

Writing about a story

What causes most lost marks?

Let's not beat about the bush. **Poor knowledge of the text** is the single biggest cause of lost marks - year on year. It's no fun to know this if it applies to you, for it probably means that you've not enjoyed your text so far and this means that re-reading is going to be hard work. But this is one of those unavoidable realities of life. So get it sorted! But wait - there's help at hand...

What to do? Focus *not on the hard work involved*, but on the **higher grade it will bring**. Kick future hassle, frustration and disappointment into touch by recognising the benefits of **re-reading** and **reflecting deeply** on your story - **with the essay question firmly in mind as you re-read**. But not just yet! You'll need help as you read so either **find a friend to share the strain with** or at the very least **get hold of one of the free study guides available from the links above!** Oh, and don't forget to read the rest of this guide, too!

- *Pre-1914 stories generally pose the greatest difficulties. This isn't surprising as they tend to be written in a complex and rather formal style. This is where a study guide comes in really useful - again, try the links above!*
- *You can never know all there is to know about a text so, if you've read it in class and re-read it again at home (along with a study guide), then rest peacefully in the knowledge that you've done all you can!*

For exam revision, make sure to ask your teacher for some past exam questions. Practising a few of these is an excellent way to be better prepared and reduce the tension of the big day itself.

What gains most marks?

Most marks are given for interpretation. This means you need to look for and explain what, in your opinion, are the meanings that exist *between the lines*. These are the **layers of meaning** that the text will contain at its more important parts. These 'layers of meaning' exist, as it were, 'below' the **surface level** or **literal** meanings provided by the words on the page.

- **Layers of meaning** are created when an author uses **literary language**. This is a way of using language that helps develop important aspects of a story such as **character, setting and atmosphere** and, perhaps most especially, a story's **themes**.
- *Literary language often uses various so-called **literary devices** that are used because they involve the reader and deepen their engagement with the text; some important and common devices are **description, dialogue, metaphor and irony**. Poetry is a concentrated version of literary language but prose writers of fiction (and even some non-fiction) use it to good effect, also.*
- *Below is a brief extract from a story by Charles Dickens that uses fairly obvious examples of literary language to create effects on the reader, most especially to create imagery that will help the reader imagine the scene in a particular way. Much more importantly, however, Dickens' choices of literary language help give the reader a clue as to **his own attitude towards what he is describing**. This is an important way in which an author can develop the **themes** of their writing.*
- *The words in red are all **literary devices**. Can you work out **how** these words and phrases are working on the reader, that is - what their likely **effect** is? Can you also develop **insights** into **why** Dickens might have written the passage like this, i.e. to guess at what his **purpose** might have been? When you do this, you are **interpreting the text**. The questions **how** and **why** must **always** take centre stage throughout your essay writing for it is these questions that are at the core of interpretation.*

"It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which **interminable serpents of smoke** trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and **a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye**, arid vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, **like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.**"

from 'Hard Times' by Charles Dickens

- *To recognise the existence of layers of meaning, you need to be more than usually attentive to the words on the page and to the **effects** these create in the mind. This means being **reflective and insightful**.*

