



Focus on success: **GCSE English Language**

Writing

Handout booklet

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The writing process

This is one way of thinking about writing as a process which can be broken down into a series of steps. Over time, with practice and consistency, this will become more automatic and seamless.

Step 1: Thinking

Students too often rush to put pen to paper! Those who pause to mentally plan or conceptualise their approach to the task often produce more focused responses. To practise this, you could present students with a writing task from a past paper and allow them several minutes of silent thinking time (strictly no writing!). Encourage students to spend this time either imagining the scene for a Paper 1 creative writing task or have a silent debate in their heads in response to the view/statement of a Paper 2 writing task. Alternatively, set free-writing tasks in order to build confidence and resilience without the fear of being assessed.

Step 2: Planning

Students should experiment with a range of planning tools to build a repertoire they can draw on in the exam. Planning is crucial but students need to practise writing in timed conditions so they can manage their time in the exam and ensure they leave sufficient time for writing and reviewing their response.

Step 3: Draft

Students should be encouraged to see writing as a messy process (as even professional writers would admit). It's rarely a finished article on first attempt and ideas will develop through writing itself rather than being fully-formed from the start. Try to explicitly model the decision-making process to your students as you write. (Remember though, most of the responses produced under exam conditions are essentially first drafts.)

Step 4: Critique/edit

Instil in students the importance of checking through their work and making improvements. Within the classroom, this can be done as self-editing/peer assessment or as a whole class exercise. In an exam, students need to critique and shape their responses as they go, pausing briefly to review each paragraph.

Step 5: Write

The final write-up is an outcome of executing all the other steps. (In an exam, of course, students won't have time for this final step.)

The mark scheme: Question 5

Notes on levels of response mark schemes: principle of 'best fit'

A response does not have to fulfil every skill in a level before it can move up to the next level. For example, if a student does not use paragraphs, it does not mean they cannot achieve more than Level 1. (Although students should obviously be encouraged to write in paragraphs, paragraphing is one skill among many.) The response is placed in the appropriate level according to the quality of writing and credit given for the skills descriptors that are being fulfilled.

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AO5 Communicate clearly, effectively and imaginatively, selecting and adapting tone, style and register for different forms, purposes and audiences. Organise information and ideas, using structural and grammatical features to support coherence and cohesion of texts.					
Level		Skills descriptors	Descriptive	Narrative	Rhetorical
Level 4 19–24 marks Compelling, convincing	Upper Level 4 22–24 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication is convincing and compelling• Tone, style and register are assuredly matched to purpose and audience• Extensive and ambitious vocabulary with sustained crafting of linguistic device Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Varied and inventive use of structural features• Writing is compelling, incorporating a range of convincing and complex ideas• Fluently linked paragraphs with seamlessly integrated discourse markers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Distinctive and original imagery.• Compelling and evocative description.• Impressive vocabulary used judiciously.• Conceptualised ideas developed well.• Subtle detail and ideas.• Compelling use of linguistic devices and impressive control of phrasing.• Fluid sequence of ideas.• Highly successful control of mood/ atmosphere.• Crafted style.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Distinctive and original narrative perspective.• Convincing character/s.• Impressive vocabulary, used judiciously.• Detailed and convincing setting.• Conceptualised ideas.• Convincing sequence of events, skilful temporal and spatial shifts.• Impressive control of phrasing.• Subtle and skilful shifts in mood/ atmosphere• Crafted style.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Convincing argument.• Conceptualised focus on task.• Detailed complex ideas.• Fluid sequencing of ideas/argument.• Judicious choice of register.• Confident and varied tone.• Convincing and impressive vocabulary.• Deliberate crafting of language and use of rhetorical devices.• Subtle variation of pace.
	Lower Level 4 19–21 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication is convincing• Tone, style and register are convincingly matched to purpose and audience• Extensive vocabulary with conscious crafting of linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Varied and effective structural features• Writing is highly engaging with a range of developed complex ideas• Consistently coherent use of paragraphs with integrated discourse markers			

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Level		Skills descriptors	Descriptive	Narrative	Rhetorical
Level 3 13–18 marks Consistent, clear	Upper Level 3 16–18 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is consistently clear Tone, style and register are clearly and consistently matched to purpose and audience Increasingly sophisticated vocabulary and phrasing, chosen for effect with a range of successful linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective use of structural features Writing is engaging, using a range of clear connected ideas Coherent paragraphs with integrated discourse markers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective imagery. Clear description that explores details. Precise and well-chosen vocabulary. A range of details described. Developed theme/s and ideas. Controlled use of vocabulary and linguistic devices. Clearly shaped sequence of ideas/images. Creates clear mood/ atmosphere. Clear and controlled use of style. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear narrative perspective. Develops characters effectively. Precise and well-chosen vocabulary. Establishes setting with clear details. Shapes and controls a sequence of events. Uses temporal and spatial shifts with success. Clearly establishes plot. Controls the pace and ideas within the narrative. Creates and maintains a specific mood/ atmosphere. Clear and controlled use of style. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear point of view/argument. Clear and relevant focus on the task. Clearly developed range of ideas. Clear and logical sequencing of ideas/argument. Appropriate level of formality. Sustained and effective tone. Accurate range of vocabulary chosen for effect. Effective use of rhetorical devices. Controlled pace.
	Lower Level 3 13–15 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is generally clear Tone, style and register are generally matched to purpose and audience Vocabulary clearly chosen for effect and appropriate use of linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually effective use of structural features Writing is engaging, with a range of connected ideas Usually coherent paragraphs with range of discourse markers 			

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Level		Skills descriptors	Descriptive	Narrative	Rhetorical
Level 2 7–12 marks Some success	Upper Level 2 10–12 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with some sustained success • Some sustained attempt to match tone, style and register to purpose and audience • Conscious use of vocabulary with some use of linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some use of structural features • Increasing variety of linked and relevant ideas • Some use of paragraphs and some use of discourse markers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to use imagery for effect. • Some development of detail and description. • Some range of vocabulary and/or attempts ambitious vocabulary. • Attempts some development of setting/place. • Some scope of ideas • Some use of linguistic devices. • Some sequence of ideas/detail. • Attempts to create atmosphere/mood. • Some awareness of style and purpose. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to develop narrative perspective. • Attempts to develop character/s. • Some range of vocabulary and/or attempts ambitious vocabulary. • Attempts some development of setting. • Some sequencing/developing of events. • Some use of linguistic devices. • Some establishing of plot. • Some control of pace. • Attempts to create atmosphere/mood. • Some awareness of style and purpose. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to establish point of view/argument. • Some focus on task. • Attempts to develop ideas. • Some sequencing of ideas. • Some relevant register/formality. • Attempts to establish tone. • Some attempt to select vocabulary. • Some use of rhetorical devices. • Some attempt to create pace.
	Lower Level 2 7–9 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates with some success • Attempts to match tone, style and register to purpose and audience • Begins to vary vocabulary with some use of linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to use structural features • Some linked and relevant ideas • Attempt to write in paragraphs with some discourse markers, not always appropriate 			

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Level		Skills descriptors	Descriptive	Narrative	Rhetorical
Level 1 1–6 marks Simple, limited	Upper Level 1 4–6 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicates simply Simple awareness of matching tone, style and register to purpose and audience Simple vocabulary; simple linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of simple structural features One or two relevant ideas, simply linked Random paragraph structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple, limited use of imagery. Simple/generalised description. Simple, basic vocabulary. Simple assertions stating place. Limited scope/ideas. Occasional use of descriptive language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple narrative perspective. Simple development of character. Simple vocabulary range and effect Limited awareness of setting. Simple reference to events. Simple sequence of events. Simple plot. Simple scope/control of pace. Simple detail to create mood/ atmosphere. Limited awareness of style. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple or limited point of view. Limited focus on task. Limited scope/ideas. Simple sequence of ideas. Simple register. Simple tone. Simple/limited vocabulary. Simple use of devices. Limited sense of pace.
	Lower Level 1 1–3 marks	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited communication Occasional sense of matching tone, style and register to purpose and audience Simple vocabulary Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited or no evidence of structural features One or two unlinked ideas No paragraphs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple sequence of details. Simple detail to create mood/atmosphere. Limited awareness of style. 		
Level 0 No marks	No meaningful writing to assess offered. Nothing to reward.				

