Background  In the early 1900s, more than one million Mexicans immigrated to the United States. Many came to find jobs but found discrimination as well. During the same time period, the need for workers in Northern factories of the United States caused a mass migration of African Americans from the South. Many African Americans settled in Harlem, a neighborhood of New York City. There, writers, along with artists and musicians, worked to establish a proud cultural identity. This movement was called the Harlem Renaissance.

Pat Mora  (b. 1942) was born in El Paso, Texas, to a Mexican American family that spoke both English and Spanish. Mora grew up speaking both languages, and today writes in English and in Spanish. When not writing, Mora spends much of her time encouraging children of all languages to read books. In 1996, she founded a holiday called “El día de los niños/El día de los libros.” In English that means “Children’s Day/Book Day.”

Langston Hughes  (1902–1967) began writing poetry as a child, but he didn’t gain fame until he met a famous poet in a restaurant where Hughes was working. Hughes left several of his poems at the poet’s table; the poet was impressed and helped introduce Hughes to a wider audience. Hughes became one of the most important voices in the Harlem Renaissance. Much of his work focuses on the experiences of his fellow African Americans who lived around him in Harlem.

SETTING A PURPOSE As you read, focus on the challenges and feelings each poet expresses about being an American, paying close attention to how each poet’s background affects his or her perspective.
A VOICE
by Pat Mora

Even the lights on the stage unrelenting as the desert sun couldn’t hide the other students, their eyes also unrelenting, students who spoke English every night as they ate their meat, potatoes, gravy.

Not you. In your house that smelled like rose powder, you spoke Spanish formal as your father, the judge without a courtroom in the country he floated to in the dark on a flatbed truck. He walked slow as a hot river down the narrow hall of your house. You never dared to race past him, to say, “Please move,” in the language you learned effortlessly, as you learned to run, the language forbidden at home, though your mother said you learned it to fight with the neighbors.

You liked winning with words. You liked writing speeches about patriotism and democracy. You liked all the faces looking at you, all those eyes. “How did I do it?” you ask me now. “How did I do it when my parents didn’t understand?”

The family story says your voice is the voice of an aunt in Mexico, spunky as a peacock. Family stories sing of what lives in the blood.

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1 unrelenting (unˈrē-ləntˈing): steady and persistent; continuing on without stopping.
2 spunky (spŭŋˈkē): spirited, plucky; having energy and courage.
You told me only once about the time you went to the state capitol, your family proud as if you’d been named governor. But when you looked around, the only Mexican in the auditorium, you wanted to hide from those strange faces.

Their eyes were pinpricks, and you faked hoarseness. You, who are never at a loss for words, felt your breath stick in your throat like an ice-cube. “I can’t,” you whispered. “I can’t.” Yet you did. Not that day but years later.

You taught the four of us to speak up.

This is America, Mom. The undo-able is done in the next generation. Your breath moves through the family like the wind moves through the trees.

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3 **pinpricks** (pîn’prîks’): small wounds or punctures made by or as if by a pin.

4 **generation** (jěn’ə-ră’shən): all the people who are at the same stage of descent from a common ancestor; grandparents, parents, and children represent three different generations.
WORDS LIKE FREEDOM
by Langston Hughes

There are words like Freedom
Sweet and wonderful to say.
On my heartstrings freedom sings
All day everyday.

There are words like Liberty
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I know
You would know why.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION  With a partner, discuss how “A Voice” and “Words Like Freedom” explore ideas such as freedom and equality. Use evidence from the texts in your discussion.
Determine the Meaning of Figurative Language

Poets often use figurative language to express ideas. A simile is a comparison of two things that uses the words like or as. A metaphor is a comparison of two things that does not use like or as. Similes and metaphors help readers see ideas in an imaginative way. The poem "A Voice" opens with a simile:

Even the lights on the stage unrelenting as the desert sun couldn’t hide the other students, . . .

The simile emphasizes how unforgiving and severe the stage lights seem. This comparison helps readers understand how the speaker’s mother felt.

To determine the meaning of a simile or metaphor, ask yourself:
- What two ideas is the poet comparing?
- What feelings and attitudes does the simile or metaphor help explain?

As you analyze “A Voice,” look for other examples of figurative language.

Analyze Tone

Tone is another way a writer expresses ideas. A writer’s tone is his or her attitude toward a subject. Tone is often described with a single adjective, such as angry, playful, or mocking. Writers establish tone through thoughts, actions, images, and word choices.

An inference is a logical guess. Readers can identify and put together clues, such as the poet’s choice of words and images, to make inferences about a poem’s tone.

In “A Voice,” the simile “In your house that smelled like rose powder, you spoke Spanish formal . . .” provides a clue about the home of the speaker’s mother. From this, readers can infer that the speaker, or the voice that “talks” to the reader, has a deep understanding of what her mother’s home life was like. The speaker’s tone can be described as understanding.

Use the following clues to make inferences about tone in the poems:
- Identify the topic.
- Pay attention to images and descriptions. Are they serious, silly, or frightening?
- Decide how the speaker feels about the subject. Does he or she feel happy, sad, or angry?
Analyzing the Text

Cite Text Evidence Support your responses with evidence from the text.

1. Infer Review lines 6–14 of “A Voice,” in which the speaker describes her grandfather. What is the simile in these lines? What inference can you make about the relationship between the speaker’s mother and her father?

2. Interpret Reread lines 17–23 of “A Voice.” How does the speaker’s mother feel about herself as a young girl? Explain how the simile in lines 22–23 shows the connection the mother has to her family.

3. Interpret Reread lines 5–8 of “A Voice.” Identify the metaphor in these lines. What does the metaphor tell you about the father?

4. Connect Reread lines 34–35 of “A Voice.” What lesson does the speaker say she learned from her mother, and how does the poet express this lesson now?

5. Interpret Reread lines 37–39 of “A Voice.” Describe the poet’s tone. How does her tone help her convey the ideas she expresses?

6. Analyze Think about the speaker’s attitude in “Words Like Freedom.” How would you describe the poet’s tone?

7. Compare Compare line 24 of “A Voice” with lines 3–4 of “Words Like Freedom.” How are these metaphors similar in the experiences and ideas they address?

PERFORMANCE TASK

Writing Activity: Poem In “A Voice” and “Words Like Freedom,” the poets express their opinions and make their voices heard. Write a poem in which you express your views about a freedom you enjoy, or about the freedom to have an opinion at all.

- Include at least one simile and one metaphor in your poem.
- Create comparisons that help express your ideas. Try a number of different ones until you find those that express your feelings in a vivid way.
- Review your word choices. Make sure they express your opinions precisely.
- Keep in mind the tone you chose as you review your work. Make adjustments as needed.