

“Alexander Calder” Narrative EOC Prompt – Practice Essay

Directions: Read the following passages and then respond to the writing prompt found at the bottom of the document. You will type your response in a separate document.

Passage 1

Excerpt from “Moving Art: The Story of Alexander Calder”

by Joseph Taylor

The now well-known artist Alexander “Sandy” Calder was born in 1898, outside Philadelphia, in Lawnton, Pennsylvania, to a family of artists. In 1909, the family moved to Pasadena, in Southern California, where Mr. Calder had been commissioned to make carvings for a new college. The following is an excerpt from a biographical article.

- 1 Sandy was proud of his father, but as he matured into his teens, he grew impatient with art and wary of how hard most artists struggled to make a living. And the thought of being the third successive Alexander Calder in the family to be an artist made him wince. “I want to do something different and forge my own path,” he confided to a friend.
- 2 Tools delighted Sandy. One Christmas, Peggy gave him a pair of pliers, which he kept snug in his back pocket. He tinkered with machines and constructed functioning model trains. When the time came for him to choose a major subject of study in college, he selected mechanical engineering, a field of science that explores how forces affect objects. Making things work called to him, and he couldn’t help but stand taller when he pictured himself as an engineer.
- 3 After he graduated in 1919, Sandy took a job as an auto engineer to help design cars. He lasted only two weeks. More jobs quickly followed. He colored water-flow diagrams for a hydraulic engineer. As a draftsman for an electric company, he made technical drawings. None of this work suited him, and Sandy began to doubt he was cut out to be an engineer.
- 4 Just before he turned twenty-four, and still unsure of his path, Sandy was working as a mechanic aboard a steamship traveling from New York to San Francisco via the Panama Canal. Early one morning off the coast of Guatemala, he was dozing on his “couch” — a coil of rope on the ship’s deck — when he noticed a change in the light. Gazing east, he found a fiery red sun just rising above the calm sea, while across the dark blue sky to the west a full moon shone like a silver coin. The wondrous sight gave Sandy goose bumps. He felt the urge to paint it. Something shifted inside him, and he knew he had to face the truth about himself: he really was meant to be an artist.
- 5 At the Art Students League in New York City, Sandy immersed himself in art courses. To help pay his way, he took a part-time job illustrating for a magazine. The editor sent him to sketch sporting events, zoos, and the Ringling Brothers

and Barnum & Bailey Circus. For two weeks, Sandy spent most days and nights enjoying the wonder and artistry of the circus and studying its astonishing performers from different perspectives. He was charmed by its humor and spontaneity and fascinated by the animals and their movements, which he captured on paper with quick, simple lines of ink. Inspired, Sandy drew ordinary animals in various positions, such as a horse plowing a field, a deer grazing, and a dog sniffing the air. This collection of brush drawings became his first book, *Animal Sketching*.

- 6 In 1926, after three years of art school, a restless Sandy headed to Paris, the heart of the art world (and his sister's birthplace). There he painted, sculpted, and produced toys. His growing interest in action led him back to the circus as a subject. Using scraps of cloth, wire, cork, wood, buttons, yarn, and string, he fashioned his own small-scale circus, *Cirque Calder*. Cranking, springing, and pulling its pieces, Sandy "performed" his circus in a well-received show and early example of performance art.
- 7 Kneeling on the floor in his apartment, next to his homemade big top, he blew a whistle for the ringmaster and introduced the acts in French. Accompanied by fast-tempo circus music playing on a gramophone, Sandy brought his spectacle to life. Miniature trapeze artists swung and somersaulted, tightrope walkers balanced on a slack wire, and acrobats did flips and handstands. A lion tamer put his head into a lion's mouth, an elephant stood on its hind legs, and doves flocked to a woman. Riders stood atop galloping horses, chariots raced, and a clown blew up balloons. A little ambulance was at the ready should anything go wrong, which it sometimes did — especially for the knife thrower's assistant.
- 8 One night at a café, some artist friends were congratulating Sandy on his imaginative performance and asked what had inspired him. "Besides being great fun," Sandy said, "I am focused on how the different pieces move and relate to one another within the space of the circus." His gaze shifted into the distance. "I'm happy *Cirque* has been a success but am not sure how to follow it."
- 9 The next day at Sandy's studio, an American painter friend offered a possible answer. "I noticed that wire is a key material in your circus," he told Sandy. "Why don't you try to sculpt with wire and draw in space?" Sandy loved the idea. He could bring the simple line he adored from drawing to sculpture, and the three dimensions of sculpture to drawing. No artist had ever attempted such a thing, which only made Sandy more eager to try it.
- 10 To create wire sculptures, he used pliers, wire cutters, and his hands to bend, twist, and cut steel wire and sometimes secure it to wood. Filled with inspiration, he "drew in space," among other things, a wire goldfish bowl, a rearing stallion, and tennis champion Helen Wills. Sandy valued the volume, movement, and *joie de vivre*, or joy of life, the wire sculptures evoked, and delighted in watching people respond to them. He told his friends and family, "I think best in wire."

