Chapter 8
Writing creatively

What’s it all about?
In this chapter, you will explore the techniques that make the very best creative writing, in the form of narratives or descriptions, come alive. You will look at how writers create convincing, compelling voices that draw us into their world. You will explore the ways in which writers address powerful ideas about the way we live, or our place in the world. You will also see how writers experiment with conventional techniques and styles of writing to give the reader unusual and surprising perspectives.

In this chapter, you will learn how to
• engage the reader through original forms of narration
• use imagery and symbolism to enhance narrative and descriptive power
• use structures to create memorable texts
• apply your skills to English Language and English Literature tasks.

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<th>English Language GCSE</th>
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<td>Which AOs are covered?</td>
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<td>How will this be tested?</td>
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<td>AO6 Candidates must use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.</td>
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Explore the skills

Choosing an unusual narrative voice for a text can be one way of making what could be a dull tale come alive. For example, you could:

- give something inanimate, or not human, a voice
- make the narrator a ‘phantom’ or double of the main character in some way (for example, a voice from the dead, or a past self)
- make the narrator an observer or someone who does not appear to the central to the story
- place the narrator in an unusual situation or position from which ‘normal’ description is difficult
- use a combination of these ideas!

Which of the narrative perspectives above can you link to these short extracts? Jot down:

1. who the narrator is
2. what they are seeing or describing
3. what makes them engaging or interesting as narrators.

a. I’m not quite clear why things have changed between us. All I know is that my bowl isn’t filled as regularly as it once was, and I’m as likely to get a slap as a pat on the back…

b. For a moment, he wished he could rise out of his body, still and flat on the hospital bed and look down on the family as they inspected him. Of course, all he actually saw was the upper half of his father’s face, a sweaty brow, and grey eyes peering, like marbles, through the porthole of his world.

c. They met at my stall. That first day, she dropped her change and he picked it up. She smiled, they laughed nervously, and he pressed the fifty pence piece into her hands. They left in separate directions, but the next day they were here at the same time, chatting, exchanging looks. I was invisible.

d. She doesn’t know it yet, but one day she will be me. Now, she is a seven year old, proud of her brittle sandcastle, neither she, nor it, fully formed. I watch her, a phantom of the future, helpless to alter her choices, the cold tide coming in. Of course, you are there, too, observing her from the rocks at a distance, her best friend forever … or so she thinks.

5. Each of the above narratives suggests something about a relationship (or relationships). Write down:

- what the relationship is
- any clues given about its history or its future development.
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Develop the skills

Choosing an unusual narrator can make your writing more original, but just as important is the tone or the voice you adopt. Read this opening to the novel *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby.

My desert-island, all time, top five most memorable split-ups, in chronological order:
1) Alison Ashworth
2) Penny Hardwick
3) Jackie Allen
4) Charlie Nicholson
5) Sarah Kendrew
These were the ones that really hurt. Can you see your name in that lot Laura? I reckon you’d sneak into the top ten, but there’s no place for you in the top five; those places are reserved for the kind of humiliations and heartbreaks that you’re just not capable of delivering. This probably sounds crueler than it is meant to, but the fact is that we’re too old to make each other miserable, and that’s a good thing, not a bad thing, so don’t take your failure to make the list personally.

Nick Hornby, from *High Fidelity*

Whom is the narrator addressing here? (This may be more than one person.)

Should we trust what he says about Laura? Why/why not?

What does the use of a ‘desert-island’ style list to categorise former girlfriends suggest about the narrator? How might this be linked to the title of the novel?

What language features can we see here that contribute to the distinctive voice and style? Copy and tick off the key elements you can identify.

| Informal, chatty vocabulary and turns of phrase | Semicolons used to add a clarification to the previous statement |
| Vivid, descriptive setting | Third person narrator |
| Directly addressing another character | Past tense references to past events |
| First person narrator | Present tense references to current situations |
| Reflective thoughts on emotions | Exclamation marks for shock or anger |

What overall tone is created?

Now look again at the four extracts (a, b, c, d) in ‘Explore the skills’.

a What tone of voice is used in each case?
b What language clues indicate this?

For example, how do the following uses of metaphor (1) and the short end clause (2) create a particular tone in the fourth example? What is the tone?

