

## The Jacket

Essay by Gary Soto

# What builds CONFIDENCE?



### ILLINOIS OBJECTIVES

#### READING STANDARDS

**1.6.23** Explain how the author's word choice creates imagery, mood, and tone

**2.6.05** Compare stories to experience or prior knowledge

**KEY IDEA** If you have **confidence**, that means you believe in yourself and in what you can accomplish. Confidence can help you speak in front of a group, meet new people, or make difficult choices. Real confidence comes from within. Still, as Gary Soto expresses in "The Jacket," outside pressures can sometimes bring you down.

**LIST IT** Brainstorm with a small group of classmates to make a list of the kinds of experiences that can build confidence. Then identify some ways that a person's confidence can be damaged.

Confidence Builders	Confidence Busters
doing well on a test	





## LITERARY ANALYSIS: TONE IN NONFICTION

As in fiction, nonfiction writers often express an attitude toward their subjects. This is known as **tone**. One of the ways writers express tone is by using similes. A **simile** is a comparison of unlike things using the word *like* or *as*. Look at the following example from “The Jacket”:

*I stared at the jacket, like an enemy, thinking bad things before I took off my old jacket. . . .*

The simile “like an enemy” reveals Soto’s tone of anger toward the jacket. Other similes Soto uses in the essay reveal other emotions and attitudes. Look for these similes as you read and notice what they help the reader understand.

## READING STRATEGY: CONNECT

Suppose you tell a friend about a bad day, and your friend says, “I know how you feel—the same thing happened to me.” This instantly makes you feel understood.

You do a similar thing when you **connect** your own experiences and knowledge to what you read. When you make connections, you may have a stronger understanding of the writer’s message. As you read “The Jacket,” use a graphic organizer to record the connections you make.

Event in “The Jacket”	+	My Experience	=	What I Understand About the Event
The character is in sixth grade.	+	I am in the sixth grade.	=	I know what things are important to a sixth grader.

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Gary Soto uses the boldfaced words to help tell about a jacket he hated. To see how many you know, replace each boldfaced word with a word or phrase that means the same thing.

1. Gary Soto remembers looking at his **profile** in the mirror, hoping to look cool in his new jacket.
2. He spun each arm like a **propeller** to see how silly the jacket looked.
3. Eventually the jacket began to **shriveled** and no longer fit.
4. Soto remembers the **vicious** thoughts he had about it.

## Author Online

### Discovering Writing

Gary Soto was planning to study geography in college. Then, while browsing in his school library’s poetry section, he discovered a collection of modern poetry.

“I thought, wow, wow, wow,” Soto recalls. “I wanted to do this thing.”



Gary Soto  
born 1952

**Poetry of His Own** Soto published his first book of poetry in 1976. Many of his poems are about Mexican Americans living and working in U.S. cities or working as migrant farm laborers. To create the lively, poetic images in his writing, he often draws upon childhood memories of growing up in a Mexican-American community in Fresno, California.

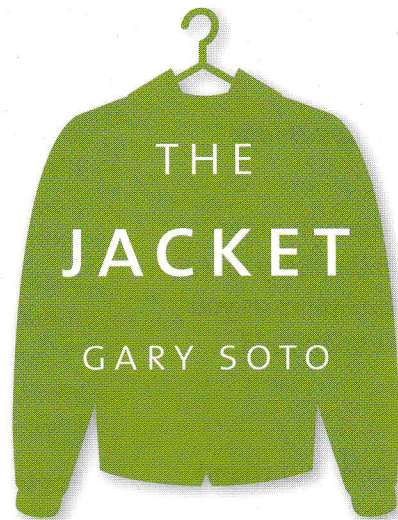
**Fresno Boy** Soto understands the effect of poverty on children. His father died in a work accident when Soto was five, and the family’s small income improved only a little when his mother remarried. Personal experiences of having to do without many things come through in much of Soto’s writing, including “The Jacket.”



### MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more on Gary Soto, visit the Literature Center at [ClassZone.com](http://ClassZone.com).





**M**y clothes have failed me.

I remember the green coat that I wore in fifth and sixth grades when you either danced like a champ or pressed yourself against a greasy wall, bitter as a penny toward the happy couples.

When I needed a new jacket and my mother asked what kind I wanted, I described something like bikers wear: black leather and silver studs<sup>1</sup> with enough belts to hold down a small town. We were in the kitchen, steam on the windows from her cooking. She listened so long while stirring dinner that I thought she understood for sure the kind I wanted. The  
10 next day when I got home from school, I discovered draped on my bedpost a jacket the color of day-old guacamole.<sup>2</sup> I threw my books on the bed and approached the jacket slowly, as if it were a stranger whose hand I had to shake. I touched the vinyl sleeve, the collar, and peeked at the mustard-colored lining. **A**

#### ANALYZE VISUALS

Examine the facial expression of the boy in this photograph. What kind of attitude does he seem to have?