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AO6 Technical Accuracy Students must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	
Level	Skills descriptors
Level 4 13–16 marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence demarcation is consistently secure and consistently accurate • Wide range of punctuation is used with a high level of accuracy • Uses a full range of appropriate sentence forms for effect • Uses Standard English consistently and appropriately with secure control of complex grammatical structures • High level of accuracy in spelling, including ambitious vocabulary • Extensive and ambitious use of vocabulary
Level 3 9–12 marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence demarcation is mostly secure and mostly accurate • Range of punctuation is used, mostly with success • Uses a variety of sentence forms for effect • Mostly uses Standard English appropriately with mostly controlled grammatical structures • Generally accurate spelling, including complex and irregular words • Increasingly sophisticated use of vocabulary
Level 2 5–8 marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence demarcation is mostly secure and sometimes accurate • Some control of a range of punctuation • Attempts a variety of sentence forms • Some use of Standard English with some control of agreement • Some accurate spelling of more complex words • Varied use of vocabulary
Level 1 1–4 marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional use of sentence demarcation • Some evidence of conscious punctuation • Simple range of sentence forms • Occasional use of Standard English with limited control of agreement • Accurate basic spelling • Simple use of vocabulary
Level 0 No marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' spelling, punctuation etc. is sufficiently poor to prevent understanding or meaning.

Paper 1 writing tasks

Below is a bank of the writing tasks that have featured in exam papers to date. Seeing the tasks at a glance enables you to find the assessment materials with ease. It also will help you in constructing your own exam-style tasks.

Descriptive writing tasks

Series	Question
Nov 2024	Write a description of a forest from your imagination.
June 2024	Write a description of a very hot place from your imagination. You may choose to use the picture provided for ideas. (Picture supplied – see QP).
Nov 2023	Write a description of a library from your imagination. You may choose to use the picture provided for ideas. (Picture supplied – see QP).
June 2023	Write a description of a zoo or wildlife park from your imagination. You may choose to use the picture provided for ideas. (Picture supplied – see QP).
Nov 2022	Write a description of a fishing village from your imagination. You may choose to use the picture provided for ideas. (Picture supplied – see QP).
Nov 2021	Describe a place at sunset from your imagination. You may choose to use the picture provided for ideas. (Picture supplied – see QP).
Nov 2020	Write a description of a mysterious place from your imagination. You may choose to use the picture provided for ideas. (Picture supplied – see QP).
Nov 2019	Describe a place from your imagination that you think is beautiful.
June 2019	Describe a market place from your imagination. You may choose to use the picture provided for ideas. (Picture supplied – see QP).

Context statement

Series	Question
Nov 2024	Write the opening of a story about a journey as suggested by this picture. (Picture supplied – see QP).
June 2024	Write the opening of a story about a disagreement.
Nov 2023	Write the opening of a story about discovering a hidden object.
June 2023	Write the opening of a story about a human meeting an animal.
Nov 2022	Write the opening of a story about an unlikely friendship.
June 2022	Write a story about a life-saving rescue.
Nov 2021	Write the opening of a story about a new beginning.
Nov 2020	Write the opening of a story about an event that cannot be explained.
Nov 2019	Write the opening of a story about a magical world as suggested by this picture (Picture supplied – see QP).
June 2019	Write the opening of a story with the title 'Abandoned'.

Examiner feedback (Paper 1, Question 5)

The following comments have been lifted from reports on the exams.

The most successful responses typically:

- use the image as a springboard into their imaginations, bringing their own interpretation to the prompt and balancing this with a focus on the finer, subtle details in the image
- adopt a quality rather than quantity approach by writing less (three to four pages) in a more controlled, 'consciously crafted' way
- use their skill in analysing structure in someone else's creative writing (Q3) to consider the shape of their own writing
- allow time to review their work to make improvements
- employ an impressive array of punctuation – colons, semi-colons, brackets and dashes – and are able to integrate these seamlessly into their responses to enhance meaning.

Areas where responses could improve:

- Planning: it's encouraging to see more and more students each series taking time to plan their writing, which often leads to more concise responses, but some students excessively plan which can have a detrimental effect if they don't allow sufficient time to write the actual piece.
- Length: some students apply a 'more is more' philosophy, when often it is the case that the more students write, the greater the deterioration in ideas, structure and accuracy.
- Method: some students continue to produce formulaic responses that give the impression that they have been over-prepared. Often, the result is something that feels artificial or contrived, for example, where they've been directed to cover all the five senses ('I can see/I can hear/I can smell', etc).
- Technical accuracy: over time the range of sentence types and punctuation used by students has improved, but sometimes students use advanced punctuation (apostrophes, semi-colons, colons and punctuation of dialogue) indiscriminately and incorrectly where it would be more effective to use these sparingly and accurately.
- Vocabulary: some students continue to include over-ambitious vocabulary that is misused and obscures meaning. 'Advanced' vocabulary only adds to the quality of the writing if chosen aptly.

Activity 2: Level 2 responses

‘Some successful communication’

Walking fastly. Chest pounding as walking through this green, old, smelly canal trying to get away from the awful smell. Watching out for holes in the floor was hard, scared in case James fell and then I would have been alone and terrified.

Looking sharply. Wanting to find the big, snowy mountains, probably as big as my future, the green brown trees swinging side to side whilst I was trying to see the mountains. James was breathtaken by the wonderful, life-changing view.

“We have finally find them,” I shouted. I was like a little girl in a sweet shop. We finally approach the large, over-sized gates which was as big as the sun. We tried to open them. We find it really difficult as they was triple our weight.

James lifted me up and I started to climb over the sharpe gates I was very mysterious that day.

James followed my league. I needed to be careful where I jump down as it was like I was walking into another planet, the weather was strange is was froggy and damp but it felt like winter wonderland.

Walking towards the huge, not so; straight peaks of the mountains. Trying to walk up the mountains was scary, my caves were aching and very sore, but I made it, to the very top and James was slowly getting closer towards me.

The views. I shouted Its marvellous and so exciting which was a weird feeling but I loved it. I could see the whole of Canada, all the other mountains it was like seeing a painting the frog made it feel unrealistic and not natural.

Suddenly, James and I felt shaking. Hearing loud cracking noises coming from where we was standing. We tried to move but we couldn’t.

Crash! Bang! Helppp me!

Screams coming from under huge icy bits of rock the mountain collapsed and feel 14 foot down onto rock solid water.

Falling into iced water was bad, we crack the water and fell into the cold frosty water and it felt like I was blind, couldn’t see anything. I certainly couldn’t hear James which was worrying and scary. I tried to open my eyes but all I could see was blurriness and it was frightening, trying not to go under water was a hard task.

Activity 3: Level 3 responses

‘Clear and consistent communication’

Response A

I finally found it; the perfect place. No people, no nearby villages, no nothing. Just me and the mountains.

Except, something’s still not right.

He’s still here.

He’s not talking to me, but I can still feel him at the back of my mind, just ... waiting. But that’s good, it means he can’t be influencing me, guiding me, forcing me to commit unspeakable acts. I can be in control for once, as if I finally got rid of the backseat driver. It’s so satisfying, and so I decide I’m going to do something before my life inevitably comes crashing down again.

I slowly get up from my pier and slowly walk towards the hut, relishing not having to run anymore, except if I want to. I grab my fishing rod and head back the way I came. It’s funny, I always thought dad was stupid for wanting to catch his own fish, but now it’s all I can think to do. I cast the line, and the distant splash tells me I haven’t lost my touch. The constant running has given me a new found appreciation for just sitting and waiting. What was it they used to say? Patience is a virtue, oh yes, how could I forget.

I sit for maybe minutes, maybe hours, listening to the gentle and almost soothing rustle of the trees. However, a consistently more aggressive rustle suddenly reached my ear. I barely have time to process it before several black clad figures emerge from the forest and there’s one behind me and he’s holding me down and I drop the rod and I feel him emerging from the back of my mind and I can’t stop him and ...

I’m surrounded by darkness, trapped in my own mind.

And I know ... all those men.

I let my guard down.

And they died for it.

Response B

The surrounding water on the dock was calm – a bit too calm for me.

The surrounding mountains looked dark and ominous – how I felt inside.

Far beyond the darkness around me I could make out a blinding light, it hurt my eyes if I looked directly at it for a long period of time. Out of nowhere, a beautiful dainty looking bird landed close to me on one of the stilts. I have a weakness for animals, they're the only thing that brings warmth to my stone-cold heart.

