

## DESCRIPTIVE COMPOSITIONS

A **descriptive composition** can be about a person, a place, a building or even an object.

- A descriptive composition about a **person** should consist of:

1. An introduction in which you give general information about who the person is, when/where/how you first met them, how you heard about them, etc.

2. A second paragraph in which you describe their physical appearance (give details of the person's height, build, hair, clothing...).

3. A third paragraph in which you provide information about the person's personality, character and behaviour<sup>1</sup>.

4. A fourth paragraph in which you write about the person's life and lifestyle: their habits, likes and dislikes (e.g. interests, hobbies, sports, languages they speak...), profession, family, their ambitions and dreams...

5. A conclusion in which you can comment on why the person is of interest, express your feelings and opinion concerning that person, why they made such a strong impression on you or how they have influenced you...

Descriptions of people can be found in **articles**, **letters**, **narratives**, etc. The writing style you use depends on the situation and the intended reader. For example, if you are writing an article for a magazine, you should use a rather formal style and a polite tone.

- A descriptive composition about a **place or building**<sup>2</sup> should consist of:

1. An introduction in which you give the name and location of the place or building, and/or the reason for choosing it. In the case of the building you can also state who designed it and when it was built. In the case of the place you can mention its population.

2. A main body (two or three paragraphs) in which you describe the main aspects of the place or building in detail. For example, when you describe a place, you should mention what you can see and do there. When you describe a building, you should first describe the building outside (what it is made of, appearance (size, style, colour...), gardens...), and then in another paragraph the building inside (different areas/rooms, light, colour, furniture, pictures, floors, windows, doors...).

5. A conclusion which includes your comments on why the place/building is of interest, express your feelings and opinion concerning that place/building, and/or a recommendation.

Descriptions of places or buildings can be found in tourist **magazines**, travel **brochures**, **narratives**, **letters**, etc. The style you use depends on the situation and the intended reader.

- A description of an **object** should include information about size and weight (tall, tiny, big, heavy, light), age (new), shape (circular, oval), pattern or decoration (plain, checked, floral), colour (multi-coloured, yellowish), origin (African, Japanese) and material (leather, plastic, nylon, cotton, wooden, silk).

To describe objects, avoid using more than three adjectives before the noun. Remember the word order of adjectives: value/opinion, size/weight, age, temperature, shape, colour/pattern, origin, material.

Descriptions of objects can be found in **leaflets**, **catalogues**, **advertisements**, **narratives**, **reports**, **articles**, etc.

<sup>1</sup> For vocabulary on physical appearance and character and personality, check your handout "Personal identification".

<sup>2</sup> For vocabulary to describe houses, buildings, cities, etc. check your handout "House, home and surroundings".

NARRATIVES

One of the standard types of composition is a **narrative**. You can be asked to write a short story (either fictional or real) for which you can be provided with either a title, or the first or last sentence of the story.

- Stages you should follow to write the narrative:

**Stage 1- PRE-WRITING:**

1. **Outline:** make an outline of what the story could basically be about, taking into consideration the question in the task. Example: Write a fairy story that ends "... it was only then that it dawned on him how lucky he was to be alive":

*The central character, walking through the mountains at night, finds a cave. In the cave is a malicious fairy. During the night they sit by the fire. The fairy asks him to get some wood from the other side of the cave, but the man is suspicious and stays where he is. In the morning he wakes to find that the cave has vanished and that he is on the very edge of a high cliff, and would have died if he had gone to fetch the logs for the fire. Then comes the final sentence.*

2. **Brainstorming.** Work out more details. To help with this step, ask yourself lots of **questions** about the three main parts of a story (that is, the plot, the character/s, and the setting) that you have thought of. For example:

*Where did this all take place and when? Who was this traveller? Where was he going and why? What time of day was it when the story began? What was the weather like? How did he find the cave? What did he see when he went into the cave? How big was the cave? What did the fairy look like? How did he feel when he saw the fairy?*

As you are asking and answering these questions, note down important points of the story in any order. In addition, as words and images come to you, jot down the most powerful and most descriptive ones so that they can be incorporated later in the finished story. For example: **evil; a vast, empty cavern; black thunderclouds heavy with rain...**

- The three main parts of a story:

**PLOT:** The plot of your story tells the actions and events that take place in your story. It's usual to describe events in the order in which they happened but this is not compulsory.

Your plot should have an introduction, a problem and its resolution. Decide whether your story will have a happy or a sad ending.

The story can be fact or fiction. It's usually easiest to write a story which is based on your own experience, but don't be afraid to change the details or invent new parts if this helps to make the story more interesting or entertaining. A good plot is not only entertaining, but also surprising and/or funny.