- To become aware of the levels of meaning at important points in a story you will need to ask yourself the questions **what, how** and **why** concerning aspects of the story such as:
 - **narration** - these are the effects created by the author's chosen **narrative voice** (this is the 'voice' that tells the story).
 - **characters** - characters are created and presented in ways that **manipulate the reader's reaction toward them**. How characters are **described; when and where they appear**; how they **speak** (through the **literary device of dialogue**); and how they **act and interact** are all important things to examine and consider.
 - **setting** (i.e. the time, place and situation in which the story unfolds). This can add to the story in surprisingly important and subtle ways. **It is always worthy of your close attention**. Setting creates a **sense of place** that can add to **believability and realism**. Importantly, setting is also frequently used to help create a particular **mood or atmosphere**, one that should help the reader engage more closely - and often emotionally - with the story.
 - **structure**, i.e. **the ordering of events**. This is a very important tool for the author as it both develops the plot and creates the important effects of **tension and suspense**.
 - all of the above work sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, to develop the story's **themes**.
 - much more on all of the above later!
- It's important also to realise that interpretation **is never about stating facts**. An interpretation is, by its very nature, an **opinion or point of view**. You can't ask the author about their intentions so you have to develop **insights** into what they might have been, and these can only be based on **evidence from the text** and, sometimes, **details of the author's context**.
- This is why examiners are not keen when students merely trot out what are often rather obviously the opinions of others - those, perhaps, of a teacher or taken from a study guide, for example. What examiners like to see are **individual ideas - your own ideas**, based on insights that are supported with **a reference to the text in question**.
- That said, it can be far easier to uncover the deeper layers of meaning within a story if you work through parts of the story with a friend. Hearing and discussing others' viewpoints almost always leads to a deeper understanding of the text developing.
- Because interpretations are **insightful opinions**, they are not fixed. This means that different readers might well develop different interpretations. This is why an interpretation needs to be **supported by giving a reference to whatever it was in the text that caused it to arise** - usually in the form of a **quotation**. This is covered later but for more on this, see also the [Englishbiz](#) guide to essay writing ([click here](#)).
- As well as interpreting, do not be shy of **evaluating** how successful or otherwise you believe the author has been. You might consider this in the light of the story's likely effects on different kinds of reader, for example, a modern reader and the text's original readers.
- Below is a short extract from towards the end of John Steinbeck's story, 'Of Mice and Men'. This has been interpreted, point by point - don't worry if you do not know this story as the same technique can be applied to any text. It has been included not to make you think that you ought to be able to do exactly the same, and definitely not to show how an essay might be written, but just to show how interpretation works and how deeply it can go if 'pushed'! It shows how much useful information can be gained from even a very short extract. So... the deeper the level of your interpretation, the fewer points you'll need to make to complete your essay or exam answer! And that can't be bad!
- *The most successful essay writers explore and develop **only a few carefully chosen points**; but they do so, as you will see below, **in depth**.*

"And Lennie said softly to the puppy, 'Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice. I didn't bounce you hard.'"

Notice the **choice of language** with the word 'softly', which is spoken by the **third-person narrator**. Notice, too, that it is included alongside several other words seemingly purposely chosen for their 'soft' sound (caused by soft consonants and long vowel sounds). The effect is to create a gentle tone in the narrator's voice, a tone that the reader will warm too and which, as a consequence, is highly persuasive. One interpretation of this is to suggest that, at this point in the story, Steinbeck wants the reader to develop sympathy with the character of Lennie. Steinbeck seems to want the reader to

recognise that Lennie is not - despite the violent act he has just carried out and the one still to come - an evil man.

The use of the **narrative voice** to create this feeling in the reader is interesting and shows that the narrator is not objective but is slanted towards certain of the characters. It also shows how important a writer's choice of narrator can be.

Next, notice the quality of the **dialogue** Steinbeck gives Lennie to use: 'Why do you got to get killed'. This is written in a style surely intended to alert the reader to the fact that Lennie has a simple mind, one completely unable to use adult language properly and thus, we can infer, unable to use mature reasoning. This helps to increase our understanding of Lennie and his actions and increase our sympathy for his (as well as George's) plight.

When Lennie says, 'You ain't so little as mice', the reader is reminded that George was perhaps wrong to trust Lennie with a puppy, as he surely should have known only too well what might occur as had previously happened to each of the mice Lennie had petted.

In giving Lennie the statement, 'I didn't bounce you hard' Steinbeck is using the **literary device** of **irony**. This is because we know that Lennie did precisely the opposite, and with such tragic results. The irony works also at the level of alerting the reader the Lennie's total inability to control his own actions. He is only able to react instinctively, like an animal, rather than with human reflection and consideration. This might also make the close reader think back to other violent characters, such as Curley. Unlike Lennie, he has an educated adult brain and yet is still shown as unable to control his instinctive animal-like behaviour at times. This surely hints at one of the themes of the story, of animals vs. humans or instinct vs. control.

In terms of **structure**, this passage is important as it works to foreshadow the violent and tragic events soon to follow when Lennie becomes confused and angry with Curley's wife.

The 'avoid these at all costs' list...

