

writing a story - 'writing to entertain'

'Writing to Entertain' means writing some kind of a story. This writing can be either a part of your coursework folder or an exam question (for specific help with exam story writing skills, writing see the second free guide)

Developing a 'Theme', Message or 'Controlling Idea'

Before you write, think about your reader; in fact, try to 'become' your reader. This is the number one professional writer's secret. If you write 'for yourself', you will almost certainly score less highly than if you keep your potential reader in mind *as you write*, constantly checking what you write - as you write - to be sure your writing remains clear, precise, lively and interesting.

- What can you write that your reader would enjoy reading and how should you write it so it captures your reader's interest and holds on to it?
- It is a fact that no one likes to write without a good reason but equally no one likes to read without feeling that what they have read has been worthy of their time and attention. But what makes reading worthwhile, interesting - even enjoyable?
- Well, most of us seem to enjoy reading about the important things in life: growing up, illness, danger, love, death, fear, loneliness, friendship and so on and most readers enjoy writing that creates a sense of excitement, tension, fear or wonder and maybe because we are a little nosy or like to compare ourselves, we enjoy reading about interesting characters that is, we enjoy hearing what happens to others and how they overcome difficulties life brings their way.
- So - writing that explores such ideas stands a good chance of being interesting to read. The technical term to describe the idea 'behind' a piece of writing is controlling idea or theme - it is what the writing is, at heart, all about.
 - *In professional writing, the writer's theme or controlling idea is rarely evident 'on the surface' rather, it begins to emerge as the reader reflects on what is written - often through layers of meaning created by the use of symbolism, metaphor and irony.*
 - *For example, a story about a visit to a place might have as its deeper meaning the wonders of nature or of creation and a story about a journey could really be a kind of metaphor for a person's life.*
- Also think about this. When you have read a good story, you have, during the reading, at times felt you were *a part of the story*... This means that you have, in a way, 'become' - for some of the story - the main character at the very least, you have enjoyed empathising (i.e. understanding exactly) the main character's predicament. And you have almost certainly also shared the sense of achievement the main character felt in overcoming some of life's problems. Make sure when you write, that your reader will be able to relate to your main character and what happens to him or her.

FOUR STEPS TO SUCCESS

1. PLAN BEFORE YOU WRITE

Decide on the key aspects of your story before you write - most especially on **who** is in it, **where** it happens and **what** overall message or theme you wish to leave for your reader to think about after the story is read.

Also plan the structure or sequence to give your story a clear 'beginning-middle-end' with each idea leading on to and connected to what came before. In almost all stories, a main character begins life in a kind of 'normality' but soon faces a problem (called the 'conflict') this conflict is eventually overcome, usually after a climax of action finally a new kind of 'normality' resumes in what is called the 'resolution'. This kind of story - the most common kind - is called a **narrative**.

Remember that even if the story is autobiographical (i.e. about your own life), the events you describe do not have to be entirely 'true'. They can certainly be made to appear made to be more dramatic than in real life by leaving out the boring bits! English coursework and exam marks are not about truthfulness but about **technique and style**.

So... decide before putting pen to paper just what sequence the events of your story should be told, as well as... who will be in the story and where it all will lead. This final part is important – it is the theme of your story.

To help you plan well, always remember that your reader will enjoy feeling that their time spent reading has been worthwhile. It would help to 'switch places' and for a moment reflect on becoming your own reader. When you read you like to be made to feel:

- **interested**
- **excited**
- **involved**
- **moved**
- **tense and fearful**
- **a sense of wonder**

Work out how you could narrate your story and make your reader feel like this. We are always especially interested in what happens to people too, because we live alongside them all the time and are naturally rather nosy! It's also good to learn from other folk's lives and see how they overcame problems that we ourselves might one day have to face.

Work out an interesting **theme** like this before you write. It is another of the secrets of gaining a high grade. If you can work out a subtle way to reveal this theme to your reader, then you have discovered yet another secret of high grade essays.

2. ADD NOTHING THAT IS NOT RELEVANT TO THE STORY'S OVERALL PURPOSE

Recognising what to include and what to leave out of a story is vital to making it effective and worthy of a high grade.

- By including only with what is relevant, effective writing becomes unified and coherent. This is important because it means the reader feels instinctively that each word and sentence is leading somewhere useful (i.e. it is **coherent**) and leading in one important direction - towards a single purpose (i.e. it is **unified**).

- Thinking of a piece of writing as being akin to a woven piece of cloth can be a useful metaphor: when you read back to yourself what you have written (both as you write each sentence and afterwards during redrafting), you should ensure it is **coherent** and **unified** by pulling out any 'loose' or 'wrong' threads and making sure that the pattern you have created will be attractive to your reader.

DIALOGUE

Characters will always have to speak in a story and when they do, you show this by giving each speaker a new line and placing all they say inside speech marks, like this:

'It won't be long now,' thought Harry 'All hell will be let loose soon!'

But almost before he had finished speaking a voice boomed over the intercom, 'All units to Precinct 5 all units to precinct 5!'

It had begun.

The key to gaining marks from the dialogue you introduce in your story is to stick with the rule: **if it isn't adding anything useful and interesting to the story, take it out.** *Never* include dialogue *for the sake of including dialogue*. Instead, use dialogue **for a purpose**.

