

Aspects of narrative

a Viewpoint

Occasionally writers employ the second person when writing narrative, but this is not advisable for exam candidates as it is hard to manage successfully and does not normally fit the composition title. The choice, therefore (if you are given one), is between a first-person and third-person narrator; they both have advantages and disadvantages which candidates need to be aware of before they start their response.

- First-person narrators can only know what they know themselves, and cannot say what other characters are thinking and feeling; they cannot end the story with their death, and it is a cliché to end with their becoming unconscious. On the other hand, an authority and sense of credibility can be conveyed by first-person narration.
- Third-person narration has the advantage of having an all-knowing narrator who can tell us what is going on in the heads of any of the characters (though it is still better to stick to one viewpoint), but it loses the sense of directness which can be conveyed by the use of the first person, who was allegedly involved in the action. The most important thing is that the candidate should make a decision and stick to it, and not switch between different types of narration.

b Voice

Whether the narrator is first or third person, the voice can be that of a character or witness to an event or sequence of events, and the persona or narrator may adopt a style different from that of the candidate's own style. This can be an effective way of characterising, but candidates must be careful not to adopt a style which includes slang or swearing, or which uses overly simple language and sentence structures, however realistic, because these will be penalised in the assessment of complexity of style and maturity of vocabulary.

c Characters

It is advisable to have either two or three characters in an exam-length story. More than three makes it hard for them to be adequately characterised and for the reader to distinguish them. It is necessary to explain the relationship between the characters. It is usual to give their name, age (roughly), some clue about their physical appearance and their job – if they have one and if it is relevant – and their personality. These details allow the reader to picture the characters and engage with them.

d Storyline

It is not really possible to think of a totally original story, nor do examiners expect it. All writers recycle, with differences of setting and character, a basic set of plots. It is acceptable for candidates to use an idea from a book or film, or to pretend that something which happened to someone else happened to them, provided that the detail is their own and the story has not just been lifted without adaptation or elaboration. Real historical events, as in the case of Text 21, can also be turned into fiction-type narratives. The candidate should not attempt a story which is too long or complex to be delivered in the time available. One event or a short series of events is all that can be managed effectively. A sequence of events should not be linked by 'And then' and treated as being equally important; they should be connected by a chain of cause and effect. Less important occurrences can be skipped over so that the focus is on the major event, which is the one causing the crisis.

e Tense

Although it is possible to write an effective narrative in the present tense, it is not advisable for exam purposes. So often the candidate forgets they have begun in the present and switches to the past, or keeps switching between the two, since it is unnatural to write about something which is supposed to have already happened in the present, and therefore difficult to remember and sustain. It also limits the narrative viewpoint, and tends to make the language and syntax simple.

f Structure

The ordering of events is normally, and more safely, chronological. However, an ambitious and capable candidate aiming for top band marks will need to consider using devices such as time lapses, flashbacks, and starting at the end. It is possible not to conclude a story but leave it at the climactic point of greatest tension. This has to be managed carefully so that it is clearly deliberate and does not give the impression that the candidate has run out of time or is avoiding having to provide a resolution. Some writers start with the climax, and then fill in the back story leading to that point, so the story has a circular structure. Another narrative device is to frame the story within another story, which is used for the opening and the ending. For instance, finding a diary many years later, and putting it back in its secret place at the end of the narrative, could frame the reading of it and the story it contains. In any case, characters have to be introduced before their problem can be explained, which precedes the climax, which is followed by the resolution. The climax should come about three quarters of the way through the narrative. Too soon and insufficient tension will have been created; too late and the ending will seem rushed and unprepared for.

g Openings

First sentences have to grip the reader and engage their curiosity from the beginning. If readers cannot place themselves in a setting they will feel unable to visualise the scene and relate to what is happening. Although the rest of the narrative is likely to have a logical/chronological structure, there is a choice of types of narrative opening:

- the conventional one gives location, surroundings, time, place, weather, season
- one or two main characters can be described as an introduction to an event or action involving them
- a shocking or intriguing opening statement provokes immediate interest
- starting in the middle of an event engages the reader's attention
- starting in the middle of a conversation makes the reader curious about speakers and topic.

h Description

Narratives need some description as well. Unless the reader can always visualise the setting and the characters they will become disengaged. However, too much description slows down the pace and reduces the tension. Details should be given where they are necessary to create a sense of place and atmosphere, and to convey originality and credibility. For instance, it is better to say exactly what someone is eating or listening to rather than just that they are eating or listening to music.

i Dialogue

Dialogue should be used sparingly, for dramatic effect, and only for significant exchanges between characters. It is safer for dialogues to be between only two characters at a time, and probably only two of the characters in a short story need to speak directly to each other. It is difficult to manage more than that, or to create distinctive voices for them. When direct speech is used, it must be punctuated and set out correctly, with a new line for every change of speaker, otherwise it becomes impossible for the reader to follow and marks will be lost for inaccuracy.

j Endings

Endings have to satisfy the reader by being both slightly unpredictable and yet credible in the way they have been led up to. Sometimes a twist can be used to catch the reader off guard and provide humour, irony or surprise, but this must be believable in the context and not a sudden turn of events which is not consistent with the previous characterisation or situation.