1. Don't retell the events of the story.

- As your teacher or examiner already knows exactly *what* happens in the story you're writing about, they'll **deduct marks** if you choose to waste valuable writing time re-telling them such details!
 - *Below is an example of the kind of 'retelling of events' that **you need to avoid**. It uses an example from John Steinbeck's story 'Of Mice and Men' - if you don't know this story, don't worry, you'll get the idea:*

'In Chapter One, when Lennie asks George for some ketchup to put on his beans, George gets angry and explodes at Lennie. He tells him how his life would be so much better if Lennie wasn't there for him to have to bother about.'
 - *You know by now that what is needed is **analysis, interpretation and discussion**. How might the above example of re-telling be written so that it **gains marks**?*

'When Lennie asks George for ketchup to put on his beans, Steinbeck is creating a chance to let the reader understand the severe strains of this strange relationship and how difficult it is for George to remain as Lennie's friend and protector.'
- The highest marks are given to students who are careful to **avoid waffle** by writing **only about those aspects of the story that are relevant to the essay or exam question**.
 - *This means thinking about aspects of the story such as **setting, plot, mood, tension, characters and events**.*
 - *It also requires a discussion of the various **layers of meaning** that exist within a story and how the author creates these through effective choices of **literary technique and language**.*

2. Fictional characters and events are not real - so avoid writing about them as if they are.

- It's important when discussing literature to analyse and discuss the characters and events of fiction from a 'critical distance'.

- This means separating yourself emotionally from the story and analysing it *coolly* and *objectively*.
 - *It's important to write in a style that shows you recognise that characters are **imaginary constructions** designed with a purpose in mind. Here is an example of writing about characters and events as if they were real (again using 'Of Mice and Men'). **This approach loses marks.***

'I feel sorry for George. He's stuck with Lennie just because Lennie can't look after himself. This is a terrible shame for George because he's such a nice guy and it means that he isn't able to carry on with a normal life.'
 - *How might this be written in a more critical and objective manner? **This approach gains marks.***

'Despite the burden Lennie causes George in this story, Steinbeck has created the two characters to help the reader understand better just how uncaring this 1930's society is and to show what true friendship really means.'

3. Answer the question, the whole question and nothing but the question!

- You would be shocked if you knew each year just how many students write answers that seem to have little bearing on the essay or exam question they are answering. Don't be one of them. Read the question or essay title with care and **reflect** on it in depth *before* you begin to write.
- Make a rough plan - a kind of *structure* for your answer. This might be a structure based on a series of quotations you've uncovered from the text that will help answer the essay question.

Stay on track by using this trick: **start each body paragraph with a sentence that, in some obvious way, is helping to develop the answer to the essay question.** Bear in mind that anything else risks being waffle and could easily lose marks.

Now for some more detail!

Teachers and examiners look for examples in your work of the following and award marks according to how well you have tackled the three areas:

| INTERPRETATION & EVALUATION | LANGUAGE & LITERARY DEVICES | STRUCTURE |
|---|---|--|
| Marks are awarded when you show you have understood the deeper levels of meaning in the story. | You also need to show how the writer has used language and literary devices effectively. | Finally, you need to discuss how the sequence of events in the story works effectively. |

How to analyse a story and discuss what you find

All of the stories you will read during your course will be based on what is called **narrative**. An understanding of this will, therefore, provide you with the tools to write a top class essay or exam answer.

It is *because* stories are told as **narratives** that they are engaging, absorbing and believable. No-one quite knows why it is but we seem to have an inbuilt psychological need to have events (whether real or imaginary) told to us using the **form** and **structure** of **narrative**. It's such a powerful means of telling about events. We all hear and use narratives each and every day, even if we never pick up a book to read!

The reason narrative is so successful and popular as a means of telling stories is connected with the fact that it works by building a sense of **anticipation**, **suspense** and **tension**. This creates an enjoyable sense of **wanting to know what will happen next**. That's why when you read a really good book or hear a juicy story from a friend, you're sometimes held spellbound.

- It's important to realise that when well constructed, narratives are also highly persuasive - we are easily convinced by them and often believe in them rather too unquestioningly.

- An important aspect of all narratives is the quality of the **narrative voice**. This is the ‘voice’ that ‘tells’ those parts of the story that are not **dialogue**. We seem to have a built in desire to want to *trust* and *enjoy* listening to certain types of **narrative voice**; again, no one really knows why this is.
- Here is a short piece of fictional narrative. Can you work out what quality makes it seem **authentic, compelling** and - above all - **trustworthy**?

