People may be astonished at seeing wild animals. The sight can be amazing.

He was scared, but this boy worked up the nerve, or courage, to handle the snake.

This lion opened its mouth and bared its teeth. Everyone could see its fangs.

The leader of a wolf pack will banish a defeated challenger. The loser must leave.
Study each Context Card.

Use a thesaurus to determine a synonym for each Vocabulary word.

**reasoned**
Scientists reasoned, or logically figured out, how to assemble these fossil bones.

**envy**
People may watch seals with envy. They are jealous of the seals’ swimming ability.

**spared**
This cat played with the mouse but spared its life and did not harm it.

**margins**
You can sometimes see deer standing in fields at the margins, or edges, of the woods.

**deserted**
A baby bird that is all alone may seem deserted, but its mother may be nearby.

**upright**
Meerkats stand upright, or straight up, to keep a lookout for nearby predators.
The Ojibwe People

The Ojibwe lived around the margins of the Great Lakes. Their homes, called wigwams, were held upright by a frame of saplings and covered in birchbark. In summer they lived in large groups, harvesting plants and berries. In winter they left their large camps deserted and headed for smaller ones. They reasoned that small groups could hunt game more easily. It took a lot of nerve for an Ojibwe hunter to face down an angry black bear as it bared its teeth. If their harvesting and hunting were successful, the Ojibwe were spared from hunger.

In the 1600s, the Ojibwe began trading beaver furs to the French for other goods and were astonished at their success. Other native peoples in the region felt envy. They battled with the Ojibwe over hunting grounds. Then settlers moving westward tried to banish the Ojibwe from the area.

The Ojibwe often decorated their clothing with beautiful beadwork.
Comprehension

**TARGET SKILL**  Theme

All stories have a theme, or message, that runs through them. You can determine a story’s theme by looking at a main character’s qualities, motives, and actions. How the character responds to conflict can also provide clues to the theme. As you read, use a graphic organizer to record details about the main character to help you determine the theme.

![Diagram of graphic organizer]

**TARGET STRATEGY**  Infer/Predict

To determine the theme of a text, sometimes you must infer a character’s qualities and motives because they are not directly stated. Inferring can help you better understand a story’s characters, predict what they might do, and determine how those actions affect the theme of the story.
MEET THE AUTHOR

Louise Erdrich

Louise Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe. While she was growing up in North Dakota, her father often recited memorized poetry to her and her six siblings. She was inspired to write *The Birchbark House* while she and her mother were researching their own family history.

MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR

S.D. Nelson

When he was young, S. D. Nelson’s Lakota/Sioux mother told him traditional Coyote stories. Now he is a storyteller. He is the author-illustrator of many books for young readers, including *Coyote Christmas, Gift Horse, Quiet Hero,* and *The Star People,* winner of the Western Writers of America Spur Award.
Essential Question
How does knowing the right actions change events?
Omakayas (oh MAHK ay ahs) is returning home from an errand. She carries scissors for her mother and a lump of sweet maple candy for herself. Both the scissors and the candy are rare and valued items in her Ojibwe village in 1847. She is not eager to return home to the chore of tanning a moose hide and to her older sister, Angeline, who made fun of her earlier in the day. Her feelings are hurt, and she wants nothing but to be respected by Angeline.