Passage 2

Excerpt from “Alexander Calder Comes to Life at London’s Tate Modern”

by Farah Nayeri

This excerpt is from a review of a show of Alexander Calder’s work at a major London museum called the Tate Modern.

- 1 Calder produced a staggering 22,000 documented pieces: wire sculptures, mobiles and stabiles, monumental outdoor sculptures, paintings, works on paper, toys, jewelry, and domestic objects. In documentary films made of him in the 1950s and ‘60s, he came across as chirpy and jolly. Mr. Rower, who started the Calder Foundation with the Calder family in 1987 and who has played a key role in the Tate show, remembers a different reality.
- 2 “My grandfather was a grumpy and surly and very dedicated and very focused person,” Mr. Rower said. “He enjoyed his life and he enjoyed himself, but he wasn’t a fun-loving, goofy kind of person at all.”
- 3 Calder was born into art. His father, a sculptor, and his mother, a painter, gave him tools as a boy, with which he made toy animals and jewelry for his sister’s dolls. He went on to study mechanical engineering as a young man, but switched to art, publishing a drawing manual (“Animal Sketching”) and producing circus illustrations for a magazine.
- 4 In 1926, at 28, he moved to Paris, where he was based for seven years. This was an exhilarating time for the artist, as the [Tate](#) show demonstrates. Besides crafting miniature animals and circus acrobats — which he animated in his famous performance work “Cirque Calder” (1926–31) — he produced the wire portraits of [Baker](#) and of artists in his circle, such as Joan Miró and Fernand Léger.
- 5 On a 1930 visit to Piet Mondrian’s Paris studio, Calder was so fascinated by the unframed colored rectangles pinned on the wall that he made a leap into abstraction. The Tate exhibition illustrates that dramatic jump, as wire figures suddenly make way for abstract sculptures featuring lines, circles and spheres.
- 6 Calder then set out on a quest to introduce motion in art. He produced a series of motorized sculptures which Marcel Duchamp promptly dubbed “mobiles.” Several are in the exhibition (though their mechanisms are too fragile to be turned on; small video monitors show them in action). Elsewhere, he suspended moveable elements in front of colored panels to create kinetic paintings. The show presents a roomful of that work.

- 7 Before long, he transitioned to creating motorless moving sculptures — the mobiles that he is best known for. Tate has a huge room of them, dangling delicately from the ceiling.
- 8 According to his grandson, Calder worked seven days a week throughout his career. After morning coffee and a soft-boiled egg, he headed straight for his studio, whether in Roxbury, Connecticut or in Saché in France's Loire Valley. It was "a very silent place, like a sanctuary," with no music and not a single assistant, Mr. Rower said.

¹Tate: The Tate Modern is a large museum of modern art in London

²Baker: Josephine Baker, a famous American entertainer

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Writing Prompt

You have just read two passages about the life and art of Alexander Calder. Write a narrative from Calder's point of view telling the story of how he developed into an artist.

- Manage your time carefully
- Plan your narrative and do some pre-writing
- Use details from both passages
- Avoid over-relying on one passage
- Your written response should be a multi-paragraph narrative.
- Do not worry about MLA formatting for the purposes of this essay.