#### **A** CONNECT

Reread lines 5–14. Think of a time when you felt your parents hadn't understood you. How does this help you understand Soto's disappointment?

1. **studs**: small ornamental metal buttons mounted on fabric.

2. **guacamole** (gwä'kə-mō'lē): a thick paste made from avocados, citrus juice, onions, and seasoning, often served as a dip.







From the kitchen mother yelled that my jacket was in the closet. I closed the door to her voice and pulled at the rack of clothes in the closet, hoping the jacket on the bedpost wasn't for me but my mean brother. No luck. I gave up. From my bed, I stared at the jacket. I wanted to cry because it was so ugly and so big that I knew I'd have to wear it a long time. I was a  
20 small kid, thin as a young tree, and it would be years before I'd have a new one. I stared at the jacket, like an enemy, thinking bad things before I took off my old jacket whose sleeves climbed halfway to my elbow.

I put the big jacket on. I zipped it up and down several times, and rolled the cuffs up so they didn't cover my hands. I put my hands in the pockets and flapped the jacket like a bird's wings. I stood in front of the mirror, full face, then **profile**, and then looked over my shoulder as if someone had called me. I sat on the bed, stood against the bed, and combed my hair to see what I would look like doing something natural. I looked ugly. I threw it on my brother's bed and looked at it for a long time before I slipped it on  
30 and went out to the backyard, smiling a "thank you" to my mom as I passed her in the kitchen. With my hands in my pockets I kicked a ball against the fence, and then climbed it to sit looking into the alley. I hurled orange peels at the mouth of an open garbage can and when the peels were gone I watched the white puffs of my breath thin to nothing. **B**

I jumped down, hands in my pockets, and in the backyard on my knees I teased my dog, Brownie, by swooping my arms while making bird calls. He jumped at me and missed. He jumped again and again, until a tooth sunk deep, ripping an L-shaped tear on my left sleeve. I pushed Brownie away to study the tear as I would a cut on my arm. There was no blood,  
40 only a few loose pieces of fuzz. Dumb dog, I thought, and pushed him away hard when he tried to bite again. I got up from my knees and went to my bedroom to sit with my jacket on my lap, with the lights out.

That was the first afternoon with my new jacket. The next day I wore it to sixth grade and got a D on a math quiz. During the morning recess Frankie T., the playground terrorist, pushed me to the ground and told me to stay there until recess was over. My best friend, Steve Negrete, ate an apple while looking at me, and the girls turned away to whisper on the monkey bars.<sup>3</sup> The teachers were no help: they looked my way and talked about how foolish I looked in my new jacket. I saw their heads bob with  
50 laughter, their hands half-covering their mouths. **C**

Even though it was cold, I took off the jacket during lunch and played kickball in a thin shirt, my arms feeling like braille<sup>4</sup> from goose bumps. But when I returned to class I slipped the jacket on and shivered until I

**profile** (prō'fīl') *n.* a side view of an object, especially of the human head

**B TONE**

Identify the **simile** in line 25. How does this comparison tell you how Soto feels?

**C CONNECT**

In your chart, describe a moment when you worried that everyone was looking at you. What does this help you understand about how Soto is feeling?

3. **monkey bars**: a structure of poles and bars for climbing, often found in playgrounds.

4. **braille** (brāl): a system of writing or printing for blind people, made up of arrangements of raised dots representing letters and numbers.





#### ANALYZE VISUALS

What can you **infer** about the two girls in this image and the secret they are sharing?

was warm. I sat on my hands, heating them up, while my teeth chattered like a cup of crooked dice. Finally warm, I slid out of the jacket but a few minutes later put it back on when the fire bell rang. We paraded out into the yard where we, the sixth graders, walked past all the other grades to stand against the back fence. Everybody saw me. Although they didn't say out loud, "Man, that's ugly," I heard the buzz-buzz of gossip and even  
60 laughter that I knew was meant for me.

**A**nd so I went, in my guacamole-colored jacket. So embarrassed, so hurt, I couldn't even do my homework. I received Cs on quizzes, and forgot the state capitals and the rivers of South America, our friendly neighbor. Even the girls who had been friendly blew away like loose flowers to follow the boys in neat jackets. **D**

I wore that thing for three years until the sleeves grew short and my forearms stuck out like the necks of turtles. All during that time no love came to me—no little dark girl in a Sunday dress she wore on Monday.

#### **D** TONE

How does the **simile** in the last sentence of the paragraph help you to understand Soto's frustration?