‘Through the hot, cloudless days in the back of New South Wales, there is always something beside the sun watching you from the sky. Over the line of the hills, or above the long stretches of plains, a black dot swings round and round; and its circles rise slowly or fall slowly, or simply remain at the same height, swinging in endless indolent curves, while the eyes watch the miles of earth below, and the six- or maybe nine-foot wingspan remains motionless in the air...’

from ‘The Wedge-tailed Eagle’ by Geoffrey Dutton

- **Information can be dry and boring; converted into narrative, that same information becomes compelling and interesting - and far more persuasive.**

THE FORM AND STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVE

When you write about a story, you need to analyse and discuss what you find at the level of **narrative**. So let’s look at the basics of narrative.

In a typical narrative, fictional or otherwise, a change in the life of a **character** is related. The main character in a narrative is called the **protagonist**. As the narrative progresses, the protagonist’s life becomes **eventful**. In some sense the protagonist’s life will become *transformed*.

- This **alteration** in the life of the **protagonist** usually occurs early in the story soon after the main characters in the story and the setting have been introduced. This initial setting up of the story is called the **exposition**.
- The changes to the protagonist’s life is caused by some kind of **conflict**. This conflict is often created by another character (called the **antagonist**) or by a social system such as, perhaps, parental authority or the law.

The **conflict** is what creates the **complication** of the story. This initial **complication** develops through what is called the story’s **rising action** and it moves the story towards its **climax**. The **climax** usually occurs near the end of the story when events reach a head. Finally, the story ends with some kind of satisfying - but not necessarily happy - sense of **closure**. This is called the narrative’s **resolution**. The final ‘drawing together’ of all loose ends is called the story’s **dénouement**.

- *Not all narratives are ‘complete’ in terms of the above basic structure. We have all grown up immersed in a world of narratives and so have become entirely capable of ‘filling in’ any part of a narrative that is missed out. We make assumptions about the parts that are missing based on what we expect to have occurred.*
- *For example, a story can start straight into its **conflict**; and yet we know, as readers, that the protagonist’s life was - and should be - uneventful and peaceful, so we assume that the first part of the narrative existed in this way and we believe that the protagonist will want that peaceful life to return.*

MORE ON NARRATIVE FORM AND STRUCTURE

The next time you tell a friend about an event in your life, you will find yourself using the typical conventions of narrative to construct and order the details of the story in order to make it more compelling for your listener. You will find yourself creating a character who is a kind of ‘hero’ while another will be the ‘villain’; the events of the story will be linked by a kind of ‘cause and effect’ relationship; the events will be told from a single viewpoint (although you might ‘invent’ other apparent viewpoints by telling what others ‘say’ - by using dialogue); and, finally, you will use a linked ‘beginning-middle-end’ structure (but you - as the narrator - will decide on when the beginning begins... and so on).

An important question can be asked about using narrative to relate events in the world because narrative acts to simplify real world events dramatically. Reality can never be as simple as narrative makes it. The real-life stories on the TV News are related to their audience as narratives and seem entirely believable. But narrative is a highly simplified and opinionated

way of accounting for what has to be the truly complex lives and events of people in this world of ours. And yet some qualities it has creates the sense that it is true or at least potentially true. Just how does narrative make its characters and events seem so believable - and compelling?

GENRE

Genre is the 'type' or 'kind' of something - we have a habit of grouping things in the world into similar things, and these can be called 'genres'. Genre and narrative are closely linked both ideas seem to be 'hard wired' into our brains. When we hear or read a narrative that is in a certain genre, we have quite firm expectations of the narrative concerning what kind of setting to expect, what kind of characters and what kind of events, whether it be an action-adventure story, a romance or whatever. In this way, genre partly determines what we expect to happen and who and what seems 'natural' and believable. [Click here](#) for more on this important concept.

ANALYSING AND DISCUSSING NARRATIVE

Belief and trust are what a writer needs for a story to 'work' on its reader - and because we tend to trust narratives, it is far too easy to forget they are merely fiction and write as if a story and its imaginary characters are real people. When writing about a story do not fall into this trap. See the story for what it truly is - a literary device that has been chosen because it creates a compelling tale most often used to promote a particular way of seeing the world - the author's themes.

