### Skill Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Strategies</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determining Main Idea</td>
<td>Analysis of a Text</td>
<td>Types (modes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalization</td>
<td>Meaning and Effect related to parts of speech, phrases, clauses, sentences, and syntax</td>
<td>Expository</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
<td></td>
<td>analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Process of Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literary Elements</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>generation of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail</td>
<td></td>
<td>organization of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>connotation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denotation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tone determined through</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diction, imagery, detail,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>point of view, and syntax</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocabulary associated with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literary Forms</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elements of Research</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Print Sources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Materials and Resources
- “Sestina” by Elizabeth Bishop

### Lesson Introduction
This lesson guides students through an analysis of a very specific poetic form, the sestina. The sestina (“song of sixes”) is a complex form that originated in the Middle Ages. It consists of six six-line stanzas and a final three-line stanza. In each six-line stanza, the writer repeats six end-words in a prescribed order and then uses those six words again, in any order, in the final three-line stanza. Contemporary writers still find this ancient form interesting and challenging, and Elizabeth Bishop’s poem is one of the most widely anthologized examples of the form.

In this lesson, students discover the characteristics of the sestina while unlocking meaning within the poem. They practice writing paragraphs of analytical commentary, including evidence from the text, and connect meaning with form.
Read carefully the poem “Sestina” and answer the questions that follow.

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove*,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

*brand name of a wood or coal-burning stove

It’s time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle’s small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
Hangs up the clever almanac

On its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
Feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.
But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house. (35)

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
And the child draws another inscrutable house.

Just as “tri” means three and “quad” means four, the Latin root “ses” stands for a number.

1. Look carefully at this poem. Notice that the last stanza is shorter than the others.
   a. Other than the last stanza, how many stanzas are there? 
   
   b. How many lines are in each of the longer stanzas? 
   
   c. What number do you think “ses” represents?

2. Circle the last word of each line of the first six stanzas.
   a. List all of these words below:

   b. Look carefully for a pattern in the use of these nouns, paying special attention to the first
      and last lines of each stanza. What is the pattern?

3. Look carefully at the last (seventh) stanza.
   a. What is different about this stanza?
b. Circle the last word of each line in this stanza.

c. Are the other words from your list in Question 2(a) also present in these lines? If so, circle them as well.

4. Two of the six repeated nouns in this poem have to do with people.
   a. What are they?
   b. There is a generation missing between these two people. What is it?

Answer each question below, and write the number of the line that contains the evidence for your answer.

5. What time of year is it?
6. What time of day?
7. Describe the weather.
8. What is the grandmother hiding?

Setting (time and place) is often used to represent or reflect the mood, tone, topic, or theme of a poem or other piece of writing. Think about how the season, time of day, and weather in this poem are related to what the grandmother is hiding.

9. Complete the following paragraph by filling in the blanks with appropriate words.

   The action in the first stanza takes place beside the ________________ in the ________________. These words might make a reader feel ________________ and ________________. But the word at the end of the stanza, ________________, creates a different feeling in the reader, a feeling of ________________. And this emotion is increased by the broader setting, for the action takes place in the ________________ during the ________________, while it is ________________ outside.
10. Who or what seems to be shedding tears or seems to be like tears in the
   a. third stanza?
   b. fourth stanza?
   c. fifth stanza?
   d. sixth stanza?
   e. seventh stanza?

11. Complete the paragraph below to explain more about the mood of this poem:

   Both the grandmother and the child are trying to stay cheerful. The grandmother
   (paraphrased evidence from the poem about what the grandmother does to stay or seem cheerful)
   (more paraphrased evidence from the poem about the cheerful things the grandmother does)
   But inside she is shedding __________. And the child sees ______________
   (noun) (noun)
   in everything, from the “__________” to the “__________,” from
   (direct evidence) (direct evidence)
   the “__________” to the “__________.” This family is
   (direct evidence) (direct evidence)
   feeling ________________, so ________________ that it seems to them that
   (feeling) (same feeling)
   every object in their environment shares that emotion. No warmth from the stove or tea, no
   laughter nor tidying up from the grandmother, can take away the pain.

12. In line 29 the child draws a ________________ in front of the house. Who might
    this be? ________________

    How could this person be connected to the sadness of the child and the grandmother?
13. If you don’t know what an almanac is, find out from a dictionary or other source.

   a. How often is an almanac published? ____________________________________________

   b. What does it do? ______________________________________________________________

14. Explain in two or three sentences how an almanac is related to the repetition of life. Think about the seasons, about crops and weather, about the life cycle of plants.

   Sestina
   A poem with six stanzas, each consisting of six lines, and a final three-line stanza (tercet) that “sums up” the main idea of the poem. The last word of a stanza is the first end-word of the next stanza. All six end-words in the first stanza are repeated in a different order at the ends of the lines in each of the other stanzas. All six end-words are also used in the tercet.

15. What is repeated in a sestina? ____________________________________________________

16. Explain in a short paragraph how the repetition in a sestina is related to the cyclical nature of life.

17. What abstract idea is Elizabeth Bishop’s sestina about? ____________________________

18. What is the speaker’s attitude toward that idea? ________________________________