**CHARACTERS:** A person, animal or imaginary creature in your story. There are usually one or two main characters. There can be many secondary characters too. Make your characters interesting so that they hold your reader's interest.

**SETTING:** This is when and where your story takes place. The setting is a **time** - the future, the past, or now. Think of the weather, time of year... Use phrases to show when things happened in your story (e.g. *Almost three months before... / By the beginning of May...*). The setting is also the **place** (e.g. *on the moon, in Chicago, at the Whitehouse*).

▪ A final aspect to decide before starting to write is from whose point of view the story is going to be told. Narratives can be written in the first person, that is, using "I", or third person ("he," "she," or "it"). With a **first person narrator**, the reader gets a very personal, subjective viewpoint and a strong sense of the narrator's opinion. You get a very partial view of the action and the other characters, because the narrator is also a character in the story. With a **third person narrative** the author becomes the omniscient **narrator**, therefore, he knows everything about the characters and about the actions. This often means there is a more objective view of all characters and actions. However, sometimes it is not possible to choose the narrator, for example, if the question in the task reads: *Write a story which ends with the following words: "But next time I visit a foreign country I'll definitely learn a few key words of the language before I go"*; you obviously have to use the first person narrator.

**3. Organization.** Arrange the ideas into sections. These sections will normally correspond with paragraphs but, if you use direct speech, there usually have to be new paragraphs every time the speaker changes.

Stories are often told in three stages:

**1. Introduction:** set the scene (time, place, characters) and possibly also the source of the story (*I was told this story by my grandfather when I was a child*).

**2. Main body:** consisting of two or more paragraphs in which you develop your story. There must be a problem in your story. Example: the fairy's trick. In these paragraphs you can describe the characters, the places, the weather...

**3. Conclusion:** where the problem is solved, perhaps in an unexpected way. Example: he wakes at cliff top. Here you may also describe the characters' feelings and reactions at the end, the consequences of what happened, etc.

### Stage 2- WRITING:

Write the composition using the number of words you are told and taking into account the three stages mentioned before.

While writing, pay particular attention to:

**1. Tenses:**

-past simple: to describe actions that happen in sequence and to describe permanent features: *I ran to answer the phone but it stopped ringing as I picked up the receiver.*

-past progressive: to describe scenes (background information): *It was raining heavily as we set off.*

-past perfect: for actions that took place before the main events in the narrative: *When I got on the bus all the seats had been taken.*

- would and used to: to talk about habitual things that happened in the past: *When I was young my sister and I used to fight a lot. We would argue over our toys and our clothes.*

- present tenses: can be used for descriptions as well as past tenses but be consistent: if you use the present tense for descriptions, use it in the whole composition for all descriptions you make.

- participle clauses can also be used to indicate time:

present participles often show two actions which are linked: *Noticing that she looked lost, I asked if I could help.*

past participles: *Seen from the outside, the building looks a mess.*

perfect participles are used to show that one action happened before another one: *Having reported my stolen passport to the police, I returned sadly to the hotel.*

**2. Linkers:** Use a variety of linkers (especially time linkers: *at first, meanwhile, as soon as, afterwards, eventually, in the end...*)<sup>3</sup> to make your piece of writing more interesting.

David is a tall man. He is in his late forties. → David is a tall man who is in his late forties.

She is cheerful. She is always smiling. She always behaves politely. → She is cheerful and is always smiling. Moreover, she always behaves politely.

Charlie's Lobster House is one of the most popular restaurants in the area. It has delicious lobster dishes. → With its delicious lobster dishes, Charlie's Lobster House is one of the most popular restaurants in the area.

Participles can also be used to link ideas too:

Brighton is located only an hour from London. It is a charming seaside resort. → Located only an hour from London, Brighton is a charming seaside resort.

**3. Descriptions:** you can describe characters, places, objects, the weather, physical actions...

Characters:

- Describe the main characters and their relationships with each other.
- Ask yourself: how much do readers need to know about their physical appearance, personalities, behaviour, and background?
- Mention anything unusual or significant about them or their clothing.

Places: to describe places ask yourself questions like:

- Why is this particular place that I want to describe important?
- Where were objects located in relation to where the character/s were?
- How did the surroundings remind the character/s of other places they have/had been?
- What were the character/s feeling at that time?

As Bill entered the castle he felt as if he was in another age.

- What sights, smells, sounds, and tastes were in the air? To give the reader a more vivid picture of the description, you can refer to the senses:

Sight: Visitors can dine watching the moon rise over the mountains.