So... always try to stand back from (that is, 'distance yourself') the story as this will more easily enable your analysis of it to be objective. You can do this best by showing that you recognise each of the characters and events in the story as being entirely fictional creations of their author. It is best if you choose to view all characters, their relationships and the events as purely a vehicle or means used by the author to create a compelling and convincing story - often no more than a highly compelling but persuasive form of writing that helps us see life the way the author wants us to see it.

Some modern writers have tried to change the traditional narrative form and structure in various ways. Some create a 'partial narrative' in which the reader is left to 'fill in' the parts not told some create a 'broken narrative' that uses 'flashbacks', 'flash-forwards' some use multiple viewpoints and many now leave the hero as less heroic, and the villain as less villainous. Despite these attempts to break with traditional narrative forms and structures, the basic concepts are similar. Narrative is proving to be a very enduring thing!

KEY FEATURES OF NARRATIVE

PLOT

An author works hard to develop a basic storyline into what is called a **plot**. Various plot 'devices' are used to create **tension** and to make the reader want to guess what will happen next; at it's best this keeps us wanting to turn the page to find out - we are made to feel that we just can't put the book down.

This tension is generated in part by the slow release of detail and the introduction of various character types and conflicts but, most of all, by the narrative device of making all events seem to be connected, leading on one from another. This 'connectedness' means that we have a chance of guessing where the story is leading - and we just love guessing and either being right or being surprised by a 'twist in the tale'. We are also naturally rather nosy and enjoy a quick peek into another person's life - even if it's a fictional life. It can be very enjoyable experiencing the world vicariously - which means 'at one remove', experiencing dangers from the safety of our seat.

THEMES and CHARACTERS

These are the two key aspects of narrative - and they form the basis of most exam and essay questions.

Few stories are written simply to entertain - some young children's stories might be, but most stories are, in reality, an entertaining 'vehicle' or means for their author to present a series of persuasive ideas to the reader. These ideas are called the themes of the story; they are the author's views concerning some important aspect - one if the 'big issues' - of life. Many authors choose themes that relate to aspects of their society's prevailing or dominant ideologies.

Writers are peculiarly creative and sensitive individuals; they can be deeply aware of the frictions within society. They use

their imaginative genius to weave compelling stories around interesting characters to highlight and help you sympathise with certain ideas and points of view.

If you have read 'Of Mice and Men', for example, by John Steinbeck, however much you enjoyed the story, after you finish the last page and close the cover, many of its ideas will stay with you for a long time, if not for the remainder of your life. These ideas or themes will have been revealed and explored in the story through the actions of its characters. You will have been brought to empathise with and often feel sympathy for the plight of certain characters in a story, and to dislike others. Those with which you sympathise, you will tend to feel strongly about, even identify with. What happens to them will interest you - and it is in this way that many ideas about society can be highlighted and brought to your attention.

So... in 'Of Mice and Men', again, you will find yourself sympathising with some of the working men on the ranch - and you are brought to feel strongly about such issues as sexism, racism, exploitation and violence as well as coming to recognise the importance of friendship and trust.

Understanding the themes an author explores in a story and the way these are made persuasive through its characters and events is crucial to your coursework and exams. A vital part of this is to understand how to close read a story to allow you to analyse its style and structure, as only this will allow you to develop sophisticated insights into its author's themes.

NARRATIVE VOICE

An important decision an author must make before writing a story is who will 'tell' it to the reader. This 'person' supplies the story's narrative voice and is called the story's narrator. There are two main choices: a story can be told either through one of its characters (usually the protagonist - using the first person pronoun, 'I') or by a person outside the story itself (which seems often to be that of the author and which uses the third person pronouns 'he', 'she' or 'they'). Most importantly, it is the narrative voice that creates a particular kind of relationship with the reader that mediates all that the reader can understand about other characters and the events and ideas of the story.

Working out and considering the effects of the author's particular choice of narrative voice adds to your understanding of the characters, the story and the themes. How obvious is this voice? What are its qualities - its effects on you, the reader? Does it seem entirely trustworthy? Is it reliable? Is it educated? Is it biased towards a particular character or way of viewing society? Working out how the narrative voice mediates what you come to know and understand about the characters, events and themes is a key exam and coursework skill - and is highly rewarded as it is classed as a high level skill.