Why am I even here? I should know by now that nothing good comes out of being here. There's something that tugs violently on me, something so overwhelming, so overbearing, it takes over me and I cannot control it. It leads me to the same place – here.

I have always wondered why it brings me here, strange things that are unspeakable, to a single soul happen here and I feel like with each event that happens I'm going to become melancholy mad.

I can smell a foul stench that seems to be present when the night time appears. The night time comes and goes very quickly here, it's like a thief – you'd never know it was here. Here, all that happens are grotesque events. Events so malevolent that it puts Satan's work to shame and would make Christians cry out for mercy.

My mouth is clamped shut, from the darkness that is slowly taking over me, it's like a serpent of smoke intermingling with every part of me, with it comes a dual personality. When I'm away from here I'm like the lovable, charitable Mr Jekyll, but when I'm here it's like I've got the signature of Satan written upon my face like Mr Hyde.

I wake up from my draining sleep with beads of sweat breaking out on my forehead and clutching my chest in aggravation like someone had plunged a knife through me. I had experienced dreams like this before, the same damn dream that is draining me slowly while I sleep so when I wake up I feel barely alive.

I live two different lifestyles, the only difference is that one is real and the other isn't.

Activity 4: Level 4 responses

'Convincing and compelling'

Full version of Extract A:

As the man sat on the damp wood he began to glare at the expansions of the mountains forming a zig-zag, a delicate white bird caught his eye, it was resting on the wooden post, calmly stretching his satin soft wings and letting the soft Scotland breeze dance with his wonderful white feathers. It were as if he was an angel. The jagged peaks of the mountains are towering so high that they kissed the cascade of clouds as they devoured the blue in the sky. The fresh air whistled as it spoke of the picturesque landscape that had been carved by God himself. As the man was watching the clouds race each other like birds it felt like the world was going back in time.

As the tranquil waters sat still, the man could see a droplet of water diving through the soft air and into the lake, quietly disturbing the calmness of the scene, the microscopic waves as they expand along the lake.

The layers of damp grass bled into the mountains whilst the little white bird lifted his wings and took flight. When this happened, the man began to realise the true meaning of life, the meaning that no technology could ever give. He grasped the moment of peace and tranquillity and kept it in his heart and mind and didn't plan on letting it go.

The smell of damp grass wafted around the man's nose. He could smell the purity of this place and it felt like he discovered it. The peaceful chorus of the little birds filled the whole of the mountains it was echoing around the place. The beautiful mountains looked though as if they were painted by God because their beauty is unmatched, it showed so much divinity and peace and the man had quickly fell in love with the place.

The bird continued to fly and the unfurling of its wings seemed to reflect in its natural simplicity the sudden relief of all the man's stress and anxieties. It was as if all his troubles had taken flight with the beauty of the bird, a reminder of his own youth. How precious was freedom, he thought. The magnificence of the landscape, its purity, had the capability of cleansing souls.

The place was concealed from the world, it was waiting to be discovered by mankind and now the magic of it is found. Speckles of green could be observed from the mini-islands that were scattered along the vast landscape. The mute mountains spoke volumes of the beauty of the place. It was magical.

Full version of Extract B:

The day is cold and overcast, and the dark grey sky looms endlessly above me. As I take my first step onto the rickety old pier the wood creaks and groans, like an elderly woman rising from her chair, joints popping and complaining. Once I am seated, the cold air settles around me. The atmosphere alongside the lake is clammy, and condensation beads upon the dried-out wooden planks of the walkway.

I am completely alone up here, I realise as the overwhelming sound of nothing envelops me. When I gaze down into the water of the lake my own reflection stares back at me, only slightly contorted by the light ripples: the day is calm, the air is still, and the weather although chill is surprisingly welcoming. The high peaks of the mountains loom ahead, barely meeting in the middle and creating a gateway for the valley beyond. I can see the trail of the lake as it heads up hill, only slightly obscured by the light mist that curls around the slopes of the mountains in the distance. When summer breaks through the veil of spring the slopes will be mottled yellow, pink and healthy green as the warmth encourages life back into the landscape. For now, everything is cast through a stale grey filter.

Suddenly, the peaceful silence is interrupted. The sound is small, but stark against the tranquility that my ears had grown accustomed to. There again, the noise surrounds me, bouncing off of the edges of the mountains and disorienting my senses. Again. Behind me this time. I whip around in search of the source, the sound growing louder to reveal a strange murmuring. My heart pounds in my chest as I try to level my breathing.

The sound is everywhere, growing louder and more frequent, and I try my best to convince myself it's nothing but I'm all alone, what if – a deafening screech echoes around the lake. My heart stops in my chest.

Earlier, I had eyed my pocket knife from its perch on my garage shelf. Why didn't I pick it up? I ask myself as the horrifying sound reverberates around the ravine. Just as I am preparing myself for defence ... a single gull lands to perch on the post in front of me. It looks me in the eye, tilts its head as if considering me, and lets out a screeching call. Relief floods me, adrenaline coursing through my veins and warming me against the chill air. I laugh, standing to leave, and give the gull a courteous wave. Smiling and shaking my head at my own mistake, I head home.

Commentary

There is a clear distinction between paragraphs and the narrative develops, albeit in conventional form, towards a clear and definite conclusion. The narrative structure follows a fairly familiar 'calm-chaos-calm' structure which is exploited for maximum impact.

Blurred lines: Descriptive vs. narrative writing

Descriptive response 1

The following is a descriptive response structured within a narrative framework: a girl returns to the city and through the power of her imagination, views a journey by bus as something magical, until reality hits.

Consider: What makes this an effective description and worthy of a mark in Level 4?

Question

Describe a journey by bus, as suggested by the following picture (June 2017).

Response

Through the haze of the window the city burned before her in a cacophony of neon laser lights, blazing across the world of darkness like stars across a night sky.

Upon the great stone and metal monoliths, the stars danced and flashed, swirled and sparkled in proud shades of red, green, yellow, blue; every colour that could be imagined was roaring in the silent symphony. These lights played and twinkled in her wide eyes. The city rose within her, a feeling long forgotten: one of wonder, beauty, adventure, one subdued by the monotony of life, one that had been sorely missed.

Sharing the will of those terrific, persistent stars, she tore her eyes away from the scene to look back, to reflect how she had ever come to live without this.

Around her she saw the same tired people, heads down, dead still, as if shackled by some unhappy master, but now she saw so much more. Their lives and dreams and meaning were unveiled through the eye of her vivid imagination. With this new found, childlike wonder, she saw movie stars, murderers, secret aliens, as if gazing at them through a kaleidoscope. Herself, she saw as an astronaut, gliding past the bright, fiery suns in her spaceship.

Once more she gazed out through the fogged screen to see fellow vessels buzzing past, and to them she waved. She closed her eyes and smiled, reclining against the soft comfort of her chair, and she listened to every varied beep and whir. The gentle but powerful growl of the engine soothed her, every now and then breaking as a piece of music faded in, then just as rapidly faded out, forever.

The light and noise faded, slowly, away, but just as the embrace of rest was closing around her, a shrill monotonous sound cut through the silence.

‘Last stop for the night.’

Disturbed and unsettled, she disembarked from the bus, stepping onto the rough, damp pavement. Weary, she gazed up. Some neon signs glowed above the entrance to a tower. Cars

droned past, just as they had always done. She frowned and looked up again, but the sky was dark and colourless, covered in cloud. It was the same dull sky she had seen thousands of times before. She stood there, still, as if shocked.

Narrative response 1

The following is a narrative response that contains effective descriptive detail. It fulfils the brief of being about two people from very different backgrounds, while creating a setting and characters that are original.

Consider: What makes this an effective narrative and worthy of a mark in Level 4?

Question

Write a story about two people from very different backgrounds. (June 2017)

Response

She walked closer to the line, tousled thick hair flowing down her shoulders like a mane, golden eyes blinking owlily as her head tilted in contemplation. Ebony skin littered with thick raised scars, shaped in whorls that danced over her shoulders and spilled onto her back whilst slowly creeping up her neck and face, glistened dimly in the scorching heat of the day. She shuffled a step closer, tattered furs that were used as clothes softly flapping against her skin as she moved. Her head tilted in the opposite direction: who are you? Her eyes – there was wildfire floating in her eyes – widened slightly. Curiosity? Or perhaps apprehension.

The other side of the line, a boy. Alabaster skin, milk hair – a strange sight in the Wildlands. He was ice, cold, unmoving, his eyes twitching ever so slightly as he drank in the girl in front of him. He held some sort of tablet in his hand, casting red rays of light that flickered across the ground. A black box was attached to a wide strip of material at his waist, occasionally letting out an eerie beep. The girl's eyes darted to it every time it did so, curiosity etching itself into every pore of her skin.

He took a step closer.

The girl's eyes widened in fright as she slithered backwards, clutching for a hunting knife tucked in the small of her back. The boy's eyes widened as he stopped, slowly dropping the outstretched arm that had risen without his command. He raised his hands in a placating gesture so not to scare her further, then slowly released the catch on his belt and let it fall into the soft sand with an audible thump.

Creeping forwards, one inch at a time, he moved towards the line. Cautiously he lowered himself onto the floor and sat still.

After sitting, the girl moved out of the crouch she had put herself in unconsciously. She looked confused, brows digging deep trenches on her forehead, turning a still lake into a turbulent sea of waves. She shuffled closer.

The boy didn't move. His stormy grey eyes tracked her movements as she slid forwards, one step at a time. Reaching the line, she paused. A dizzying second passed before she folded in on herself, sinking into the sand as if there was running water in her bones, effortlessly flowing and ebbing, saving and drowning.

They stared at each other.

Her eyes roved over his face, flitting from feature to feature, always returning to his eyes. They were like the glaciers of the North Mountains: cracking; moving; halting; freezing. An endless cycle of ice, drowning out all the thoughts in her head.

He was doing the same. The scars, he saw, continued: fine lines, swirls and points, running across the bridge of her nose, twisting up her temples and disappearing into her hair line. Her eyes, he thought, were like the golden spires of his home; rivers of molten gold encircling pyres of white fire.

He smiled at her, inciting warm stirrings in her heart. She smiled back, and watched as a thousand suns shone through the icy panes, lightning crackling through her spine.

She lifted her hand, palm upturned. An invitation.

He gazed at it, drums pounding through his head, blanking out the rustling sands and birds. Slowly he licked his lips, biting the lower in apprehension.

He lifted his hand, every second looking back at her, checking and re-checking.

Their hands slid together, fingers entwining like thick vines as they used each other as anchors.

She laughed. It was such a beautiful sound! The sweetest birdsong paled in comparison.

They both looked at their joined hands, white twisting around black, providing a stark contrast to each other, highlighting each other, eyes down from one to the next and back again.

They looked... perfect together.

Don't you think?

Descriptive response 2

The following is another descriptive piece of writing set within a narrative framework. It is particularly effective because it is structured well and deals with a complex concept: the idea of humanity in isolation.

Look closely at how the piece is structured. What structural features are deliberately crafted by the writer?

You might consider:

- shifts between different times or places
- a sudden or gradual introduction of a new character at a significant point
- combining external actions with internal thoughts
- switching between different points of view
- developing and reiterating: focussing on a point of view by expanding and repeating it
- positioning of key sentences and their impact on the whole.

Question

Describe a journey by bus, as suggested by the following picture (June 2017).

Response

I sit in my seat – aisle, two rows from the front – and I look out. I see the shop lights, the street lights, the car lights illuminating the town engulfed in darkness. The clouds part just enough for the moon to penetrate through the smog and connect all those who see it. I see it, the woman besides me sees it, the man outside sees it, but do we see each other?

Outside, I can see the noise. The windows are shut and so my hearing is impaired, but I see the noise: see the drummer play the rhythm; the mouths moving; the door bells ringing. Inside it's quiet. No one speaks. A group of girls disrupts the silence, screeching about one guy or another; yet everyone else remains still and soon they do, too.

The doors open and I can taste the lively humanity outside: the laughing of colleagues; the defensive cry of a mother; the awkwardness of a first date. But then the doors shut. The silence rules once again and I simply stare once more.

Two rows back is a woman. Long dark hair, eyes like emeralds and soft skin glimmering in the moonlight. That girl and I have got the same bus every day for three years. Not one word has ever played between us; unless you count the time I apologised to her after bumping into her walking off the bus. I don't.

There is something about a bus. It's all about community yet I have never seen two strangers talk.

Eye contact for too long is considered creepy and people who sit next to you when there are free doubles might as well be stalking you; because there is something about a bus. Even

when you come on with a friend conversation eventually dies because you are in public and everyone knows the best talks are in private. Yet somehow we participate in this strange community of sharing and silence.

The bus continues. Capacity had been reached and people are standing. The bus takes a sharp turn and one man attempts to play out his magnificent stumble. He looks around, checking if anyone witnessed his embarrassment. We all look down; why embarrass him more?

Once more the door opens and I can hear the shouting, smell and taste the takeaways. I see the fun yet once more the doors shut and all I can feel is the scratchy seat below me, once I was so thankful to have after a strenuous day of work. So I just sit and observe.

Finally my stop comes. I carefully manoeuvre the rows, awkwardly side step a stroller and leap out. The bite of the wind snatches at my jacket, but I don't feel it. I feel ready to go see my children, greet my husband and hug my couch.

I stand there. I turn back and watch the bus go. I watch as twenty people's stories press pause whilst they take the bus; because the bus is the journey and we all want to reach our destination.

Narrative response 2

The following is another narrative piece containing effective descriptive detail. It explores a complex concept: what is real and what is virtual? It was awarded full marks and is an example of a student's writing ability beyond the ceiling of the mark scheme.

Question

Write a story about two people from very different backgrounds.

Response

Do my eyes deceive me? Have I gone crazy? Excuse me if I'm wrong, but I heard him.

Three years, two weeks and four days ago I landed here. Here: a planet, by our standards uninhabitable, fourteen billion light years away from Earth – and not one spark of life has been seen.

Before you ask, there's no way back. I spend my endless days baking in the 241 degree sun, its white glare an oppressive presence, a cruel, ultraviolet overlord that blinds and burns. I spend my infinite nights wrapped up in my tiny vessel, no familiar moon to guide my dreams.

Three years, two weeks and four days ago I became the loneliest man on Earth ... my Earth. I yearn for the touch of another man, the familiar rising and falling of a breathing chest, a simple yet life-changing 'hello'.

And there it is. 'Hello.'

I shoot up from my seat in the dune buggy: in all my solitary stasis my mind never stooped as low as inventing voices of its own. But I heard it.

‘Don’t be afraid. I’m right behind you.’

Somebody once told me that people are alike all over. I turn my head so slowly I feel every single muscle in my neck contract, and then I see him.

Him! Him! It’s a him! His figure matched my own, the cockroach of the mammals, dark chestnut skin stretched over his long, thin body, pale yellow eyes piercing holes through mine as I stammer and splutter like a nervous schoolboy asking the gorgeous Ginny Waters out in year seven. This man is real, physical, muscular, atomic matter; my prison of loneliness, solitude, agonising seclusion is finally finished.

He tells me stories of his land, one of emerald green leaves, flowers that dance and sing, communities that thrive and share, a planet respected for Her beauty, grace and resources. I lay back on my man-made carbon fibre receiver on the dijon-mustard sand: his homeland sounds like the Utopia only seen in the fiction of terrestrial bodies.

‘What is your planet like?’ he asks, smooth tones oozing from his mouth like sweet molasses.

I could tell him stories of a planet at breaking point, polluted over hundreds of years with the kicked up dust of an ungrateful bacteria, the human race. I could tell him of how we exploited Her for every resource imaginable, all whilst millions died daily from malnourishment. I could tell him how we can’t even see the stars at night for the sake of greenhouse gas.

He glares at me with a strange look, cunning and clever yet as if he is waiting for me to slip. Even after the fortune of solitude, this creature before me is not welcoming. Our lives are polar opposites: white skin, black skin; Utopia, dystopia; real, virtual. I don’t tell him anything of the original Earth. I can’t trust him.

‘Francis,’ he mutters, the voice now raspier and more impatient. I stare with glazed eyes, lost in calculation of who this creature is and what he wants from me and why we are the only beings here and how does he know my name and why doesn’t he look 100% real?

His hand on mine breaks the spell of paranoia that he cast over me. His grip tightens. His teeth flash in a manipulative grin and they look like pearls from the real Earth. As I look deep into his eyes, still frozen, they grow and shrink, the iris melting into a black puddle just resting on his lower eyelid. I try to pull back, to no avail.