I watch her, a phantom of the future, helpless to alter her choices, the cold tide coming in. (1) Of course, you are there, too, observing her from the rocks at a distance, her best friend forever … or so she thinks. (2)

Choose one of the short extracts from Activity 4 and continue it, maintaining a similar style and narrative perspective.

Apply the skills

Write a description or story suggested either by the photo above or the title, ‘Long Division’.

Begin by generating some ideas around the title and/or photo, in order to come up with suggestions about the situation or relationship. Try to think beyond the obvious: relationships can be between all sorts of people (family members, friends, leaders and followers).

Decide on a narrator. Go back to the possibilities you have encountered in this unit, and think about what would make an interesting or original perspective. If you are using the picture, it could be someone out of shot, not necessarily the people shown.

Plan the style of narrative voice and how you will create it.

Now draft the first three paragraphs of your story or description.

Checklist for success

- Make your narrator interesting and engaging.
- Match the language and style to the story told, or to the relationships revealed.
Weather and the seasons are typically used to symbolise emotions or life’s progress. Complete one of the cinquains below, or write your own, trying to convey a deeper or more powerful idea.

Now read this extract from a short story by Ted Hughes, ‘The Rain Horse’.

In this extract, a man comes back to the countryside area he left 12 years earlier.

As the young man came over the hill the first thin blowing of rain met him.

He turned his coat-collar up and stood on top of the shelving rabbit-riddled hedgebank, looking down into the valley.

He had come too far.

What had set out as a walk along pleasantly-remembered tarmac lanes had turned dreamily by gate and path into a cross-ploughland trek, his shoes ruined, the dark mud of the lower fields inching up the trouser legs of his grey suit where they rubbed against each other. And now there was a raw, flapping wetness in the air that would be downpour at any minute.

He shivered, holding himself tense against the cold.

Ted Hughes, from ‘The Rain Horse’

On the surface, all this story seems to be about is a man who has got lost in the countryside. But is there more to it than that? Look at the annotations, and then make notes on:

a the narrator’s situation and the error he has made
b how conditions have changed
c any phrases or sentences that suggest there is more to this than just a ruined walk.

Think about the young man returning after 12 years. What could this extract suggest about his decision to return?

Now read this later extract from the same story:

Twelve years had changed him. This land no longer recognized him, and he looked back at it coldly, as at a finally visited home country, known only through the stories of a grandfather…

Hughes uses figurative language in two further ways here. Identify:

a his use of personification in how the countryside responds to him
b his use of comparison in how he responds to the countryside.

Key terms

- cinquain: a five-line poem invented by Crapsey which has a structure of 2, 4, 6, 8, 2 syllable lines
- image: language that creates a vivid picture
- literal: the surface or obvious meaning
- symbolise: represent

Key terms

- figurative language: words or phrases that represent or symbolise other ideas, not just literal ones
- personification: giving human characteristics to something that is not human
Gasping for breath now and cursing mechanically, without a thought for his suit he sat down on the ground to rest his shaking legs, letting the rain plaster his hair down over his forehead and watching the dense flashing lines disappear abruptly into the soil all around him as if he were watching through thick plate glass. He took deep breaths in the effort to steady his heart and regain control of himself. His right trouser turn-up was ripped at the seam and his suit jacket was splashed with the yellow mud of the top field.

The power of the narrative comes from the details of the horse’s actions and of the man’s reactions and feelings. Through these, Hughes begins to suggest or imply other ideas. Looking over the annotations, make brief notes about:

• the idea that the horse may symbolise something more than just a vicious or startled animal
• how his own behaviour and priorities have now changed
• whether Hughes is making wider points about man and nature.

Apply the skills

Write the opening to a story in which someone gets lost in an unfamiliar environment.

10 Briefly, jot down some ideas for your story:

• Who is lost? Will there be anyone else (or thing) in the story?
• Where they are lost/Where they have come from?
• How did it happen?

Now, think about how you can represent the relationship between the setting and the person who is lost. It does not need to be alien or unwelcoming, but could be a refreshing change or new experience.

Draft your opening three paragraphs. You could begin with the familiar and then move onto the unfamiliar, increasing the emotional and physical effects.