First Person Narrative

The important thing to remember here is the limitations of this choice of narrator: a first person narrator is limited by time and place, by who they are, by what they know and what other characters tell them. But this choice of narrator is able to create a close relationship with the reader - indeed, it is highly possible for the reader to feel as if they are the narrator in this kind of narrative, so close is the relationship that develops.

Third Person Narrative

A third person narrator can 'see' and 'tell' everything about each character, and be anywhere at any time, able to judge and comment upon events and characters at will; however, third person narrators are usually not neutral and are given limited and biased viewpoints by the writer such that the narrative voice leads the reader to support the 'hero' and criticise the 'villain'. A third person narrator is sometimes referred to as an omniscient narrator when the viewpoint is more neutral and 'all-knowing'.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Narratives are told in such a way that they allow the plot to be slowly revealed. This technical device causes the reader to become enjoyably absorbed and involved in the plot as we enjoy guessing and predicting what might happen next. Clearly the sequence of events that develop the plot is an important consideration when you are analysing and discussing a particular story. Again, this is classed as a high level skill and so can attract many marks.

More about structure...

The following table shows graphically how writers often structure their stories in a way that they know a reader will feel is most satisfying and which will allow the plot to be developed slowly and most convincingly:

| BEGINNING | > | MIDDLE | > | END |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 'Exposition' | > | 'Conflict and rising action' | > | 'Resolution' |
| Stories usually open with an introduction to the main character (protagonist), the place and the time a suitable mood or atmosphere is set the main character's life is, for the time being, seen to be balanced or in a state of 'equilibrium'. | > | The protagonist meets a problem - his or her life is disturbed in some way the action is built up to a climax the protagonist deals with the conflict. The reader will sympathise with the protagonist during the conflict. | > | The conflict is resolved in a way that will be satisfying to the reader the story ends the protagonist has dealt with the conflict and 'grown up' from a state of 'innocence' to a state of 'experience'. |

CHARACTERISATION

Characterisation is the technical term for the way a writer creates believable and realistic characters through effective choices of language. To discuss characterisation, you need to consider how the author helps you to believe in and either empathise with or distrust the story's characters.

Some characters are technically referred to as rounded. This kind of character is important to the story; we know far more detail about them and can believe in them. You can compare a rounded character with others that could better be described as flat or even 'stereotypes' (see below for more details of this important aspect).

Look for ways in which you have been brought to empathise or even sympathise with and relate to the protagonist and engage with what they are involved in and the way they are thinking. Why do you think it is that readers always identify with the 'good guy' and never the 'bad guy'? Look closely at your story and see how this literary trick was achieved.

DIALOGUE

The reader's relationship with a character is often helped to develop by *what* characters are given to say and *how* they say it. The technical term for speech in a story is **dialogue** and it can be very effective at drawing a reader into a story and making the characters seem very believable.

It's important to realise that successful dialogue is *never* natural - even if it seems that way. Everyday real conversation is very 'loose' and, if put straight into a story, very b-o-r-i-n-g. Like description, dialogue is always tightly focused and dramatic; it adds only what is essential to the story and characterisation.

DESCRIPTION

Look out for the ways **description** has been used to create an effective mood or atmosphere (especially **tension**), and how this supports the action or characterisation.

'TELLING' vs. 'SHOWING'

Although it is usually far quicker to do so, writers will often try to avoid simply 'telling' a reader about things; instead, they prefer to 'show' the reader what something or someone is like. For example, instead of telling you a character is, say, 'evil', an effective writer would rather 'show' the character *acting* in an evil way, or describing features that seem evil. This is far more convincing ploy. 'Showing' acts by involving the reader and engaging them in an emotional or 'sensory' way with the story's details: seeing, hearing, touching, almost sometimes tasting what is described. A good writer will always **show** what is important and **tell** *what is not*.

Read how John Steinbeck mixes 'showing' with 'telling' in this brief extract from 'Of Mice and Men':

'Evening of a hot day started the little wind to moving among the leaves. The shade climbed up the hills towards to top. On the sand-banks the rabbits sat as quietly as little grey, sculptured stones. And then from the direction of the state highway came the sound of footsteps on crisp sycamore leaves...'