Hearing: You can hear the sound of church bells ringing.

Smell: I remember the Far East with its aromas of exotic herbs and spices.

Taste: Enjoy a cup of freshly-ground Italian coffee.

Touch: Relax in the soothing warm waters of the Roman baths.

Objects: remember what we said above (include information about size, weight, age, shape, pattern, colour, origin and/or material).

Weather:

▪ Useful adjectives for weather conditions: sunny, cloudy, foggy, hot, windy, ic(e)y, showery, humid.

▪ Useful adjectives for temperature: boiling → hot → warm → cold /chilly → freezing.

▪ Wind: a breeze → a wind → a strong wind → a gale → a hurricane:

It was a hot day but there was a lovely breeze.

The wind blew my hat off.

▪ Rain: a shower (a short period of rain); to pour (when it rains a lot):

We had several showers yesterday evening.

It's pouring/ It's pouring with rain.

<sup>3</sup> For a variety of linkers, check your handout "Linking words and phrases".

Physical actions:

▪ Sight verbs: see (use your eyes); look (at) (look carefully); watch (pay attention to sth that is moving); glance (look at sb/sth very quickly); glimpse (see briefly or partially); peer (look at very closely); gaze (at sb: look intently, esp in admiration, surprise...); stare (look at sb/sth in a fixed way for a long time).

Light adjectives: dark, gloomy (dark, especially in a way that makes you feel sad), sombre (dark, serious, without any bright colours), bright, shiny, vivid (very bright).

These brown walls are a bit gloomy. We should paint them white.

There was a shiny object lying in the sand.

Types of light: the sun shines; a camera gives a flash of light; stars twinkle; a candle-flame flickers in the breeze; a diamond necklace sparkles/glitters.

▪ Hearing verbs: hear (able to hear); listen (to) (pay attention to things you hear).

Hearing nouns: sound, noise. Hearing adjectives: noiseless → silent → quiet → noisy → loud → deafening.

▪ Smell verbs - smell: Always smell wine before tasting it.

Smell adjectives: stinking/stinky/smelly (having a very strong unpleasant smell), aromatic, fragrant, sweet-smelling/sweet, delicious. Smell nouns: aroma, smell.

▪ Taste verbs - taste: When you've got a heavy cold you can't really taste things properly.

Taste adjectives: sweet (honey); salty (crisps); bitter (strong coffee); sour (vinegar); spicy/hot (Indian food). Tasty (food); tasteful (clothes, furnishings, architecture...); tasteless (opposite of both adjectives); mouth-watering, tempting, exquisite, savoury, delicious.

▪ Touch verbs: feel, hold, touch, press, grab (to take hold of someone or something with a sudden or violent movement), finger (to touch or handle something with your fingers).

It was a terrible fire, they could feel the hot air.

Could you hold my hand?

Don't touch those wires -they're dangerous. Press the button.

She grabbed her bag and ran.

She nervously fingered her collar.

▪ Verbs connected with the mouth/nose and breathing: breathe (through your nose or mouth), yawn (when you are tired or bored), cough, sneeze, sigh, snore, smile, laugh, blow (one's nose).

▪ Verbs connected with speaking: whisper (soft), murmur (soft, romantic or complaining), mutter (soft, irritated), mumble (soft and unclear, nervous or insecure), shout (loud, angry or excited), scream (loud, frightened or excited); boast (proud of oneself), threaten (aggressive), complain (displeased), beg (desperate), grumble (displeased).

▪ Some useful adverbs connected with speaking:

-if sb feels angry: angrily, crossly, furiously, bitterly: She spoke angrily.

-if sb feels unhappy: unhappily, miserably, sadly

-if sb feels happy: happily, cheerfully, gladly, eagerly

-if sb feels worried: anxiously, nervously, desperately

▪ Verbs connected with eating/drinking and the digestion: chew (grind food with the teeth), munch (chew with strong movements of the mouth), gobble (eat rapidly, noisily and greedily), bite (cut, crush with the teeth), swallow (let food go down the throat), sip (drink a little at a time), suck (hold sth in the mouth while drawing liquid from it), lick (pass the tongue over sth), burp (pass gas loudly from your stomach out through your mouth).

