

Sample Response

Prompt: Write a first-person, fictional or personal narrative that explores a moment in time where an individual recognizes one aspect of their identity.

My Rhythm

"Boom! Boom!" The sound of my drum echoed off the gym walls as I tried to remember the beat. Sweat dripped down my forehead, and my hands slipped on the drumsticks. "Come on, Jayden," I muttered to myself. The school talent show was only three days away, and my piece still wasn't right.

"Nice beat," said Mateo, my best friend, grinning from the bleachers. "But maybe too . . . traditional?" I frowned. "What's wrong with traditional?"

He shrugged. "Nothing! I just thought you were gonna do something more . . . like what we listen to?"

That's the thing. I love hip-hop, but I also love the small hand-carved wooden Dondo that I brought back from Ghana. The rhythms remind me of summers there. My mind wanders to the long dusty village roads, music everywhere, Grandma smiling. The beat mimics the heart of my family—my father's laughter, the boundless energy of my twin brothers, and my mother's wit and endless courage as she immigrated from Ghana to start anew and create opportunities here for us. But at school, nobody really knows much about that part of me.

When I first signed up for the show, I said I'd perform a drum solo. Everyone assumed I meant a pop rhythm or a cover like everyone else was doing for the talent show. Now that they knew it was an African rhythm, people kept saying things like, "That's cool..." but what stuck with me was what they didn't say.

The next day, during rehearsal, I started to play my piece again. Boom-ta-ka, boom-ta-ka. The beat filled the room, and my body moved without thinking. Then I noticed some kids whispering and smiling at each other. My stomach twisted with **trepidation**. Maybe Mateo was right. Maybe I should just do something "normal."

That night, I sat on my bed staring at my **dependable** drum. The surface was worn smooth from years of use. I remembered Grandma's voice: "Play what's in your heart, Jayden. Your rhythm is you."

The next day at lunch, I told Mateo, "I'm keeping my piece."

He looked surprised, then smiled in **admiration**. "Good. I think you should," he said.

When the night of the show came, my heart pounded harder than my drum. I timidly stepped onto the stage, and the lights blinded me. For a second, I froze. Could I really bring myself to play this song in front of such a large audience? I closed my eyes, and I thought of Grandma. I channeled my mother's courage. She left comfort, familiarity, and family in Ghana to come to America and create opportunities for my brothers and I. If she can do hard things, so can I. I raised my drumsticks and began.

The gym filled with rhythm—strong, steady beats that echoed through the crowd and pulsed through my body. The room went quiet, then started clapping **exuberantly** along with my beat. When I finished, there was a second of silence before the cheers erupted.

Walking off, I grinned so hard my face hurt. I found my rhythm.