‘Francis,’ he smirks. ‘People are alike all over. Even here in the next dimension. See? I look just like you.’

Something isn’t right here. The light in his eyes ... almost pixelated ... smears like a digital glitch.

Who is virtual? Me, or him?

Paper 2 writing tasks

Below is a bank of the writing tasks that have featured in exam papers to date. Seeing the tasks at a glance enables you to find the assessment materials with ease. It also will help you in constructing your own exam-style tasks.

Series	Question
Nov 2024	<p>'The past is irrelevant to our generation and learning about it is a waste of time and effort. The future is in innovation, so that's where all our efforts should be directed.'</p> <p>Write an article for your school or college website in which you argue your point of view on this statement.</p>
June 2024	<p>'Choosing a future career should be based on helping others and making a positive contribution to society, not achieving status or making lots of money.'</p> <p>Write an article for your school or college magazine in which you argue your point of view on this statement.</p>
Nov 2023	<p>'Young people have the energy, enthusiasm and ideas to change our world for the better in so many ways. However, they are powerless because adults do not really listen to them, or take them seriously.'</p> <p>Write a speech to be given at a meeting with the leaders of your country in which you argue your point of view on this statement.</p>
June 2023	<p>'Cars are convenient, comfortable and save time. However, we need to use them less by making public transport such as trains, trams and buses cheaper, more reliable and easier to access.'</p> <p>Write a speech to be given at a meeting of your local council in which you argue your point of view on this statement.</p>
Nov 2022	<p>'Scientists say that teenagers are not like adults; they learn and socialise differently and need sleep at different times. Education needs a radical re-think to meet the needs of students.'</p> <p>Write a letter to the Minister for Education explaining your point of view on this statement</p>
Nov 2021	<p>'Our addiction to cheap clothes and fast fashion means young people in poorer countries have to work in terrible conditions to make them. We must change our attitude to buying clothes now.'</p> <p>Write an article for a magazine or website in which you argue your point of view on this statement.</p>
Nov 2020	<p>'People have become obsessed with travelling ever further and faster. However, travel is expensive, dangerous, damaging and a foolish waste of time!'</p> <p>Write an article for a news website in which you argue your point of view on this statement.</p>
Nov 2019	<p>'People protest about the cruelty of keeping animals in captivity, but they seem happy enough to eat meat, keep pets and visit zoos. All animals should be free!'</p> <p>Write an article for a magazine in which you explain your point of view on this statement.</p>

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Series	Question
June 2019	<p>'It is people who have extraordinary skill, courage and determination who deserve to be famous, not those who have good looks or lots of money or behave badly.'</p> <p>Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper in which you argue your point of view in response to this statement.</p>
Nov 2018	<p>'Cars are noisy, dirty, smelly and downright dangerous. They should be banned from all town and city centres, allowing people to walk and cycle in peace.'</p> <p>Write a letter to the Minister for Transport arguing your point of view on this statement.</p>
June 2018	<p>'All sport should be fun, fair and open to everyone. These days, sport seems to be more about money, corruption and winning at any cost.'</p> <p>Write an article for a newspaper in which you explain your point of view on this statement.</p>
Nov 2017	<p>'Education is not just about which school you go to, or what qualifications you gain; it is also about what you learn from your experiences outside of school.'</p> <p>Write a speech for your school or college Leavers' Day to explain what you think makes a good education.</p>
June 2017	<p>'Parents today are over-protective. They should let their children take part in adventurous, even risky, activities to prepare them for later life.'</p> <p>Write an article for a broadsheet newspaper in which you argue for or against this statement.</p>
Specimen 4	<p>'Snow seems like it is picturesque, exciting and fun but in reality it causes accidents, inconvenience and economic disruption.'</p> <p>Write an article for a broadsheet newspaper in which you explain your point of view on this issue.</p>
Specimen 3	<p>'Floods, earthquakes, hurricanes and landslides – we see more and more reports of environmental disasters affecting the world and its people every day.'</p> <p>Write the text of a speech for a debate at your school or college in which you persuade young people to take more responsibility for protecting the environment.</p>
Specimen 2	<p>'Festivals and fairs should be banned. They encourage bad behaviour and are disruptive to local communities.'</p> <p>Write a letter to your local newspaper in which you argue for or against this statement.</p>
Specimen 1	<p>'Homework has no value. Some students get it done for them; some don't do it at all. Students should be relaxing in their free time.'</p> <p>Write an article for a broadsheet newspaper in which you explain your point of view on this statement.</p>
Year 9 Pack 1	<p>'Children of school age should not be working at all. They should be focused on their school work and helpful to their parents. Working for money comes later'.</p>

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BOOKLET

Series	Question
	Write the text for a speech to be given at a school debate in which you argue for or against this statement.
Year 9 Pack 2	‘Ghosts don’t exist. Anyone who believes in them is being fooled.’ Write an article for your school magazine or website in which you argue for or against the statement.
Year 9 Pack 3	‘Pets are either treated too well or too cruelly!’ Write the text for an article to be published on your school’s website in which you explain your own point of view.
Year 8 Pack 1	‘People become too attached to their pets. Animals are here to be useful, not to be spoilt.’ Write the text to appear on a website about the treatment of animals in which you explain your point of view on this statement.
Year 8 Pack 2	‘School pupils should not be punished with detentions. They are the modern equivalent of being imprisoned.’ Write an article for your school magazine or website in which you argue for or against the statement.
Year 8 Pack 3	‘Visiting a good zoo can be entertaining and informative, but there are lots of other tourist attractions that can make a suitable day out for all the family’. Write the text for a leaflet in which you advise families about the best attractions to visit in your area.
Year 7 Pack 1	‘Beauty contests and talent competitions are a good idea because they give young children confidence and something to aim for.’ Write a letter to your local radio station in which you argue for or against the opinion expressed in the statement.
Year 7 Pack 2	‘Performing music on the street should not be allowed. It is far too noisy. It causes disturbances and is just a form of begging.’ Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper in which you argue for or against the opinion expressed in this statement.
Year 7 Pack 3	‘It is important to travel and go on adventures so that you can learn more about other people, the countries they live in and their ways of life.’ Write the text of a speech to be given at a school assembly in which you persuade your audience to agree with this view.

Paper 2 writing forms

The features of forms that we would typically expect students to replicate in exam conditions:

Form	As a minimum, students should include:	More detailed/developed indicators of form could include:
Letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> an indication that someone is sending the letter to someone paragraphs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the use of addresses a date a formal mode of address if required e.g. Dear Sir/Madam or a named recipient effectively/fluent sequenced paragraphs an appropriate mode of signing off: 'Yours sincerely/faithfully'
Article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the use of a simple title paragraphs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a clear/apt/original title a strapline subheadings an introductory (overview) paragraph effectively/fluent sequenced paragraphs
Text for a leaflet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the use of a simple title paragraphs or sections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a clear/apt/original title organisational devices such as inventive subheadings or boxes bullet points effectively/fluent sequenced paragraphs
Text for a speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a simple address to an audience sections a final address to an audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a clear address to an audience effective/fluent linked sections to indicate sequence rhetorical indicators that an audience is being addressed throughout a clear sign off e.g. 'Thank you for listening'.
Essay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a simple introduction and conclusion paragraphs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> an effective introduction and convincing conclusion effectively/fluent linked paragraphs to sequence a range of ideas.

Examiner feedback (Paper 2, Question 5)

The following comments have been lifted from reports on the exams. You may wish to refer to these when preparing classroom activities or entering exam season.

The most successful students typically:

- address just one or two of the strands in the statement and write in more depth about each
- establish a central argument and sustain the thread of their argument throughout the response
- consider the structure/shape of their argument, sequencing their ideas with a building sense of momentum
- engage with the 'big idea' that's the focus of the writing task and link back to the reading material in Section A, framing their own perspective(s) in this larger context
- project an individual voice
- adapt and sustain the tone, style and register of their writing to match the audience, purpose and form
- consciously craft their writing, making deliberate language choices (which could include, but not be limited to, subtle use of extended metaphor and other imagery, use of humour, irony or hyperbole – as appropriate for the specific context of the task)
- use a broad range of linguistic/rhetorical devices being careful not to overuse any particular technique.