At lunchtime I stayed with the ugly boys who leaned against the chainlink fence and looked around with **propellers** of grass spinning in our mouths. We saw girls walk by alone, saw couples, hand in hand, their heads like bookends pressing air together. We saw them and spun our propellers so fast our faces were blurs.

**propeller** (prə-pĕl'ər) *n.* a spinning blade used to move a boat or airplane forward **propel** *v.*

**I** blame that jacket for those bad years. I blame my mother for her bad taste and her cheap ways. It was a sad time for the heart. With a friend I spent my sixth-grade year in a tree in the alley, waiting for something good to happen to me in that jacket, which had become the ugly brother who tagged along wherever I went. And it was about that time that I began to grow. My chest puffed up with muscle and, strangely, a few more ribs. Even my hands, those fleshy hammers, showed bravely through the cuffs, the fingers already hardening for the coming fights. But that L-shaped rip on the left sleeve got bigger, bits of stuffing coughed out from its wound after a hard day of play. I finally Scotch-taped it closed, but in rain or cold weather the tape peeled off like a scab and more stuffing fell out until that sleeve **shriveled** into a palsied arm.<sup>5</sup> That winter the elbows began to crack and whole chunks of green began to fall off. I showed the cracks to my mother, who always seemed to be at the stove with steamed-up glasses, and she said that there were children in Mexico who would love that jacket. I told her that this was America and yelled that Debbie, my sister, didn't have a jacket like mine. I ran outside, ready to cry, and climbed the tree by the alley to think bad thoughts and watch my breath puff white and disappear. **E**

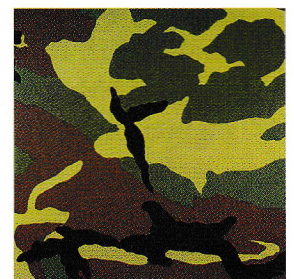
**shrivel** (shrĭ'vəl) *v.* to shrink or wrinkle

**E TONE**  
Reread lines 83–85. In what way does the **simile** “like a scab” help express Soto’s attitude toward the jacket?


**vicious** (vĭsh'əs) *adj.* severe or fierce

But whole pieces still casually flew off my jacket when I played hard, read quietly, or took **vicious** spelling tests at school. When it became so spotted that my brother began to call me “camouflage,” I flung it over the fence into the alley. Later, however, I swiped the jacket off the ground and went inside to drape it across my lap and mope.

## VISUAL VOCABULARY



**camouflage** (kăm'ə-flāzh') *n.* fabric dyed to make the wearer blend in with the environment

I was called to dinner: steam silvered my mother’s glasses as she said grace;<sup>6</sup> my brother and sister with their heads bowed made ugly faces at their glasses of powdered milk. I gagged too, but eagerly ate big rips of buttered tortilla that held scooped-up beans. Finished, I went outside with my jacket across my arm. It was a cold sky. The faces of clouds were piled up, hurting. I climbed the fence, jumping down with a grunt. I started up the alley and soon slipped into my jacket, that green ugly brother who breathed over my shoulder that day and ever since. 

5. **palsied** (pōl'zēd) *arm*: a paralyzed or weakened arm.

6. **grace**: a short prayer or blessing said before or after a meal.





## READING STANDARD

1.6.23 Explain how the author's word choice creates imagery, mood, and tone

## Comprehension

1. **Clarify** Reread lines 104–105. What does Soto mean when he calls his jacket an “ugly brother who breathed over my shoulder”?
2. **Summarize** Why is Soto disappointed by his sixth-grade year?
3. **Represent** Using details from the essay, sketch the jacket Soto wanted to have. Then create a series of sketches showing the jacket his mother actually gives him, and how the jacket changes over time.

## Literary Analysis

4. **Compare and Contrast** What are the similarities and differences between the jacket Soto asked for and the one he received? Explain how what he wanted affected his attitude toward what he got.
5. **Make Connections** Review your chart of connections to find parts of the essay that were similar to your own experience. How do these connections affect your understanding of the story?
6. **Identify Symbol** A symbol is a person, place, thing, or activity that stands for something beyond itself. Explain what Soto's jacket might be a symbol for, and why.
7. **Identify Tone** Create a chart like the one shown to gather the **similes** Soto uses in “The Jacket.” Then decide what overall tone these comparisons convey.

<i>Simile</i>	<i>Basic Description</i>	<i>Positive or Negative</i>
<i>“I stared at the jacket, like an enemy” (line 21)</i>	<i>he stared meanly or cautiously at it</i>	<i>negative</i>

8. **Evaluate** Reread lines 61–74. Do you agree with Soto that the jacket is responsible for his “bad years”? Give examples from the essay to support your answer.

