funny book English with us grandchildren. I'm surprised that he's still so sharp, because his body is shrinking like a crumpled-up brown paper sack with some bones in it. But I can see from looking into his eyes that the light is still on in there.

"It is a short story, Arturo. The story of my life. It will not take very much time to read it."

"I have time, Abuelo." I'm a little embarrassed that he saw me looking at my watch.

"Yes, hijo. You have spoken the truth. La verdad. You have much time."

Abuelo reads: "I loved words from the beginning of my life. In the *campo*<sup>4</sup> where I was born one of seven sons, there were few books. My mother read them to us over and over: the Bible, the stories of Spanish conquistadors<sup>5</sup> and of pirates that she had read as a child and brought with her from the city of Mayagüez;<sup>6</sup> that was before she

4 In Spanish, *campo* (cäm'pō) means "country."

5 Any of the Spanish conquerors of Mexico, Peru, or other parts of the Americas in the sixteenth century are called *conquistadors* (cōn kēs'tä dōrz).

6 *Mayagüez* (mä yä gwes') is a port city in western Puerto Rico.

#4

Style What do these statements tell you about Abuelo? How are his words different from Arturo's?



married my father, a coffee bean farmer; and she taught us words from the newspaper that a boy on a horse brought every week to her. She taught each of us how to write on a slate with chinks that she ordered by mail every year. We used those chinks until they were so small that you lost them between your fingers.

"I always wanted to be a writer and a teacher. With my heart and my soul I knew that I wanted to be around books all of my life. And so against the wishes of my father, who wanted all his sons to help him on the land, she sent me to high school in Mayagüez. For four years I boarded with a couple she knew. I paid my rent in labor, and I ate vegetables I grew myself. I wore my clothes until they were thin as parchment. But I graduated at the top of my class! My whole family came to see me that day. My mother brought me a beautiful *guayabera*, a white shirt made of the finest cotton and embroidered by her own hands. I was a happy young man.

"In those days you could teach in a country school with a high school diploma. So I went back to my mountain village and got a job teaching all grades in a little classroom built by the parents of my students.

"I had books sent to me by the government. I felt like a rich man although the pay was very small. I had books. All the books I wanted! I taught my students how to read poetry and plays, and how to write them. We made up songs and put on shows for the parents. It was a beautiful time for me.

"Then the war came, and the American President said that all Puerto Rican men would be drafted. I wrote to our governor and explained that I was the only teacher in the mountain village. I told him that the children would go back to the fields and grow up ignorant if I could not teach them their letters. I said that I thought I was a better

### Vocabulary

**diploma** (di plō' mə) *n.* a certificate indicating that someone has graduated from a school or a program

**ignorant** (ig' nər ənt) *adj.* without an education or knowledge

#5

**Recognize Author's Purpose** What message does Abuelo's story send to readers?



*El Libro*, 1997. Juan Lascano. Oil on canvas. Zurbaran  
Galeria, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

teacher than a soldier. The governor did not answer my letter. I went into the U.S. Army.

"I told my sergeant that I could be a teacher in the army. I could teach all the farm boys their letters so that they could read the instructions on the ammunition boxes and not blow themselves up. The sergeant said I was too smart for my own good, and gave me a job cleaning latrines.<sup>7</sup> He said to me there is reading material for you there, scholar. Read the writing on the

walls. I spent the war mopping floors and cleaning toilets.

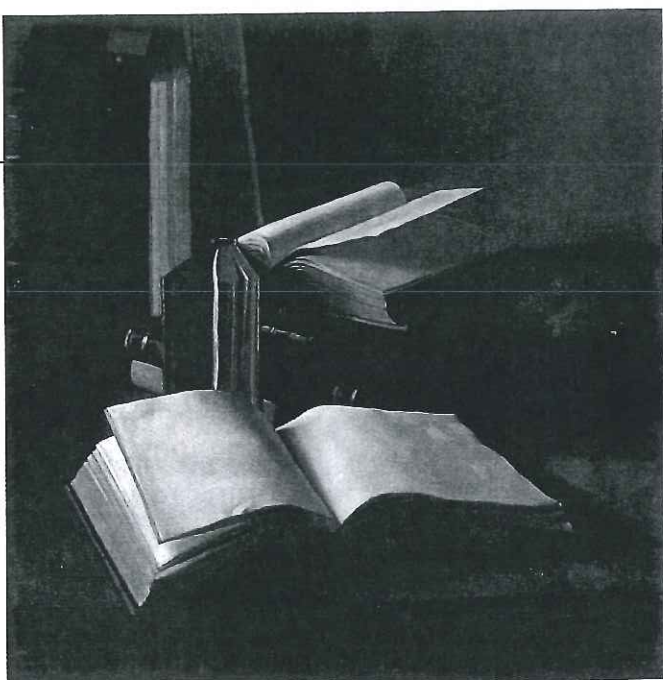
"When I came back to the Island, things had changed. You had to have a college degree to teach school, even the lower grades. My parents were sick, two of my brothers had been killed in the war, the others had stayed in Nueva York. I was the only one left to help the old people. I became a farmer. I married a good woman who gave me many good children. I taught them all how to read and write before they started school."