Checklist for success

• Suggest a deeper meaning to the story than simply a tale of someone getting lost through imagery or symbolism.
• Use personification to describe inanimate or natural objects.
• Choose verbs and nouns carefully to imply the relationship between place and person.
In the opening line above, the writer begins with a subordinate clause which starts with a word (‘Although’) indicating qualification or even negativity: even though it was nice weather, the main character feels cold so wears fur.

This suggests (and it is only a hint) that this may not turn out to be a perfectly happy tale.

Other structural features relate to the time order of events. Now read the whole opening paragraph to ‘Miss Brill’.

Although it was so brilliantly fine—the blue sky powdered with gold and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques—Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur. The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip, and now and again a leaf came drifting—from nowhere, from the sky. Miss Brill put up her hand and touched her fur. Dear little thing! It was nice to feel it again.

She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes. “What has been happening to me?” said the sad little eyes. Oh, how sweet it was to see them snap at her again from the red eiderdown!...But the nose, which was of some black composition, wasn’t at all firm. It must have had a knock, somehow. Never mind—a little dab of black sealing-wax when the time came—when it was absolutely necessary...Little rogue! Yes, she really felt like that about it. Little rogue biting its tail just by her left ear.

She could have taken it off and laid it on her lap and stroked it. She felt a tingling in her hands and arms, but that came from walking, she supposed. And when she breathed, something light and sad—no, not sad, exactly—something gentle seemed to move in her bosom.

Short stories require economy, conveying a great deal in not many sentences. They often focus on one current or ongoing moment, rather than plodding through everything that has happened in strict time order.

The story begins in the public gardens, but what earlier event are we then told about?

What verb form (‘had taken’, ‘has taken’ or ‘took’) does the writer use to indicate this event that has been completed?

What do we learn about how Miss Brill feels about the fox fur now?

What verb form (‘bitten’, ‘bite’, ‘biting’, ‘had bitten’) tells us this is what she is experiencing at this moment in the story?
In Mansfield’s story, a young couple are also in the gardens. Write a similar first few lines about them as they, too, arrive at the park.

Start with a sentence about them and what they are doing as they arrive in the park. For example...

Then, go back in time to reveal earlier events or actions between them. (use the past perfect ‘had’ form)

Finally, write a sentence establishing something happening to them now (use the participle ‘…ing’ form)

The structure of a narrative or description is also made memorable by echoes and patterns that emphasise important ideas or establish moods and tones. We have already seen how the story opens with a qualifying conjunction that hints at all not being well.

Where in the text does Mansfield use ‘but’ to:
• emphasise the coldness in the air
• indicate the fox fur isn’t completely restored?

What other descriptions hint at or add to this sense of things being not quite perfect, or at a darker side to the story?

Copy and complete these sentences about the same young couple in the park; add suitable conjunctions to hint at not everything being well. Choose from:

but, even though, although, yet

... the water in the duck lake looked clear and blue at a distance …
They had hoped to find a quiet spot to sit and chat, …
The boy hugged the girl close to him, …

Now read the ending of ‘Miss Brill.’ She is watching a band play on the bandstand and a young couple come and sit near her, the boy trying to kiss the girl.

“No, not now,” said the girl. “Not here, I can’t.”
“But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?” asked the boy.
“Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn’t she keep her silly old mug at home?”
“It’s her fu-ur which is so funny,” giggled the girl. “It’s exactly like a fried whiting.”
“Ah, be off with you!” said the boy in an angry whisper. Then: “Tell me, ma petite chère—”
“No, not here,” said the girl. “Not yet.”

On her way home she usually bought a slice of honey-cake at the baker’s. It was her Sunday treat. Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present—a surprise—something that might very well not have been there. She hurried on the almond Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way.

But today she passed the baker’s by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard—and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.

The shape and structure of the whole text in a short story can also be dependent on its overall ‘completeness’, the way in which the ending echoes, or draws upon earlier ideas.

In what ways does the ending:
• develop the earlier theme of spinsterhood
• link back to earlier events or things Miss Brill has done?

Apply the skills

Write your own story called ‘The Anniversary’.

First, draft a plan with main character(s), setting and the basic elements of the plot. Then think about the points in the Checklist below.