Before she went back on the trail, Omakayas rinsed off the old candy lump in the lake. It came out beautifully, creamy-golden, translucent and grainy-dark. And sweet. She started walking, her treasure now wrapped in a leaf. As she walked, Omakayas thought. There was no way to share such a tough nut of sweetness. How would she divide it? Omakayas decided she did not want to cause trouble at home. Furthermore, it suddenly made sense to her that at least one person in the family should get the full effect of the maple sugar. She would pop the whole thing into her mouth. All at once! This would save problems. Aaaaah. The lump was delicious, tasting of spring sweetness and the inside of trees. Besides, Omakayas reasoned, as she walked contentedly along, the taste of the sugar would save her from eating every one of the berries she was sure she would find on the path.
Omakayas’s feet moved slower and even slower yet. For one thing, the moose hide waited. For another, she was still angry with her older sister, and didn’t want to see Angeline. She could still feel that sister foot pressing hateful on her back. If only there were some way to impress Angeline, cause her envy, make her say, “Can I have some of those berries, please, please, please?” You can be sure, Omakayas thought, her face taking on a faraway, haughty expression, she would be slow in answering! Yet the worst of it was this: her sister was usually on her side, helping her plan tricks on the other children in the village or gathering new ferns or snaring rabbits, visiting the grave houses looking for sugar or food left for the spirits, tossing off her clothes to swim with her. And to have her older sister laugh at her hurt Omakayas so much inside that she both wanted Angeline to smile in surprise, to be proud, to envy her, and to feel rotten and be sorry forever. So Omakayas took the slow way back looking for odaemin (oh DAY mihn), little red heartberries, in the sunny margins of the woods near the ground.

She carefully removed the hard lump of sweetness from her mouth, stuck it back in its leaf just inside the pocket of her dress. Just as the taste of maple sugar faded along her tongue, she bent over, pushed back delicate leaves, and found masses of plump red little berries. Ah! One, two, three. She’d eaten a huge handful. Another. She grinned, thinking that she’d allow her sister to return with her to plunder them, but only if Angeline changed her ways.

STOP AND THINK
Theme How might Omakayas’s feelings about her sister have affected her decision not to share the maple candy?
All of a sudden, a rustle and then a thump in a bush ahead made Omakayas freeze. A long moment passed as she stared through the dark leaves. Suddenly, crash! Two bear cubs burst from the bush and rushed pell-mell, tumbling head over heels straight for her. They came on in such a hurry that they didn't see Omakayas until they were nearly in her lap, and then, with comical looks of shock, they tried to stop themselves. One flew flat on its face, bumping its nose and squealing. The other twisted in midair and landed in a heap on the ground, shaking its head in confusion at Omakayas.

The bear boys looked at her. Slowly, she put out her open hand filled with heartberries. Curious, the cubs jumped forward, lost their nerve. They scampered backward, and then crept forward shyly again. The smaller cub seemed slightly bolder and sniffed at Omakayas's hand.

The bear cub took one berry, then jumped away in seeming fright at its own bold act. But the taste of the berry seemed to banish fear. The two now tumbled at her, growling, mock-ferocious. Their long pink tongues touched up every berry from her hands, eagerly flicking them from her fingers as fast as she could pick. They seemed to like the game. It could have gone on for hours, that is, until she stood upright. Then they tumbled backward in alarm. Their chubby bottoms rolled them over like playing balls, and she laughed out loud. She realized they had thought Omakayas was their own size. They were astonished the same way Omakayas had been the first time she saw the trader Cadotte unfold a seeing glass, something he called a telescope, a long shiny tube that grew in his hands.

She bent down again.

"Ahneen, little brothers," she said to them kindly, and they came forward.
She looked around. No mother bear. Omakayas was well aware that she shouldn’t stay so close to these cubs, but after all, they seemed deserted. She looked around again. They were orphans! Perhaps the mother bear’s skin was now draped across old Tallow’s bed, although she hadn’t heard about a recent kill. But still, no mother bear in sight. And these little ones so hungry. Wouldn’t her big sister be thrilled when Omakayas returned with these two new brothers! Eagerly, Omakayas began to plan out her triumphant walk back to the house. She would enter the little clearing with the cubs, one at her heels and one before her. Everyone would make way, impressed. She would lead the bear cubs around the fire four times before she presented one of them to Angeline, who would look at her with new respect.

