**Subject area/course**: English/Language Arts

**Grade level/band**: 11–12

**Task source**: Inquiry by Design in collaboration with Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE); Authors: Dennie Palmer Wolf and John McMillan

**Portraits of Americans Dreaming**

**STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS**

1. **Task context**

The American dream is a powerful and important idea. But it has not always been easy to obtain or experience. Some would say that it is a myth – even a mirage – that eludes most Americans. Numerous authors, such as Sinclair Lewis in his 1922 novel *Babbitt*, satirized the materialism and shallowness that he saw in the chase for the American dream. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway describes how the pursuit of opportunity became “the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." In 1949 Arthur Miller wrote the play "Death of a Salesman" in which the American dream is portrayed as a fruitless pursuit that destroys and deludes.

The pursuit and the elusiveness of this dream are major themes throughout American history, literature, art, film and music. This task invites you to think, read, and write about the idea of the American dream. This assessment has three parts. Be sure to complete the tasks in order because the work you do early in the assessment will make your later work much easier.

1. **Final product**

Part 1: Engage in a Close Reading

In this part of the assessment you will look at two texts that deal with the American dream, including one print text and one non‐print text. You will work with a partner to do a close reading of these two texts. Then you will be asked to compare the two texts and their perspectives on the American dream in a short essay.

1. ***Closely read Langston Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again” (Small Group Work)***

* Read through the poem one time. As you read, mark places in the poem:
  + - That make a strong impression on you
    - Where you agree or disagree
    - That leave you wondering or asking a question
* Next, find a partner and write a paragraph that summarizes the poem. In your summary be sure to capture the main sequence of the poem.
* Finally, discuss the following question with your partner: Why do you think the speaker says “O, let America be America again‐‐/The land that never has been yet‐‐/And yet must be—“? After this discussion, do a brief quick-write to capture your best thinking about the question.

1. ***Watch a scene from Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” (Small Group Work)***

* View a scene from the movie. As you watch, please write down notes on the places in the scene that you find powerful or that confuse you.
* Next, work with a partner to create an outline of the scene. In your outline, divide the scene into its major parts. Then go back and create a paragraph-long summary of the scene.
* Finally, compose a quick-write in response to this question: What is Arthur Miller saying to the audience about the American dream in this scene?

1. ***Compare the texts***

* Drawing on your notes, write a 400–500 word response to the following prompt.

Imagine that in “Death of a Salesman” and “Let America Be America Again,” Miller and Hughes are making arguments about the American dream. What argument(s) do Miller and Hughes make in their texts about the nature of the American dream? How are their perspectives similar or different?

* Be sure to cite specific lines in the text to support your claims.

Part 2: Reading and Writing Portraits of American Dreamers

1. ***Study a Portrait of an American Dreamer***

* Read the short essay, “At an Age for Music and Dreams,” by Dan Barry. As you read, think about the argument Barry is making about the American dream. Mark or make notes in the margins about the things Barry does to make his point in the essay. These things might include his use of specific facts, words, or phrases, as well as his way of organizing the essay.
* Next, as a class, discuss the following questions:
  + What is Barry’s view of the American dream?
  + How does Barry communicate his view? (e.g., how does he select facts, use language, and develop his ideas through the piece?)

1. ***Prepare to write a portrait***
2. **Select a Subject**: Identify a person you know who has pursued the American dream. It can be someone who has succeeded or someone who has struggled.
3. **Prepare your Questions**: Use the “Interview Support Worksheet” and ideas from your class to create your own set of interview questions appropriate for your subject.
4. **Conduct the Interviews**: Interview your American dreamer. If possible, make an audio or video recording of your conversation. Take detailed notes during your interview.
5. **Analyze the Interview**: After the interview, listen to the recording and take notes on the following things:

* The major points the person made
* Direct quotes that express the person’s experiences
* Key events the person mentioned that you need to research. (You should use the Internet and other available texts to research these key events, taking notes on key points.)

Part 3: Produce a Portrait of an American Dreamer

1. ***Select ONE of these two choices to create and present your portrait.***

**CHOICE A: Essay Portrait**. Write a short (500**‐**750 word) essay portrait of your American dreamer in which you:

* Employ the strategies you observed Barry use in “At an Age for Music and Dreams”
* Use the information from your interview and background research
* Include specific evidence (direct quotes, facts, etc.)
* Communicate/reflect on what that person’s life suggests about the American dream

***OR***

**CHOICE B: Mixed-Media Portrait.** Create a mixed**‐**media portrait of your American Dreamer that includes:

* A short, compelling text (the written portion of the slide show, quotes, commentary, etc.) that describes your American dreamer. Use the information from your interviews and background research. Include specific evidence (direct quotes, facts, etc.)
* A set of images that enrich the written portion of the portrait (e.g., slides with voiceover, video/audio clips, or a collage of photos to illustrate the written text).

For examples of mixed**‐**media portraits, you can explore:

* “One in 8 Million” series in the New York Times http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/nyregion/1**‐**in**‐**8**‐**million/index.html
  + Joseph Cotton: The Grandfather
  + Tika Chapagai: The Newcomer
  + Buster English: The Green Thumb
* “On Being” series in the Washington Post http://specials.washingtonpost.com/video/onbeing/

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

1. **Knowledge and skills you will need to demonstrate on this task:**
2. On this task, you will show that you know these things:

* The techniques used by authors to craft a message about an enduring theme, such as the American dream.
* Texts are embedded within their historical, social, and cultural context, as well as personal history and experiences.

1. On this task, you will show that you are able to do these things:

* Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text
* Determine central ideas and themes
* Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text
* Analyze the structure of texts
* Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text
* Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text
* Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content
* Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience
* Conduct short research projects based on focused questions in which they gather relevant information from multiple sources, integrate the information, and draw conclusions
* Gather relevant information from print and digital sources, assess the credibility of each source, and integrate the information
* Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research

1. **Materials needed:**

* “Introduction to Bearing Witness: Portraits of Americans Dreaming” text
* Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”
* “Death of a Salesman” (film version)
* Dan Barry, “At an Age for Music and Dreams” <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/15/us/15land.html>
* Interview Support Worksheet

1. **Time requirements:**

* You will have four to five class days for Parts 1-4
* Five additional days out of class to complete Parts 5-6
* One additional in-class day for peer review of Part 6 before final draft is submitted (optional)

1. **Scoring**

You work will be scored using the English/Language Arts Textual Analysis Rubric, Grade 12.