Areas where students could improve:

- Formulating an argument: students are not required to address every strand of the view/statement stimulus (unless they wish to). Some students who attempt this find themselves stalled in an array of separate ideas which they then find difficult to weave into one coherent whole. A more effective strategy would be to focus on one or two threads. A useful starting point for planning their response is to sum up their argument in a single sentence. This could be incorporated into their introduction or conclusion, or simply used as a reference (inscribed at the top of their page), reminding students to stay focused.
- Sustaining an argument: where students present a counter-argument, they need to ensure they do so in a way that doesn't dilute their own argument or outright contradict it, which is sometimes the result when it's not done well. This risks jeopardising the overall clarity of communication (and students will struggle to achieve more than a mark within Level 2).
- Length: some students are still writing too much (over 3 sides) which can be counter-productive and detrimental as it becomes far harder to sustain both the clarity of the argument and technical accuracy. A useful mantra that all students would do well by is: write less and control what you write more carefully. A concentrated, crafted and concise response is almost always going to be rewarded more highly than a diluted, rambling and elongated response.
- Structure: students who carefully consider the use of paragraph links and discourse markers to signpost the direction of the response are likely to improve the clarity of their argument and improve the overall quality of their writing.
- Adapt style/tone: students should pay attention to context and adapt their style/tone to match the audience and form, rather than writing indiscriminately which can lead to the

blending of formal and informal styles, for example. Students should avoid writing in a colloquial or overly familiar manner as this is likely to limit the mark that can be achieved for AO6.

- Technical accuracy: similar to Paper 1, students are using a greater variety of sentence forms which can lead to an increase in the range of punctuation marks, but semi colons and colons are still more frequently misused.
- Vocabulary: students are using more complex and sophisticated vocabulary, but when students use such words imprecisely, it obscures the meaning and detracts from the overall clarity of the argument.

Teaching ideas

A note on the importance of sequencing ideas

It is crucial when presenting a point of view that the reader can follow and understand what is being proposed. This requires the student to present a sequence of ideas which are linked by an underlying argument. One of the key questions an examiner will consider, having read a response to Question 5, is: 'What is the central argument here?'

Too often, students present a range of ideas which are entirely unconnected, making their argument very difficult to follow. This is often the result of not planning how the different points will be organised for maximum effect, and lack of care in linking paragraphs and points effectively. Only a minority of students take time at the start to use planning to improve their writing; those who do invariably reap the benefits of their plan and produce more structured responses.

Topic sentences are another under-used structural writing feature, which are only seen occasionally at the start of new paragraphs. The function of a topic sentence is very straightforward but effective, as the rest of the paragraph should naturally follow.

A coherent argument is one where the writer takes the reader on a journey, where a range of points are presented in a controlled and deliberate sequence of ideas, leading the reader to a compelling conclusion. The use of paragraphs, topic sentences and discourse markers, as well as other structural features such as headings, is beneficial, but even without their support, the sequence of ideas should be clear enough for the reader to follow without difficulty. Generating and ordering a sequence of ideas in a series of paragraphs is crucial to the successful completion of Question 5.

Graphic organisers

Graphic organisers can be helpful in guiding students through the thinking process of planning their response. This isn't to suggest they'll produce a plan this detailed in the exam itself, but this suggested model encourages them to think about the flow of their ideas and the different decisions they could make about the positioning of their points. Once they've settled on an over-arching shape, they can then consider what linguistic/rhetorical devices they'll use to enhance their argument.

Students could use this to practise planning responses. You could collaborate as a class and plan a response together.

An interesting exercise would be for students to then play with the plan, try re-organising the sequence and evaluate how this alters its impact.



‘Because...But...So...’

To illustrate how this model works, take the view: ‘Cars are increasingly harmful to our cities...’

Because of the toxic emissions they pump out into the atmosphere.

But we need to provide more efficient access to cities and towns because of all the time lost through congestion and extended travel times.

So, we need to invest in more comprehensive urban planning which takes into account the need for new technology as well as providing more efficient public transport.

Take a look at the example student response below. Can you apply the ‘because...but...so...’ model to this essay?

Question

‘Cars are noisy, dirty, smelly and downright dangerous. They should be banned from all town and city centres, allowing people to walk and cycle in peace.’

Write a letter to the Minister for Transport arguing your point of view on this statement.

Student response

I am writing to you today to argue that cars should be banned from our cities, for a multitude of reasons.

Firstly, cars are pollutive, they create noises and particle pollution making the air in city centres dirty. This high level of particulates in the air in the city centres is terrible for the health of the people who live and work there, increasing the likelihood of diseases like cancer. In some areas the pollution is so bad that it has a similar impact on people’s lungs to smoking. On top of the pollutive issues and health issues already displayed, cars seem to be completely pointless for travel purposes. This is because of the amount of congestion caused, so as a result, walking is faster than taking the car. The public transport links in city centres are also already good enough that people can access any area of a city centre via to be or train. So overall, cars are mostly pointless in city centres.

You could argue that vehicles are needed for deliveries to shops and other similar things, however, the resupplying shops need to do can easily be completed without the use of motor vehicles. An alternative could be a system similar to luggage transport in airports, where smaller more pedestrian-friendly vehicles could resupply all the shops. There are already zones in some of our city centres dedicated to pedestrians, and these zones have worked flawlessly already. Therefore, the simple expansion of them would create hardly any hassle, as most people are already used to using these zones on a daily basis. These places are also proven to be far less dangerous as pedestrians don’t make rash decisions when faced with a road to cross.

I would disagree, however, that it is the cars that make places more dangerous. The only reason cars are dangerous to people on foot is because of the pedestrian's decision-making skill. If people just obeyed the traffic lights and crossed roads when they were supposed to, there would be no danger at all. This, however, is an impossible thing to prevent. There are always going to be those people that think crossing the road two seconds earlier in front of a car is worth it just to save those two seconds. If you do not consider removing cars, please at least consider the proper education of people regarding road safety.

Across the world, there are some cities in quite developed areas, like Japan, that have made the move to ban cars from city centres. This has only gone well for them so far, and as they keep investing in the city centres, it will only keep getting better. They have introduced cycling schemes in these areas with wide, easy to distinguish cycle lanes that many people use daily to commute and go to events. The success of these schemes largely depends on the willingness of people to cooperate and so I would personally recommend some sort of vote on the subject to take place.

To conclude, cars in city centres are pollutive and, from a transport point of view, pointless. They also can be dangerous to pedestrians in the wrong circumstances. Also, pedestrian zones have been proven efficient and well-executed in our cities, and in other countries entire centres pedestrianised has been a huge success.

I hope you will consider this matter. Thank you for your time.

Commentary

This response was awarded a Level 4. The student takes the view that 'Cars should be banned from city centres...'

Because:

- cars are pollutive
- they cause congestion and therefore travel is slower.

But:

- cars are needed for short deliveries, therefore we need to think of alternatives
- it's also pedestrians who cause the problem.

So:

- we need to learn from other countries such as Japan and adapt our systems.

Building a cohesive argument: Topic sentences

Read the below extracts from student responses to the November 2018 writing task.

- Identify the topic sentence in Extract A.
- Where and how does this paragraph lose coherence?
- How could this be improved?

Question

'Cars are noisy, dirty, smelly and downright dangerous. They should be banned from all town and city centres, allowing people to walk and cycle in peace.'

Write a letter to the Minister for Transport arguing your point of view on this statement.

Extract A

The high level of incidents occurring are not the fault of the cars but the drivers. The driving tuition and testing system should be revamped to place far more stress on the drivers' responsibility to look out for and protect vulnerable road users. Yes, cars are noisy because they want people to beware of their surroundings so the high level of incidents would decrease.

Extract B

Over the last decade, I have been living in a noisy, toxic and smelly neighbourhood. This is due to the numerous cars and other vehicles clogging up the road network. For those that have respiratory problems, this is a hazardous situation, and I feel that it is time to make a change, don't you think?

Commentary

Extract B is more cohesive because the topic sentence is clear (the neighbourhood is polluted). They provide a reason/evidence their view, using 'this' to refer back to the first sentence and link ideas cohesively. The next sentence builds on the last by offering a specific consequence and it ends with a rhetorical question to engage the reader in the debate.

Full response – Level 4

A full response is provided below. It was awarded a Level 4. In what ways has this student constructed cohesive paragraphs and a coherent argument overall?

Killing Machines!

Dear Minister of Transport

I plead for not only the mercy of our citizens, but for the mercy of our planet. Millions and millions of cars in our city centres are destroying not only our livelihood, but our environment. My little siblings are coming home each day with blackened faces, tainted from the dirty smog that oozes so unhealthily out of those tin cans that patrol our streets. The walls of our once opal and silver architecture are now covered with a dull brown stain of depression and failure.