Abuelo then puts the notebook down on his lap and closes his eyes.

"*Así es la vida* is the title of my book," he says in a whisper, almost to himself. Maybe he's forgotten that I'm there.

For a long time he doesn't say anything else. I think that he's sleeping, but then I see that he's watching me through half-closed lids, maybe waiting for my opinion of his writing. I'm trying to think of something nice to say. I liked it and all, but not the title. And I think that he could've been a teacher if he had wanted to bad enough. Nobody is going to stop me from doing what I want with my life. I'm not going to let *la vida* get in my way. I want to discuss this with him, but the words are not coming

<sup>7</sup> Another word for *toilets* is *latrines* (lə trēn'z).



#6

**Recognize Author's Purpose** Why did the author include this detail in the story?

#7

**Style** What can you tell about Arturo from the way he narrates?



“I’m about to ask him why he didn’t keep fighting to make his dream come true,”

into my head in Spanish just yet. I’m about to ask him why he didn’t keep fighting to make his dream come true, when an old lady in hot-pink running shoes sort of appears at the door.

She is wearing a pink jogging outfit too. The world’s oldest marathoner,<sup>8</sup> I say to myself. She calls out to my grandfather in a flirty voice, “Yoo-hoo, Arturo, remember what day this is? It’s poetry-reading day in the rec room! You promised us you’d read your new one today.”

I see my abuelo perking up almost immediately. He points to his wheelchair, which is hanging like a huge metal bat in the open closet. He makes it obvious that he wants me to get it. I put it together, and with Mrs. Pink Running Shoes’s help, we get him in it. Then he says in a strong deep voice I hardly recognize, “Arturo, get that notebook from the table, please.”

I hand him another map-of-the-Island notebook—this one is red. On it in big letters it says, *POEMAS DE ARTURO*.

I start to push him toward the rec room, but he shakes his finger at me.

“Arturo, look at your watch now. I believe your time is over.” He gives me a wicked smile.

Then with her pushing the wheelchair—maybe a little too fast—they roll down the hall. He is already reading from his notebook, and she’s making bird noises. I look at my watch and the hour is up, to the minute. I can’t help but think that my abuelo has been timing me. It cracks me up. I walk slowly down the hall toward the exit sign. I want my mother to have to wait a little. I don’t want her to think that I’m in a hurry or anything.

<sup>8</sup> A *marathoner* is a person who runs a long-distance race.

#8

**Style** What does Abuelo’s “strong deep voice” tell you about how he’s feeling?

#9

**BQ** BIG Question

In what new way does Arturo understand Abuelo at the end of the story?

## After You Read

### Respond and Think Critically

1. What reasons does Arturo give for not wanting to visit his grandfather, Abuelo, in the nursing home? [Recall]
2. What happens during Arturo's visit with Abuelo? Give details from the story to support your answer. [Summarize]
3. At the beginning of the story, why does Arturo believe that he doesn't have much in common with his grandfather? Explain. [Infer]
4. Why do you think Abuelo tells Arturo to look at his watch at the end of the story? What does this reveal about Abuelo? Explain. [Interpret]
5. In what way has Arturo's attitude changed by the end of the story? Explain. [Conclude]
6. **EC** **BIG Question** Which part of his life story most helped you understand Abuelo? Explain. [Evaluate]

### TIP

**Making Inferences** To answer question 3, you must closely read parts of Arturo's narration.

- Look for what Arturo says when he first starts to talk about his grandfather.
- Think about how the details make Abuelo seem different from Arturo.
- Based on the details, make an inference about why Arturo feels he has little in common with Abuelo.

**FOLDABLES** Study Organizer Keep track of your ideas about the **BIG Question** in your unit Foldable.

### View the Art

#### Village Life in Puerto Rico

This painting depicts a Puerto Rican village much like the one in which Arturo's grandfather grew up. What do you think life was like growing up in a village like this one?

**Group Activity** Discuss the following questions with classmates. Use evidence from "An Hour with Abuelo" to support your answers.

1. What does Abuelo's story tell readers about village life in Puerto Rico before World War II? Recall details about Abuelo's parents, childhood, and education.

2. What details in this painting reflect details in the story? Explain.
3. What does Abuelo call his book? Based on what you know about life in Puerto Rico, why do you think Abuelo chose that particular title? Explain.



*El Sol Asombra, 1989.*  
Rafael Ferrer. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 in. Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH.