

My First Free Summer

Memoir by Julia Alvarez

When is it time to LEAVE?



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS
Reading Process & Literary Analysis
Benchmark LA.8.1.7.4 Identify cause-and-effect relationships in text.

Benchmark LA.8.2.2.4 Identify and analyze the characteristics of a variety of types of text (e.g., reference works, reports, technical manuals, newspapers, magazines, biographies, periodicals, procedures, instructions, practical/functional texts).

KEY IDEA Even under the best of circumstances, **leaving** someone or something behind can be difficult. Familiar people and places often provide us with a sense of safety and security. In the memoir you are about to read, Julia Alvarez faces the pain of leaving her homeland, even as she realizes the dangers of staying.

QUICKWRITE Reflect on times when you have had to leave a special person or place. Choose one experience and write a journal entry that explores your feelings about leaving. Were you looking forward to moving on? What were you worried about?





LITERARY ANALYSIS: MEMOIR

A **memoir** is a form of autobiographical writing in which a writer describes important events in his or her life. Most memoirs

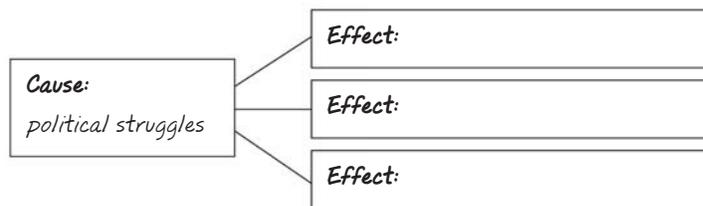
- use the first-person point of view
- are true accounts of actual events
- describe conflicts faced by the writer
- include the writer’s feelings about historical events or social issues

As you read “My First Free Summer,” look for places where Julia Alvarez shares her feelings about the historical events taking place in the Dominican Republic.

READING SKILL: CAUSE AND EFFECT

Events are often related by **cause and effect**, which means that one event brings about the other. The first event is the **cause**, and what follows is the **effect**. Sometimes, one cause can have many effects. Recognizing cause and effect relationships can help you understand important turning points, because you’ll be aware of the consequences of events and actions.

As you read, look for the effects that the political struggle in Alvarez’s homeland had on her life. Use a chart like the one shown to help you keep track of these effects.



VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Alvarez uses the vocabulary words to help describe a traumatic childhood experience. See how many you know. Make a chart like the one shown. Put each word in the appropriate column.

WORD LIST	contradiction	replete	unravel
	interrogation	summon	

<i>Know Well</i>	<i>Think I Know</i>	<i>Don't Know at All</i>

Where Is Home? Julia Alvarez emigrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States when she was ten. Her father had taken part in an underground plot against dictator Rafael Trujillo (ră-fă'yəl' trōō-hē'yō), so the family’s safety was in jeopardy. Although Alvarez and her family escaped, she found it difficult being cut off from her homeland and adjusting to a new country. Books offered Alvarez a world where she did not feel alone. Through writing, she could begin to connect her two cultures. She likes to quote another poet in saying, “Language is the only homeland.”



Julia Alvarez
born 1950

A Poet First Poetry first drew Alvarez to writing. After receiving degrees in literature and writing, she spent 13 years teaching poetry at several universities. *Homecoming*, a book of her poems, was published in 1984. Since then, Alvarez has gone on to write in a variety of genres, including fiction for both children and adults.

Background

A Brutal Dictator The people of the Dominican Republic suffered under the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo and his supporters for 31 years (from 1930–1961). Under his rule, masses of people were slaughtered for “crimes” as minor as not hanging his portrait in their homes. Many brave Dominicans, including Alvarez’s father, tried to overthrow this government. Those caught faced terrible consequences.



MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND BACKGROUND

To learn more about Julia Alvarez and the Dominican Republic, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

My First Free Summer

JULIA ALVAREZ

I never had summer—I had summer school. First grade, summer school. Second grade, summer school. Third gradesummerschoolfourthgradesummer-school. In fifth grade, I vowed I would get interested in fractions, the presidents of the United States, Mesopotamia; I would learn my English.

That was the problem. English. My mother had decided to send her children to the American school so we could learn the language of the nation that would soon be liberating us. For thirty years, the Dominican Republic had endured a bloody and repressive dictatorship.¹ From my father, who was involved in an underground plot, my mother knew that *los americanos*² had
10 promised to help bring democracy to the island.

“You have to learn your English!” Mami kept scolding me.

“But why?” I’d ask. I didn’t know about my father’s activities. I didn’t know the dictator was bad. All I knew was that my friends who were attending Dominican schools were often on holiday to honor the dictator’s birthday, the dictator’s saint day, the day the dictator became the dictator, the day the dictator’s oldest son was born, and so on. They marched in parades and visited the palace and had their picture in the paper.

Meanwhile, I had to learn about the pilgrims with their funny witch hats, about the 50 states and where they were on the map, about Dick and Jane³ and
20 their tame little pets, Puff and Spot, about freedom and liberty and justice for all—while being imprisoned in a hot classroom with a picture of a man wearing a silly wig hanging above the blackboard. And all of this learning I had to do in that impossibly difficult, rocks-in-your-mouth language of English! **A**

ANALYZE VISUALS

Look at the girl’s expression, posture, and clothing, as well as the window she leans near. What do these **details** suggest about her situation?

A CAUSE AND EFFECT

What effect does Mr. Alvarez’s political involvement have on Julia’s life? Include this in your chart.

1. **dictatorship** (dīk-tā'tər-shīp'): a government under an absolute ruler, or dictator.

2. **los americanos** (lōs ə-mēr'ĭ-kā'nōs) *Spanish*: the Americans.

3. **Dick and Jane**: characters in a children’s reading textbook.

Detail of *The Stillness of an Afternoon* (2003), Bo Bartlett. Oil on panel, 18½" × 21". Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York.



Dictator Trujillo established the SIM (Military Intelligence Service), a secret police force that spied on fellow Dominicans and engaged in torture and murder at Trujillo's request.

B MEMOIR

What does freedom mean to Alvarez at this point in her life?

replete (rĭ-plĕt') *adj.*
abundantly supplied

unravel (ŭn-răv'əl)
v. to undo; come apart

C CAUSE AND EFFECT

What's causing Alvarez to have a boring summer?

Somehow, I managed to scrape by. Every June, when my prospects looked iffy, Mami and I met with the principal. I squirmed in my seat while they arranged for my special summer lessons.

"She is going to work extra hard. Aren't you, young lady?" the principal would quiz me at the end of our session.

My mother's eye on me, I'd murmur, "Yeah."

30 "Yes, what?" Mami coached.

"Yes." I sighed. "Sir."

It's a wonder that I just wasn't thrown out, which was what I secretly hoped for. But there were extenuating circumstances,⁴ the grounds on which the American school stood had been donated by my grandfather. In fact, it had been my grandmother who had encouraged Carol Morgan to start her school. The bulk of the student body was made up of the sons and daughters of American diplomats and business people, but a few Dominicans—most of them friends or members of my family—were allowed to attend.

40 "You should be grateful!" Mami scolded on the way home from our meeting. "Not every girl is lucky enough to go to the Carol Morgan School!"

In fifth grade, I straightened out. "Yes, ma'am!" I learned to say brightly. "Yes, sir!" To wave my hand in sword-wielding swoops so I could get called on with the right answer. What had changed me? Gratitude? A realization of my luckiness? No, sir! The thought of a fun summer? Yes, ma'am! I wanted to run with the pack of cousins and friends in the common yard that connected all our properties. To play on the trampoline and go off to *la playa*⁵ and get brown as a berry. I wanted to be free. Maybe American principles had finally sunk in! **B**

50 The summer of 1960 began in bliss: I did not have to go to summer school! *Attitude much improved. Her English progressing nicely. Attentive and cooperative in classroom.* I grinned as Mami read off the note that accompanied my report card of Bs.

But the yard **replete** with cousins and friends that I had dreamed about all year was deserted. Family members were leaving for the United States, using whatever connections they could drum up. The plot had **unraveled**. Every day there were massive arrests. The United States had closed its embassy and was advising Americans to return home.

My own parents were terrified. Every night black Volkswagens blocked our driveway and stayed there until morning. "Secret police," my older sister whispered.

60 "Why are they secret if they're the police?" I asked.

"Shut up!" my sister hissed. "Do you want to get us all killed?"

Day after day, I kicked a deflated beach ball around the empty yard, feeling as if I'd been tricked into good behavior by whomever God put in charge of the lives of 10-year-olds. I was bored. Even summer school would have been better than this! **C**

4. **extenuating circumstances** (ĭk-stĕn'yōō-ă'tĭng sŭr'kəm-stăn'sēs): a situation or condition that provides an excuse for an action.

5. **la playa** (lä plā'yä) *Spanish*: the beach.

One day toward the end of the summer, my mother **summoned** my sisters and me. She wore that too-bright smile she sometimes pasted on her terrified face.

“Good news, girls! Our papers and tickets came! We’re leaving for the United States!”

70 Our mouths dropped. We hadn’t been told we were going on a trip anywhere, no less to some place so far away.

I was the first to speak up. “But why?”

My mother flashed me the same look she used to give me when I’d ask why I had to learn English.