I write to you here today not only speaking for myself, but also for the public. The daily commuters on foot who have to put up with the endless racket and drone of cars killing everything it sees with its horrible blast of noise and disgusting blow of fumes. They must be banned today!

Take a minute and think about your child. How would you feel knowing that they can't walk safely in their own city without their lungs being stuffed constantly with bacteria and smog. Remove cars from main city areas and you will literally be restoring peace to the community. Cleaner air, peaceful sounds and altogether healthier people.

The lack of cars will free the roads up for cyclists, this will lead to drops in obesity as people will be exercising more often. It will also lead to a complete eradication of road accidents, saving taxpayers millions over the coming years.

Dare I mention the slash of police time that would be saved? No more speeding, no more driving in bus lanes, and best of all, no more drink drivers. This will force the yearly death numbers to plummet into the ground, leaving our community safer, happier and healthier.

So I ask you today, fulfil your responsibility at making our transport systems safer, and you can be the person that saves our society not only money, but their lives.

Yours sincerely

Sentence models

Varying sentence forms and structures. It is worth noting that three of the six skills descriptors are focused on sentences, highlighting their particular importance in the AO6 mark awarded.

Contrast

Whilst we sleep in our comfortable beds safely within our secure homes, there is another world out there which literally begs us to listen.

The question

When will we as a society learn that we need to do more to help the disadvantaged and the destitute?

The dramatic sentence

Tonight, a homeless person near you will die.

The 'trailer' opening with three semi-colons and a colon

We live in a world where there are people dying on the streets; where young adults starve for the want of a warm meal; where old men collapse with hypothermia for the sake of a comfortable bed: is this the world we want for our children?

The 'for too long' and a colon sentence

For too long, we have ignored the pressing issue of the homeless in our society: it is time that we as a community did something about it?

Now more than ever...

Now more than ever, we need to ensure that those who lack the basic human rights of shelter and warmth are provided with hope and a better future.

The 'I understand... (semi-colon) however...' sentence

I understand that there are people out there who claim that some homeless people are not genuine; however, can we afford to play with people's lives based on what we think are a minority?

Writing in action – Paper 2

Activity 5

The following example student responses are from the November 2017 series.

Question

‘Education is not just about which school you go to, or what qualifications you gain; it is also about what you learn from your experiences outside of school.’

Write a speech for your school or college Leavers’ Day to explain what you think makes a good education.

Level 1: ‘simple, limited communication’

Sample response

I think learning how to act like a good human and also smartly. More involved in your studies makes a good education. Education is experience where you gain almost as much experience as you can. It might not be only about mentally challenged subjects but other things like sports. It’s a journey on how well you can adapt not a competition.

Commentary

In this Level 1 sample response the student offers a very brief response, with just three or four ideas. The ideas are relevant to the task and therefore have potential, but each sentence introduces a slightly different idea, without being explained or developed any further. There is no clear link between them, other than they are all loosely connected to the concept of education. The student uses one linguistic device – a metaphor describing education as a journey – which, although simple, also shows promise.

To improve, the student could be encouraged to take the five sentences they have written and use each one as the topic sentence for a short paragraph. Each paragraph would then explain the idea in more detail, and could include some examples to illustrate the point. Topic sentences are a useful feature for students at all levels, as they are the primary means of creating links between ideas and paragraphs. It might also be useful for the student to consider their five paragraphs and try them out in various different orders, to identify links between the topics covered in each paragraph and to judge which sequence works best. Writing a plan is not necessarily a waste of time (as many students and some teachers seem to think), as it encourages students to generate a range of ideas and think about how their ideas could be sequenced to build a solid argument.

The metaphor of the journey is one which could be extended very effectively. The student could also consider using a wider range of linguistic devices to raise the level of their writing. The mark scheme for Q5 identifies an attempt to use linguistic devices as one of the criteria for Level 2, so the inclusion of a range of devices would raise the overall level of performance. As this particular task is a speech, the student could be encouraged to consider which devices would work best when spoken aloud, and identify those with an aural element, such as repetition and alliteration. Similarly effective in a speech might be those devices which appeal explicitly to the audience, such as rhetorical questions and direct address. It might be worth

reminding the student that with such a young, familiar audience, humour might also be appropriate as a tool.

Level 2: 'some successful communication'

Sample response

This statement is very much true in my eyes. If you are shaking your head 'no' because you disagree with it, just listen to what I have to say.

Have you ever wanted to be good at something or make someone proud? I know I have because being good at something or making someone proud encourages you to do well, it reflects off of your work. Just like if you go into school with a positive attitude, you will most definitely have a better day than going in miserable.

It is scientifically proven that doing extra activities or hobbies that you enjoy/love will help you with improving your education. Do you have a hobby? If you don't then you should. This is why teachers encourage these things to happen because being positive allows you to learn as you aren't so focused on the negative things.

Do you think that school is boring? Yes. I know you think school is as boring as mass on a Sunday because you have to sit in silence and listen to everything that is being told to you. Well there are ways around it, for example if you actually listen to the things that are being taught then you would find them interesting and teachers play games if you show respect.

Therefore I passionately believe education is important.

Commentary

This response illustrates the way in which many students make an attempt to use a range of linguistic devices, with varying degrees of success. The student uses direct address in the opening paragraph to good effect, acknowledging the student audience and anticipating their likely response. They also use an appropriate and humorous simile in the final paragraph (assuming the reference to 'mass' is one which would be familiar to the student audience). However, the rhetorical question in the second paragraph may have had good intentions, but in effect leads the reader away from the focus on education, so is less effective than if it were more directly related to the topic. The student repeatedly uses the rhetorical question in each paragraph and it becomes predictable and increasingly ineffective. Likewise, the 'scientifically proven' fact about the value of hobbies is generalised and unexplained, also diminishing its impact.

In terms of sequencing ideas, the student attempts to establish the context for the speech in an opening paragraph, and ends with an appropriate concluding statement of commitment to education, giving an effective overall structure to the response. However, in between, there are three paragraphs, each of which introduces a discrete and unlinked idea with a tenuous connection to the theme of the task. The three ideas could be summarised as: making someone proud is good motivation; hobbies support education; listening in class makes school less boring. There has clearly been little thought about the sequence of these ideas, and no attempt to link them in any way. As a result, the focus is tangential, there is no central argument and the student's perspective is difficult to follow.

To improve, the student could be advised to use linguistic devices more sparingly and avoid repetition of the same device. Facts and statistics are very popular with students, but are often used ineffectively with the results being counter-productive. Facts and statistics are easy to devise, but are frequently implausible and contrived; they are often associated with spurious 'experts' which usually serves to lessen the impact, not increase it. Facts, statistics and expert opinions need to be very carefully presented in order to be credible and, if not, should be avoided.

To add a sense of coherence to the structure of ideas, the student could consider the addition of a topic sentence which refers back to the content of the previous paragraph and forwards to the content of the current paragraph. If these topic sentences also made reference to the topic of the task as a whole, that would increase the overall coherence of the argument and make it easier to follow.

Level 3: 'clear and consistent communication'

Sample response

Greetings, hello and welcome. It's lovely to see you all. It's lovely to hear you have done so well. I've written a speech for you today to answer this, 'What makes a good education?' Well I know for a fact its not where you grow up, although that helps, its not about how talented you are in the beginning but its who teaches you! It may be yourself, a friend, a teacher or even your parents. It could be Maths, English, Science or even bad jokes from your Dad to tell to your kids one day.

Now you may ask why I say this. Surely talent's important and we're all different aren't we? Good questions but fundamentally flawed, anyone can learn anything as long as you have the right people to inspire you, motivate you and push you to your goals and beyond.

Of course you can't just rely on others to get you those grades, or punchlines, of course you need to do the hardest bit and climb the mountain of education yourself. You can have all the support in the world but you won't move unless you start pulling those ropes.

It may be daunting at first but every mountain looks enormous from the base, but you've already climbed hundreds just like it. Everyone can look back at a time when something looked hard but overcame it with ease, like carrying all the shopping bags from the car in one go, or getting all that laundry upstairs without dropping those pesky socks!

So who cares? Well you've all finished your time here at this school and youre about to head out into the big bad world or carry on education somewhere else but that doesn't mean it will get easier. No no no! It only gets harder from here so prepare yourselves to start learning like you've never learned before because out there you may not have a teacher or your parents but someone who will always be with you is you!