- Verbs connected with the eyes and face: blink (shut and open the eyes quickly), wink (at sb: close and open one eye quickly), cry, frown (frown one's brows to indicate disapproval, displeasure or concentration), blush/flush (become red in the face, usually because you are embarrassed or angry)
- Verbs connected with the head/hair: nod (your head to mean "yes"), shake your head (to mean "no"); comb (one's hair).
- Verbs connected with the hands/arms: clap, knock (on a door), wave (goodbye), point (at sb/sth), punch (sb: strike with the fist), shake hands, fold (one's arms), suck (one's thumb), bite (one's nails).
- Verbs connected with the body: perspire/ sweat, tremble (shake involuntarily), shiver (shake slightly and uncontrollably), stroll (walk in a slow casual way), march (walk quickly and with a clear purpose).

**4. Grammar structures:** use a variety of grammar structures. A narrative lends itself to the use of conditionals, reported and direct speech, relative clauses, etc.

- **Direct speech** can be used occasionally for dramatic effect. Remember the following:

- use a new paragraph every time there is a change of speaker.
- don't let a voice talk for very long.
- use inverted commas at the beginning and end of the words spoken.

"I'm glad you are here", she said, "because there is something I've been wanting to talk to you about".

- if the reporting verb follows the speech, use a comma at the end of the speech:

"I don't understand", she said.

- if the reporting verb precedes the speech, use a comma or colon:

She said, "Can I come in?"

She said: "Can I come in?"

- don't use "s/he said" all the time. Use other reporting verbs: accuse, admit, advise, argue, ask, complain, deny, encourage, explain, invite, promise, recommend, remind, suggest, warn...

- thoughts can also be reported directly:

She looked at the wolf and thought, "That doesn't look like my grandmother!"

- **Inversion** and **participle clauses** are also useful when telling a story because they link the events and are economical.

Inversion when we begin with a negative word: No sooner had he seen the donkey, than Robert fell in love with him.

Participle clauses:

Pushing his head through the wire, John rubbed his nose against Robert's pullover.

Surprised as Silvia was, she was able to take charge of the situation.

- Besides, **inversion** as well as **fronting** and **cleft sentences** are useful if you want to put emphasis on what you/the characters are saying:

Inversion in a conditional clause: Had she seen Tom, she would have helped him.

Fronting of the complement of "be": Fenced on three sides is the garden of this attractive suburban home.

Fronting of an adverbial of place: Behind the desk was an old woman.

What-cleft sentence: What the police did first was (to) interview all the witnesses to the accident.

It-cleft sentence: As she walked into the grand dining room, it was the huge wooden table that she noticed first.

**5. Techniques:** you can use the following techniques to begin/end your story:

- Use direct speech:

Beginning: "Always look on the bright side of life, kids", Mr Frisbain used to tell us.

End: "Thank you, sir", the boy said to me.

- Ask a rhetorical question:

Beginning: Have you ever travelled by train on a warm summer night?

End: Why did I have to suffer so much?

- Refer to the characters' feelings:

Beginning: I was exhausted because I had been painting walls all day.

End: My brother had become the hero of the day and I was extremely proud.

- Address the reader directly: I am sure you all know what a bargain is.

- To begin your story you can use your senses to set the scene and describe the weather, atmosphere, people's actions...:

I could hear the wind howling around me. It was quite dark that night and it felt strange to be out in the wilderness all alone.

- To begin your story you can also use flashback narration. This means you can start your story at a certain point in time (often a very exciting moment), then go back in time and describe events which happened before this time (usually in Past perfect), lead the reader up to the specified time, then go on with your story till the end.

### Stage 3- PROOFREADING:

Read through the story in order to see if you can find any mistakes.

1. Make sure you stick to the **question**.

2. Evaluate the **layout** and **organization**.

3. Revise **grammar**.

4. Revise **vocabulary**. In narrative stories repetition of words and structures is quite frequent. Example:

And Pinocchio's nose started to grow, and the more he lied, the more it grew, and the more it grew, the more he lied.

However, when describing it's important to vary the adjectives so that you do not use "nice" and "good" all the time.

5. Revise **spelling, capitalization and punctuation**.

6. Revise **style**: in opposition to formal essay compositions, narrative stories have a rather informal style. Hence, ...

6.1. You can use informal vocabulary: words of Anglo-Saxon origin, phrasal verbs, idiomatic expressions...

6.2. You can use the first person and expressions of personal feelings. Example:

I saw him once, in the distance, a mysterious figure in his black cloak with his silver walking stick in his hand.

6.3. You can use informal structures: imperative sentences, contractions, direct speech and thoughts... as well as formal ones (for example, inversion can be used to give emphasis to one aspect, participle clauses can be used instead of other longer clauses).

6.4. You can use informal punctuation marks such as exclamation marks, dashes, or parentheses. Pausing is also frequent to add dramatic effect. Example:

And as I pushed open the door... I saw a huge figure standing by the window.