SETTING

Setting refers to the **time, place** and **situation** in which the author sets the characters and action. Sometimes, the term 'landscape' is used to refer specifically to place the description of place. Importantly, **setting** is almost always important to the story in terms of its **mood, atmosphere, characterisation** or **themes**.

LITERARY CONVENTIONS

Fiction only appears realistic to make it work we have, in fact, to 'suspend disbelief' and we do this willingly. Conventions are a part of the experience of reading a story because we 'suspend disbelief' we are rarely aware they even exist. Here are a few: the events described in a story are not truly realistic because they focus only on what happens to particular characters and only those actions needed to move the plot along are described, all else is ignored 'flashbacks' and 'letters' may be used to help fill in background, and so on. You can see that fiction relies on a willing co-operation between writer and reader.

VERISIMILITUDE

When you are analysing and writing about a story, it is important that you keep reminding yourself that - however believable and realistic the story may seem - it is purely an imaginative invention of its author.

*Stories appear realistic and believable through the author's skilful use of various **literary devices**. The most important of these is the author's choice to use the most trusted form of storytelling, i.e. **narrative**.*

- A story's closeness to reality is referred to as its degree of **verisimilitude**. If a story's truthfulness to life is less than convincing, its author will have failed to create a sufficient degree of **verisimilitude**.

UNITY

Unity describes the way a story pursues a **single main idea**, which is the writer's **theme**; **coherence** is the way a story 'holds logically together', with each part existing in a kind of 'cause and effect' relationship with previous and following parts of the story.

- Even **description** and **dialogue** are constructed so as to seem to 'hold together' in this way. They are only ever used when they will **add** to the overall coherence and unity of the narrative.

Notice how, in any professionally written story, the author includes **only** those elements (i.e. of plot, dialogue, description, etc.) that are required to develop its overall theme.

- Real life, of course, is certainly not coherent or unified, and this should show you just how unrealistic stories really are (although this lack of realism is hidden very well indeed).
- We are all certainly very easily fooled by **narrative conventions** into thinking that the story is true-to-life. But it is only these **narrative conventions**, such as **unity** and **coherence**, that fool us into thinking that we are reading is believable in reality, of course, a narrative is always nothing more than someone else's **version of reality**.
- You should approach all stories with the realisation that they are, at heart, **a construction**: no more than a *vehicle* for the author both to entertain you... and *persuade* you to see the world in a certain way: the way the author wishes!

DOMINANT IDEA OR THEME

All stories have - woven into every aspect of them - their author's 'controlling' or 'dominant' idea (these are the reasons that motivated the author to write it - his or her themes). No part of what an author writes will lead you away from this dominant idea: there are never any loose threads in a well-woven professionally written story at all times you will be aware that what you are being told is important in some way to the story that is slowly and inexorably unfolding.

- A story that exhibits **unity** can be said to have a single, or **unified** purpose - one that takes its reader ever forwards towards an inevitable resolution.
- The **mood, atmosphere, description, setting, dialogue** and **action** will all be working together towards a single end. Are **your own stories** similar? They certainly should aim to be!

USING QUOTATIONS

Using quotations effectively will boost your marks and grade!

- You'll definitely receive low marks if you *don't* use quotations in your answers but **avoid opening a paragraph with a quotation**.
- Instead, structure each **body paragraph** by opening it with a **point** that in some clear way is **helping to answer the essay question**. Follow this with a quotation that shows the point to be soundly based on the text, i.e. **to show how that part of the text made you think the way you have explained in your opening point**.
 - See this in action, here:

Steinbeck's use of description is an important aspect of his style and is obvious even in the opening lines of 'Of Mice and Men' where he paints a paradise like version of nature:

'the Salinas River drops in close to the hill-side bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight...'