I was about to tell her that I didn’t want to go to the United States, where summer school had been invented and everyone spoke English. But my mother lifted a hand for silence. “We’re leaving in a few hours. I want you all to go get ready! I’ll be in to pack soon.” The desperate look in her eyes did not allow for **contradiction**. We raced off, wondering how to fit the contents of our

80 Dominican lives into four small suitcases. **D**

Our flight was scheduled for that afternoon, but the airplane did not appear. The terminal filled with soldiers, wielding machine guns, checking papers, escorting passengers into a small **interrogation** room. Not everyone returned.

“It’s a trap,” I heard my mother whisper to my father.

This had happened before, a cat-and-mouse game⁶ the dictator liked to play. Pretend that he was letting someone go, and then at the last minute, their family and friends conveniently gathered together—wham! The secret police would haul the whole clan away.

Of course, I didn’t know that this was what my parents were dreading.

90 But as the hours ticked away, and afternoon turned into evening and evening into night and night into midnight with no plane in sight, a light came on in my head. If the light could be translated into words, instead, they would say: Freedom and liberty and justice for all . . . I knew that ours was not a trip, but an escape. We had to get to the United States. **E**

The rest of that night is a blur. It is one, then two the next morning. A plane lands, lights flashing. We are walking on the runway, climbing up the stairs into the cabin. An American lady wearing a cap welcomes us. We sit down, ready to depart. But suddenly, soldiers come on board. They go seat by seat, looking at our faces. Finally, they leave, the door closes, and with a powerful

100 roar, we lift off and I fall asleep.

Next morning, we are standing inside a large, echoing hall as a stern American official reviews our documents. What if he doesn’t let us in? What if we have to go back? I am holding my breath. My parents’ terror has become mine.

He checks our faces against the passport pictures. When he is done, he asks, “You girls ready for school?” I swear he is looking at me.

“Yes, sir!” I speak up.

The man laughs. He stamps our papers and hands them to my father. Then, wonderfully, a smile spreads across his face. “Welcome to the United States,” he says, waving us in. 🌊

summon (sŭm’ən)
v. to send for; call

contradiction
(kŏn’tre-dĭk’shən) *n.*
a denial; an expression
that is opposite to

D CAUSE AND EFFECT

Why is Alvarez’s family leaving for the United States on such short notice? Mark this in your chart.

interrogation
(ĭn-tĕr’ə-gă’shən) *n.*
an official or formal
questioning

E MEMOIR

Reread lines 89–94. What changes have occurred in Alvarez’s thinking about the Dominican Republic and the United States?

6. **cat-and-mouse game**: cruel, playful game to torment another.



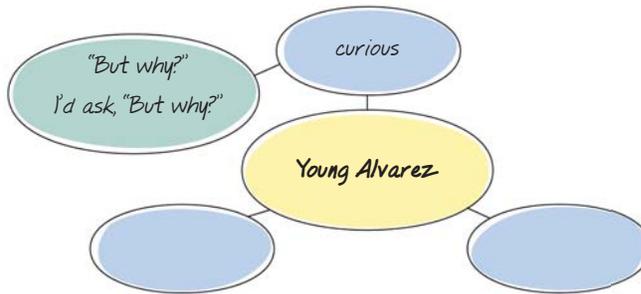
SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD
Reading Process
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and-effect relationships in text.

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** Why was Alvarez allowed to attend the American school?
- 2. Clarify** What happened at the airport as the Alvarez family waited for the plane?

Literary Analysis

- 3. Interpret Memoir** What do you think the title of the memoir means? Consider the possible meanings of the word “free.” Cite evidence from the selection to support your interpretation.
- 4. Analyze Personality Traits** Choose three words or phrases to describe Alvarez as a child. Include them in a web like the one shown. Expand the web by providing specific examples from the memoir that support each description.
- 5. Analyze Perspective** Although the events depicted in the memoir take place when Alvarez was a child, she writes about the experience many years later. Find at least two examples from the selection that show her adult perspective, or view on the topic. What does she know as an adult that she didn’t know at the time?
- 6. Generalize About Cause and Effect** Review the chart you created as you read. On the basis of the information you collected, make a general statement about how politics can affect one’s personal life.
- 7. Draw Conclusions** Why do Alvarez’s feelings about **leaving** her homeland change by the end of the memoir?



Extension and Challenge

- 8. SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** Research one of the following topics to find out more about the Dominican Republic during Trujillo’s rule. Present your findings in a poster.
 - The 14th of June Movement
 - “The Butterflies”
 - Trujillo’s assassination



RESEARCH LINKS

For more on Dominican Republic, visit the **Research Center** at ClassZone.com.