So after all that, telling you to climb mountains and not disregard others help, I say to you that a good education is learning to teach yourself and others, take on others advice and criticism and push yourself to be a better you...

Commentary

The sample response at Level 3 is typical in presenting an argument which is easy to follow. The points made could be summarised as:

- education is not dependent on talent or where you live
- a good education requires teachers
- the ‘teachers’ could be parents or friends
- but the most important person is you
- it’s your responsibility to meet the challenge of education
- education is a mountain to climb
- you might think school is finished and education complete
- but education continues and the focus is on you more than ever.

The student effectively uses discourse markers and other phrases at the start of each paragraph to signpost each stage of this argument so that the reader is carried smoothly and consistently through the speech. The student also uses a wide range of linguistic devices, but no single device more than twice. The metaphor describing education as a mountain is impressively extended in subsequent paragraphs. Alliteration is also employed effectively, particularly appropriate for a speech which is intended to be read aloud. There is an occasional stab at humour, with the throw away comment on ‘pesky socks’ and references to ‘Dad jokes’ which, again, are appropriate for a young, lively audience in a relatively informal setting. The rhetorical questions are genuinely thought-provoking and the student’s use of repetition provides a tub-thumping moment towards the climax of the speech.

In terms of the sequencing of ideas and use of linguistic devices, the student meets the criteria for Level 3 comfortably. To improve, the student would need to develop some of the ideas further and incorporate more complex ideas into the sequence already established. The student could be advised to consider a conceptual framework for their ideas, such as exploring the idea of the place of the individual within society, the concept of education as life-long learning or the school curriculum as only a very minor and insignificant factor in the education of young people.

The linguistic devices used are varied and effective, but, with the exception of the mountain metaphor, are relatively unsophisticated. The student could improve by considering how they might craft the rhetorical devices and lists more carefully to raise them above their current pedestrian level, perhaps by introducing a higher level of more compelling and sophisticated vocabulary.

Level 4 responses

Sample response A

Dear students, teachers, and parents. We did it, we made it through college! However, it’s not over just yet and I am here to give one final speech which I hope you will carry with you long after you last walk out of these familiar school gates... It is on the way in which our educations, enjoyable as they have been, could be improved.

First and foremost is the unbelievable rise in recorded cases of bullying and depression in colleges nationwide. A recent study by Ofsted found there to be a 39% increase in teenager suicides in the capital alone. This must end. We must be the ones to resolve this heartbreaking and truly despicable state of affairs. As Nelson Mandela famously said “no person is born hating another man, we are taught to hate, and if we can learn to hate, we can learn to be kind - for kindness comes far easier to the human heart”. Although the answer to this pandemic problem may not be simple, there are certainly places one can begin, for example offering safe and understanding environments in which students can share their feelings and thoughts.

Secondly is the incredible importance of stimulation independent of academia. When did our school experience become nothing more than a blur of black pen on white paper and the occasional uninteresting school trip? The best schools are those that offer more than just an exam result. I believe passionately in the desperate need to broaden education’s horizons, for if we are not given the opportunity to experiment in school then perhaps we will never leave our comfort zones. It would be an abominable, saddening, and quite frankly unforgiveable thing to deprive students of the abundant wonders of cooking, to art history; to steal from them the simple pleasures of art, photography carpentry and sculpture.

It is often argued that the attainment of qualifications is far more pertinent to the education system, as it is vital to the employment of students in their futures. But what do you do once you’ve landed your job and your only form of knowledge and experience is an exam paper and the familiar scrawl of black ink? When did we reduce the children of this generation to nothing more than a grade on a paper? This entire philosophy of education is totally ludicrous. Knowledge isn’t only gained by the memorising of a textbook: we are people, not letters and percentages. Our development, both social and cultural, is paramount to the improvements we will create in the world around us. After all it is art that we as a society leave behind. The works of Socrates and Aristotle are still studied worldwide, people travel 1000s of miles to admire the Mona Lisa. Does anyone bother to venerate the Roman education’s grade average ... of course not!

If you can leave today with the knowledge that not only have you completed an exam, but that you are equally kind and knowledgeable, intelligent and intellectual, then you have every right to be proud of yourself. And this is what I believe makes a school good.

This is another response that was awarded Level 4.

It was just three sides long in the official exam answer booklet, showing what you can achieve by writing more briefly.

Sample response B

Education. What is it? Six painful hours of mandatory work for thirteen mandatory years of wretched school life, for a few hours of stressful exams which test how much you've been listening and how much you understand.

Education is reading from a textbook and memorising each and every word because who knows what questions could come up in the test?

Education is listening to a teacher when they tell you 'Write this down, it may come up in the test' because you don't want to fail.

Education is learning the cruel mark scheme off by heart in order for you to know how to answer the question the way the examiner wants it answered and to dodge any sneaky tricks they add in to try and trip you up to fail you.

Education is whatever the government wants it to be.

However, to us, it can become much more. People will tell you that you must hand in your homework at a certain time because it prepares you for deadlines that you will meet at work, correct? And they will bang on about how important it is to use high level words so you sound sophisticated in your work, correct? And they will also tell you that you must score highly in your test because there's nothing else left for you to do if you don't, correct?

Incorrect. Some people struggle with being organised and actually need help becoming more organised. Some people don't have an enormous advanced dictionary in their minds, maybe due to lack of skill or maybe due to learning difficulties. Some people don't perform at their best under pressure, maybe due to nerves or even anxiety. My point is that not everyone has the same skills and abilities and strengths, so why treat them as if they do? Not everyone learns the same way, eats the same way, moves the same way or thinks the same way, so don't treat them as if they do.

Everyone is different and unique and I believe that education is key to highlighting those differences and evolving them to become something even greater. Education should be about encouraging people to explore the world and themselves, to gain experience, to try new things, to find what works best for them. Not forcing them to do everything the same, stripping them of everything but their name for non-identification in a test.

I refuse to be a marionette and let someone else pull my strings. I challenge education to let go and do something different for a change, to let itself evolve like the world around it, before it becomes extinct.

A good education should be dispensed to all. Education with an open mind and diverse ways of thinking. No one is the same so treat them as they deserve to be treated. Don't let us become the victims of education, let us become proud children of it.

Commentary

The sample response is typical in so far as it is surprising and compelling. The student adopts an alternative perspective from the start and pursues the same argument coherently throughout. They establish an individual voice and a serious, determined, even forceful, tone which remains consistently effective to the end. The ideas are complex and conceptualised, and structured in a relatively simply sequence which leads the audience irrevocably towards the climax of the argument in the penultimate paragraph. The early repetition of paragraphs beginning with the same pattern of words hammers home the aggrieved message and builds a foundation for the student's increasingly belligerent ideas.

The linguistic features are sophisticated and deliberately crafted to magnify the impact of the argument. The inclusion of adjectives in the opening paragraph such as 'mandatory', 'wretched' and 'painful' sets the scene, while the personification of the mark scheme as 'cruel' is a brilliant and unexpected way of highlighting the sense of persecution the student feels. They deliberately select the ironically colloquial phrase 'bang on about' to explain the pressure put on students to use high level vocabulary. The 'marionette' metaphor is an inspired choice and perfectly illustrates the way the student feels they are helplessly in the hands of a merciless and inflexible education system. It would be churlish to suggest ways in which this response could be improved, although there are some sections which are less successful than others, and there is possibly an over-dependence on repetition and listing in places. Overall however, it is an inspiring and engaging response, worthy of marks at the top end of Level 4.

- Rhetorical devices used are not merely to decorate, but to emphasise the writer's perspective on the topic.
- Use of repetition in the first few paragraphs announces a personal style that serves to reinforce the message about education as a mere cataloguing of experiences.
- Vocabulary ('mandatory', 'wretched') in the opening paragraphs is already extensive and impressive and continues to be assured throughout.
- There is a clear voice – not ranting, not haranguing – but subtly interweaving some quite perceptive insights into modern education with the sense of personal experience.
- The fifth paragraph is effective in moving to the wider social context – 'education is whatever the government wants it to be' – which reinforces the writer's message that students are treated as automatons with no agency in the structures of education (reinforced later by the reference to the 'marionette').
- The shift in tone in the sixth paragraph is effective in signposting the introduction of the writer's own opinions about what education could be.
- Judicious combination of sentence structures and forms.

Notes

Notes

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