- The purpose of the quotation is to show that the point you have just made is based on an **interpretation** of the text.
- As you can only have arrived at the points you open your paragraphs with *because of some aspect of the text you have read*, it follows that you *should* be able to find a small part of the text to show how it made you feel that way... **and this is what you should quote** (and please remember, it's 'a quotation' not 'a quote').
 - *A quotation is the obvious and most effective way to support **each point** you make in your essay.*
 - *Using a quotation gives you the opportunity then to comment on the language of the quotation (see below).*
 - *Sometimes a description is needed instead of a quotation - especially when your point concerns **structure** (in an essay on a play, you will be describing the stage action, too).*
- The quotation you choose needs to be just sufficient to show why you said you were led to think in the particular way that your opening point says you do.
 - *Choose a quotation that shows just what it was that led you to your point.*
 - *Keep quotations apt and short - just sufficient to clearly support your point (never more than two lines is a good rule of thumb).*
- Typically, you should find yourself using, perhaps, **one quotation per paragraph** (of course, in a comparative essay, two quotations are more likely).
 - *If the quotation is just a few words long (and the majority probably should be), keep it within your own sentence but always within **quotation marks**.*
 - *If the quotation needs to be longer, for example if you need to quote more than a single line of a play or a poem, you should **set it off from your own writing** on a new line, as if it were a new paragraph (as shown in the examples above and below).*
 - *Don't worry about leaving lots of space like this - it's the standard way to do it.*
- As suggested, the quotation or description needs to **support the point it follows** - after all, that's the reason you've chosen it.
 - *If your quotation does not **support your point clearly and obviously**, choose another!*
 - *Overlong quotations lose marks and are a waste of time and space.*
- Now to what gains most marks in an English essay...
If every point is followed by a quotation, then, just as importantly, each of these quotations must be followed by a substantial **explanatory comment**.
 - *This is where you explain your **interpretation** in depth by discussing the **effects, qualities, methods and purposes** of the language the writer used in the quotation you have used.*
 - *It is this comment on the author's choices of effective **language, style and structure** that **gains the majority of marks** in your essay.*
- You can easily extend your comment by discussing the **effects** and **purposes** of the language of each quotation by explaining how it is working in **two ways**: both at the part in the text **where it occurs** and **how it contributes to the whole story** (i.e. how it acts to develop the reader's understanding of the overall story - its **plot** and **themes**).
 - ***This is particularly important to your overall marks and it will increase the depth and quality of your essay.***

FINDING THE BEST QUOTATIONS

If you are writing answers on an extract printed on your exam paper, there are few problems with finding quotations as they are printed there in front of your eyes; however, for texts studied in class, you cannot take the text into the exam so will need to have **learned by heart** a number of short key quotations.

- You are **not** expected to remember long quotations.
- You will **not** be penalised if your quotations are not entirely accurate.
- You will need to identify, with your teacher's help, a representative selection of quotations for **each major character** at **key moments of the story** that **relate to important themes**.
- For each quotation you learn, make sure you can say something useful about its author's uses of **language** and **style** and how it helps the reader in some way understand the story and its themes better. This means working out the **EFFECTS** the quotations create on the reader and the **PURPOSES** intended by the author.

- Many students say they struggle to find something useful to write about the language of stories. They say the writer's choices of language seem so 'ordinary', especially in comparison to, say, poetry; and this can seem true because story writing often aims to be naturalistic.
- Keep in mind, however, that your comments need to cover two aspects: the **effects** the language of the quotation is intended to have on the reader and the **purpose** intended by it.
- Think for a moment - *any* piece of writing that is *effective* will contain words and phrases, that is, choices of **form** or **style**, or use of **structure** that in some way adds to the reader's enjoyment or understanding of the story. This is what you need to be explaining.
- In fictional writing, this might be that the writing of the quotation provides a particularly vivid **description** that sets a useful mood, or it creates a powerful and authoritative **narrative voice**, one that can be trusted and which is very persuasive; the language might be **ironic** or it could be an effective use of **dialogue**. See here how this can be done using the above example:

Steinbeck's use of description is clearly a major aspect of his style. In the opening paragraphs to 'Of Mice and Men', he uses description to paint a paradise-like version of nature:

'the Salinas River drops in close to the hill-side bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight...'

Steinbeck uses a form of personification here to help create this feeling of 'paradise'. Verbs such as 'runs' and 'slipped' suggest that the river has some kind of life of its own and this allows the reader to identify more closely with it. Also, each word is chosen to create a warm and inviting tone, for example, 'deep and green' and 'twinkling'; the overall effect of this is to allow the reader to feel that this river is there 'for them' rather than merely just 'being there'. In this way Steinbeck creates a dream-like nature not so different from the dream-like future the two protagonists, Lennie and George, hope for.