There was no warning. One moment Omakayas was wiggling a leafy stick, making it move on the ground so the cubs would jump on it, biting fiercely. Then next moment, she found herself flipped over on her back and pinned underneath a huge, powerful, heavy thing that sent down a horrible stink. It was the sow bear, the mother. Breathing on her a stale breath of decayed old deer-hides and skunk cabbages and dead mushrooms. Owah! The surprising thing was, Omakayas realized later, that although she had no memory of doing so, she had the scissors out of their case and open, the sharp ends pointing at the bear’s heart. But she didn’t use them as a knife. She knew for certain that she should not move. If the bear began to bite and claw, she would have to plunge the tip of the scissors straight in between the bear’s strong ribs, use all of her strength, sink the blade all the way in to the rounded hilt and then jump clear, if she could, while the bear went through its death agony. If she couldn’t get clear, Omakayas knew she would have to roll up in a ball and endure the bear’s fury. She would probably be clawed from head to foot, bitten to pieces, scattered all over the ground.

Until the mother bear made the first move, Omakayas knew she should stay still, or as still as possible, given the terrified jumping of her heart.
STOP AND THINK

Infer/Predict Why do you think the bear attacks Omakayas? Use what you know about bears from your own knowledge and from the selection to understand the bear’s behavior.
For long moments, the bear tested her with every sense, staring down with her weak eyes, listening, and most of all smelling her. The bear smelled the morning’s moose meat stew Omakayas had eaten, the wild onion seasoning and the dusty bit of maple sugar from old Tallow stuck to the inside of her pocket. How she hoped the bear did not smell the bear-killing dogs or the bear claw that swung on a silver hoop from Old Tallow’s earlobe. Perhaps the bear smelled the kind touch of Grandma and Mama’s bone-and-sprucewood comb, her baby brother’s cuddling body, the skins and mats she had slept in, and Little Pinch, who had whined and sobbed the night before. The bear smelled on Omakayas’s skin the smell of its own cousin’s bear grease used to ward off mosquitoes. Fish from the night before last night. The berries she was eating. The bear smelled all.

Omakayas couldn’t help but smell her back. Bears eat anything and this one had just eaten something ancient and foul. Hiyn! (HY n) Omakayas took shallow breaths. Perhaps it was to take her mind off the scent of dead things on the bear’s breath that she accidentally closed the scissors, shearing off a tiny clip of bear fur, and then to cover her horror at this mistake, started to talk.

STOP AND THINK

Author’s Craft  Authors use sensory details that make readers feel what is happening in a story. Which details of the bear encounter make you feel Omakayas’s fear?
“Nokomis,” she said to the bear, calling her grandmother. “I didn’t mean any harm. I was only playing with your children. Gaween onjidad (gah WEEN ohn jee dah). Please forgive me.”

The bear cufféd at Omakayas, but in a warning manner, not savagely, to hurt. Then the bear leaned back, nose working, as though she could scent the meaning of the human words. Encouraged, Omakayas continued.

“I fed them some berries. I wanted to bring them home, to adopt them, have them live with me at my house as my little brothers. But now that you’re here, Grandmother, I will leave quietly. These scissors in my hands are not for killing, just for sewing. They are nothing compared to your teeth and claws.”
And indeed, Omakayas’s voice trembled slightly as the bear made a gurgling sound deep in her throat and bared her long, curved yellowish teeth, so good at ripping and tearing. But having totaled up all of the smells and sifted them for information, the bear seemed to have decided that Omakayas was no threat. She sat back on her haunches like a huge dog. Swinging her head around, she gave a short, quick slap at one of the cubs that sent it reeling away from Omakayas. It was as though she were telling them they had done wrong to approach this human animal, and should now stay away from her. Omakayas’s heart squeezed painfully. Even though it was clear her life was to be spared, she felt the loss of her new brothers.

“I wouldn’t ever hurt them,” she said again.

The little cubs piled against their mother, clung to her. For a long moment the great bear sat calmly with them, deciding where to go. Then, in no hurry, they rose in one piece of dark fur. One bear boy broke away, again tried to get near Omakayas. The other looked longingly at her, but the big bear mother abruptly nosed them down the trail.
Short Response  Omakayas knows that she should not get close to the bear cubs in the woods. However, she goes against her better judgment, feeding and playing with the cubs. Think about real-life wild animal encounters you have heard or read about. Then write a paragraph explaining whether you would have handled the situation differently and why.