This could be: to help define a particular type of character to move the plot forwards to create tension... but never, for the sake of passing the time of day.

3. CREATE A MOOD AND ATMOSPHERE THAT HELPS YOUR READER 'BE THERE'.

Never move forward into your plot without setting the right mood for your reader. This mood, which must be consistent with the main idea of your writing, will help engage and absorb your reader.

4. NEVER DESCRIBE FOR THE SAKE OF... DESCRIBING!

Like dialogue, describing things can be your downfall or your saviour. When you do describe something in your story - and description can add powerfully to any story - make sure the description is not being used for its own sake: always make it do something useful! When describing, even though your story is probably imaginary place, always help your reader to feel as if they were there, seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling... all that matters that is around them. Use 'sensory description' to achieve this:

- Where it matters most, show *don't* tell! Show your reader by allowing your characters to do things that allow your reader to see, hear, taste, smell or feel what the character feels. If a character is evil, show an evil act, rather than merely tell your reader, 'John is evil'!
- You probably do need adjectives to do this, but try hard to find words that do not need an adjective if you can. Choose precise words (you could use a thesaurus to help...). Precise words are far more effective than everyday nouns qualified with extra adjectives. Use vivid - and preferably original - similes and metaphors, too as it is these that help to almost **etch** an image onto your reader's imagination.

USING PRECISE SENSORY DESCRIPTION

Here are some examples of writing that use **precise vocabulary** and **vivid similes or metaphors**. You might think of such vocabulary as 'muscular' for it creates powerful images without relying on lots of extra adjectives. Can you detect the **sensory images** here, too?

- The swollen mass of people teemed forwards like a seething colony of crawling ants.
- The mingling spices tingled our senses to create a glorious surge of appetite.
- The summer rain spilled down and soused our sweltering faces with its refreshing coolness.
- The flashes of lightning flooded the land with a fearful display of Nature's power.
- The children were like bundles of concentrated energy exploding with delight.
- The very buildings themselves seemed to bow low as the town's new hero approached.

A GRADE A* SHORT STORY

Cities on a Saturday are often such interesting places: full of people, full of cars, full of the hustle and bustle of modern life. And Leicester is no exception. I was born there so I can speak from personal experience. But something was different last Saturday. There were more people, more cars and much more hustle and bustle than I had ever seen or heard before.

I'd gone into town with my mates that Saturday - as we always do. We caught the same No. 149 bus from Oadby - that's a small town south of Leicester. Nothing unusual in that. The journey was as predictable as ever - I'm so used to it. I can't even remember getting on the bus; but I can certainly remember getting off...

By the time we did get off we were all pretty fed up. We were as hot as the proverbial Sahara and as bothered as a bumble bee trapped in a beer bottle. The usual breezy fifteen minutes' journey had taken us over an hour. We hadn't noticed to start with. You know what it's like chatting about this and that. And Big Brother had been pretty crazy last night, so that had kept us more than a little occupied. But you know what it's like on a hot, packed bus crawling through traffic that's more like thick porridge than jam? Pretty awful once you realise what's happening. And what was happening? Not a lot.

Looking out onto the London Road to see what was going on - that was after wiping away mist as thick as a cotton sheet from the steamed up window - it looked as if someone had said to the whole of Leicestershire, "Get yourself to Leicester today; there's a million quid going free under the Clock Tower!" The road looked more like the packed car park at an N.E.C. pop concert than a city road; and as for the numbers of people...

Anyway to cut a long story short, we did eventually climb - well tumble - off the bus. We'd have headed straight for our usual glass of cool Coke at Brucciani's but we were more interested to know what was going on. The crowds were incredible. It was as if every nation, every age, everybody was there! The noise hit us next - shouting, screaming, oohing and aahing. Then something else struck me. Was it my imagination, or was it darker than usual? There was something about the quality of the light that made us all stop and look at each other. We didn't have to ask the question, for we knew we all had the same thought in our minds. There was something odd about the sky... You know that feeling you have just before a really bad thunder storm, when the sky turns inky and the air feels oddly cool and fresh? Well the sky had certainly turned inky, but there was no freshness. It was weird.

It was then that we noticed that what we had thought was a grey cloud was moving and swirling a whole lot more quickly than any cloud we had ever seen move before. We suddenly realised, it wasn't a cloud. It was smoke: thick, dark, haunting smoke. There was a fire somewhere - surely a huge fire. And everyone was pushing and shoving to get a closer look at what was going on.

As we managed to push further through the crowd the air began to feel electric. Ahead the piercing flick, flick, flick of blue lights were visible all around and we felt that strange mixture of wanting to see and yet being too frightened to look. And there it was - the Shires' shopping centre. Ablaze. The smoke was like a wall of solid black, and the action unbelievable - fire-fighters, hoses, water jets and a crowd of faces looking on just like they would at a fireworks display, just looking and wondering.

If you saw the news last night, you'll know the rest. Not a lot to tell you if you missed it. Unbelievably, no one was badly hurt and the fire-fighters had it all under control pretty quickly. By the time I got that Coke, I can tell you it was cooler and longer than any Coke I'd had before or I've had since. But we didn't get it from Brucciani's. Their Shires branch wasn't selling Coke any longer...