## Extension and Challenge

9. **Big Question Activity** With a group of classmates, reread lines 43–50. Take turns discussing the effect the jacket had on Soto's **confidence**.
10. **Reader's Circle** Soto blames his jacket for his awkwardness in the sixth grade. In a small group, discuss the ways in which Soto's attitude might have made wearing the jacket seem worse than it actually was. What are some things he could have done to overcome the effects of the jacket?



# Vocabulary in Context

## VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Use context clues to choose the vocabulary word that best completes each sentence.

1. The airplane made an emergency landing when its \_\_\_\_\_ broke.
2. It was sad to see my favorite sweater \_\_\_\_\_ and shrink with each wash.
3. I know he was upset, but he didn't need to be so \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Many portraits show only the person's \_\_\_\_\_, not the whole face.



**READING STANDARD**  
**1.6.01** Determine the meaning of a word using prefixes, suffixes, and word roots

## VOCABULARY IN WRITING

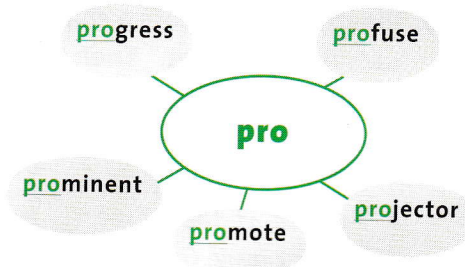
Write a paragraph describing a piece of clothing, like Soto's jacket, that you really don't like to wear. Use at least two vocabulary words. You might start like this.

### EXAMPLE SENTENCE

*Having to wear my itchy mittens makes me vicious.*

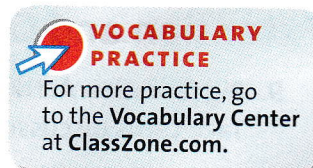
## VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE LATIN ROOT *pro*

The vocabulary words *profile* and *propellers* both contain the Latin root *pro*, which means "forth" or "forward." You can find the word root *pro* combined with other roots and base words in many English words. When you come across an unfamiliar word containing *pro*, use context clues, as well as your knowledge of the root, to figure out the meaning.



**PRACTICE** Choose the word from the web that best completes each sentence. Use a dictionary if necessary. Explain how the root *pro* helps give meaning to each word.

1. After five years, the company decided to \_\_\_\_\_ him from assistant to manager.
2. We couldn't see the movie because the \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't working.
3. His \_\_\_\_\_ and detailed thank-you note was four pages long!
4. They were pleased to make such good \_\_\_\_\_ on their report.
5. He has become a very \_\_\_\_\_ man since running for town mayor.





## Reading-Writing Connection



### SKILLS PRACTICE

Increase your understanding of “The Jacket” by responding to these prompts. Then complete the **Grammar and Writing** exercise.

#### WRITING PROMPTS

##### A. Short Response: Explore Tone

Write a **one-paragraph description** of the jacket as if you were Soto’s mother. Use a **simile** to help express her attitude toward the jacket. Your description should have a different tone from the one in the essay.

#### SELF-CHECK

##### *A strong description will ...*

- show the jacket from the mother’s point of view
- create a tone that matches the mother’s attitude

##### B. Extended Response: Evaluate Ideas

“The Jacket” tells about a time in Soto’s life when he lacked **confidence**. Does he seem to have more confidence as an adult looking back? In **two or three paragraphs**, explain the ways in which Soto has or hasn’t changed since the years when he wore the green jacket.

##### *An interesting response will ...*

- compare Soto’s adult way of thinking with his attitude as a sixth-grader
- use examples from the essay as support

## GRAMMAR AND WRITING

**USE COMMAS CORRECTLY** When writing a sentence that includes a list of three or more items, use **commas** to help make the sentence’s meaning clear. Place commas after every **item in a series** except the last item. To separate two or more **adjectives** describing the same noun, use a comma after all but the last adjective.

*Original:* Soto remembers the embarrassment sadness and awkwardness of having an ugly jacket.

*Revised:* Soto remembers the embarrassment, sadness, and awkwardness of having an ugly jacket.

**PRACTICE** Insert commas where needed in the following sentences.

1. His mother bought cheap sturdy and practical clothes for the kids.
2. He uses humorous vivid familiar images to describe the jacket’s ugliness.
3. The jacket resulted in poor grades no girlfriend and ugly friends for Soto.
4. Thinking of the jacket brings back memories of poverty disappointments and loneliness.

**FOR MORE HELP WITH COMMAS, SEE PAGE R49 IN THE *Grammar Handbook*.**



### ILLINOIS OBJECTIVES

#### WRITING STANDARD

3.6.11 Use commas correctly