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Knowing the Right Actions

Turn and Talk  When Omakayas finds herself pinned under the huge, powerful mother bear, she is able to stay calm. Discuss with a partner how Omakayas’s respect for and knowledge of wild animals seems to help her escape harm. Then discuss how this scene reinforces the story’s theme. THEME

Sibling Rivalry

Predict a Reaction  Do you think Omakayas will gain Angeline’s respect when she tells her about what happened in the woods? Use story details to predict Angeline’s reaction to Omakayas’s story. Then work with a partner to write a script for a conversation in which the two sisters discuss Omakayas’s bear encounter. Choose roles. Rehearse your conversation, and perform it for the class. PARTNERS
Grammar

What Are the Perfect Tenses? You have already learned the simple verb tenses: past, present, and future. English has another group of tenses called the perfect tenses. All perfect-tense verbs include has, have, or had as a helping verb. A verb in the past perfect tense includes had as a helping verb. A verb in the present perfect tense includes has or have as a helping verb. A verb in the future perfect tense includes will have as a helping verb.

Two bears have tumbled into the berry patch.

Omakayas had picked some berries minutes earlier.

Soon the mother bear will have found her cubs.

Try This! Copy these sentences onto a sheet of paper. Circle each verb. Then label the verbs as present perfect, past perfect, or future perfect tense.

1. Now the mother bear has captured Omakayas.
2. That huge, smelly bear had surprised Omakayas.
3. Apparently the bear had eaten something foul earlier.
4. Omakayas has kept calm somehow.
5. In a few minutes the mother bear and her cubs will have left the area.
**Conventions** You know that regular verbs add -ed when used with *has, have, or had*. You must add a special ending to irregular verbs used with *has, have, or had*. Use the correct forms of regular and irregular verbs when you write sentences in the perfect tenses.

A baby bear has *ate* some berries.

Omakayas had *share* them with the cub.

By tonight, Omakayas will have *telled* her story many times.

A baby bear has *eaten* some berries.

Omakayas had *shared* them with the cub.

By tonight, Omakayas will have *told* her story many times.

**Connect Grammar to Writing**

As you revise your paragraphs, look for incorrect verb forms in perfect-tense verbs. Correct these errors so that your writing makes sense.
**Write to Inform**

**Ideas** The author of “The Birchbark House” reveals characters through their thoughts and actions. The bear cubs “crept forward shyly.” Omakayas spoke to them “kindly.” You can use details like these to compare and contrast characters.

Carleasa drafted some compare-contrast paragraphs to explain how Omakayas and Angeline are alike and different. Later, she added specific details to support her ideas. Use the Writing Traits Checklist below as you revise your writing.

**Revised Draft**

In “The Birchbark House,” Omakayas’s older sister has upset because Angeline made fun of her. Usually Angeline is on Omakayas’s side. She helps her plan tricks on other children. She helps her gather new and she helps her snare rabbits. The sisters do many things together.

She even helps her visit grave houses to steal food left for the spirits.
Omakayas and Angeline
by Carlaasa Dutton

In “The Birchbark House,” Omakayas is upset because her older sister Angeline has made fun of her. Usually Angeline is on Omakayas’s side. She helps her plan tricks on other children, gather new ferns, and snare rabbits. She even helps her visit grave houses to steal food left for the spirits.

The sisters do many things together. The biggest difference between the sisters is their age. Omakayas desperately wants her older sister’s respect, but Angeline doesn’t worry about impressing Omakayas. When Omakayas meets the bear cubs, she imagines how she could use the cubs to impress Angeline. Omakayas wishes she could make Angeline envy her and also feel sorry for making fun of her. That’s the way a young girl feels when an older sister puts her down.

In my final paper, I added specific examples to support my ideas. I also combined sentences and used a perfect-tense verb.

Reading as a Writer

Which examples made the sisters’ similarities and differences clear? Where in your writing can you make similarities and differences clearer?