Checklist for success

• Reveal past and present information fluently by your use of tenses.
• Hint or indicate mood or tone through your use of conjunctions or sentence order.
• Create a ‘completeness’ in your story by echoing or coming back to earlier events or themes in your final paragraph.
Reflecting on your progress

Read the following response to this task. As you read, think about what the student has done well and what advice they might need in order to make more progress.

Response 1

Under the sea the only sound at first is the air pressure against your scuba mask. The world is silent and dark and you struggle to make out shapes. Then, slowly, it all comes into focus and you make sense of the world around you. The huge ship is tilted on its side and is a monster, but one that is asleep. It seems to be groaning but it is all in the mind. Everything remains still and it feels as if you’re the only thing in deep sea universe.

The round port-holes in the side of the ship are eyes staring out into the blackness. If you shine a torch deep into the sockets you will see there is no life there at all. If you run your hands along the rusty edge that feels so rough and hard, you will feel the metal like jagged jaws that could cut like daggers. And if you run your hand along the top you will feel the slime of centuries.

Inside the old ship’s body you feel tense. What if there are bodies still here, even though it has been centuries since the ship sank? There are eyes watching you, or so you think, as you push open the creaky metal door into the lower bit. Groping for something to hold, you descend. Into the darkness as if into hell. Then at the bottom you turn and cast your torch light on the corridor. The glow goes around the walls lighting up rusty shelves. Your feet crunch on old, dirty cups on the floor, so you flip your flippers to break free and go along the space towards the cabins. This is a place you fear but you must face.

Under your gaze, groups of little silver fish flash in front of your eyes and for a moment you forget your reason for being there. The water is green and grimy here too, and you’re glad you can’t taste it just the oxygen you’re breathing all the time.

So, you push open the first cabin door. But nothing happens. It is rusted fast onto its old warped hinges. Taking out a small axe from your belt, you bash away at the hinges until even through the mask you hear a welcome crack. Slowly the door opens inwards and you point your fading torch light at the cabin.

At first it is indistinct. Then the image grows and you see a white figure lying on the bed. Rags which were once clothes...
I sing a dead song. It is a song I repeat for infinity, a song of a hopeful journey turned into despair. It is a song of a captain who lost his way. For all humans lose their way on the journey of life, on the voyage of life, in the path through the forest of waves and calm. Up, down, up, down. Swinging high, low, high, low. Slowly, I will disappear into the ashes of the ocean floor, taking with me the memories and the history. My past in the dockyards of the north, my free adventures around the globe and my passing several centuries ago. I can feel my old body sinking into the arms of the ocean bed, a terrible destructive embrace. I shall sing my song as I descend into the coffin of the earth. There are many of us who rest here in the graveyard of the ocean: tiny dinghies that capsized on pleasure trips; trawlers that took their fishermen with them; motorboats who disappeared during races. Dotted around the globe, we are an underwater army that no one sees.

Can you hear us? If you put your ear to a shell on a sandy beach you will hear a roar. This is not the sea but our souls crying out for rest.

Listen out for us as you pass on your own voyages. Do not forget us. We are below you.

Comments on Response 2

This is a rich and evocative reimagining, using the picture as a prompt. The compelling metaphors which draw parallels between life’s journey and actual travel are original, and the overall structure and composition with its echoes and repetitions fits the idea of a sunken boat.

Occasionally, the metaphors and abstractions seem to contradict each other, and perhaps drift a little bit away from the source but in general the range of vocabulary, the choice of imagery and the variety in sentences and overall arrangement create an ambitious and original piece.

How might this response be improved even further? Using the top rung of the Check your progress ladder at the end of this chapter, decide what feedback and advice you might give to this student.
Check your progress

● I can create a range of convincing, original and compelling narrative voices which engage the reader from the very start.

● I can sustain a powerful range of ideas through my selection of imagery, symbols and allusions.

● I can use structural devices fluently and inventively to create a range of ideas and effects.

● I can create engaging and effective narrative voices.

● I can use appropriate imagery and symbolism in my writing to create vivid narratives.

● I can use structural devices to make my writing coherent and engaging.

● I can create a range of different narrative voices.

● I can use imagery consciously to make my writing more vivid.

● I can link ideas effectively using some structural devices.