

Planning and writing a narrative opening from a picture stimulus

You are learning to:

- understand how professional writers create effective openings to novels
- plan and write an examination-style novel opening task
- plan and write an examination-style task inspired by a picture.

Testing: AO5

For: Paper 1 Question 5

1 Getting you thinking

One of the choices you may have in the examination is to write a story based on an image: a picture or a photograph.

A good way to start is to look at the picture like a detective and ask yourself as many questions as you can about what you see.

- a Look at the painting below and jot down the questions it raises for you as you look at it.

Perhaps your first questions were about the woman in the picture or the place itself.



2 Explore the skills

- a Now look at the possible examination task below.

Write the opening extract of a novel based on the picture above.

Just as in a short story, the *opening* to a novel should set up:

- character
- situation
- location.

It should also raise important questions to keep readers hooked.

- b** Look at the questions below, gathered by a group of students. Answer them yourself to form your own interpretation of what's happening in the picture. Record your ideas in a spider diagram or a structured list. This will form an outline plan for the examination task above.

- Who is the woman? What is she wearing? Does she work there or is she just in the fashion of the time? Why is she waiting there?
- What is the building and where is it? Is that a film that's showing? What is the film? How long has it been on? Why is the woman not watching the film? Who else is there?
- What is the light like in this place and the fabrics and furnishings? Is this modern or in the past? When is this?

Once you have gathered your initial thoughts and ideas, you have some choices to make as a writer. One of the most important choices is whether you will choose a **first-person** or a **third-person narrator**. This will decide whether your story is told from the point of view of a character in the story or not.

- c** Read this student's opening to the examination task set earlier using a **third-person narrator**.

Sandy leaned against the wall and checked her watch. Seven forty-five. The film had started fifteen minutes earlier even though the place was half empty on this rainy November night. A handful of people occupied the plush red velvet seats. A couple on a first date. Two elderly women – regulars every Wednesday – and a few lonely figures. As lonely perhaps as Sandy, leaning against the wall and waiting by the stairs.

- d** Now rewrite the paragraph above as though *you* were Sandy. Think about what you can include now that the third-person narrative is left out. You could begin:

I stepped back, out of the shadows and into the faded golden light...

Key terms

first-person narrator: when a character in a story tells it in their voice using 'I'. This makes it feel like they are sharing their experiences with you

third-person narrator: when a story is told objectively using 'he', 'she' 'they'. This can make it feel like an outside observer is telling the story, looking in

Week 6 . Lesson 1

- e When you have finished, decide which narrative perspective or point of view might be more effective in presenting the character in the picture.

3 Explore the skills

In a novel opening, you may not always have a specific event happening, but you could have a glimpse of an interesting person or place.

- a Read this opening to a novel by Linda Grant called *The Clothes on Their Backs* published in 2008. Investigate the interesting glimpses the writer gives you by answering the questions in the annotations. There are no right or wrong answers.

This morning, for the first time in many years, I passed the shop on Seymour Street. I saw the melancholy sign in the window which announced that it was closing down and through the glass the rails on which the clothes hung, half abandoned, as if the dresses and coats, blouses and sweaters had fled in the night, vanished down the street, flapping their empty arms.

There was Eunice, behind the counter, patting her blue-black lacquered hair with silver nails. How old she looked, and how forlorn, her chin sinking for a moment on her chest. [...]

An impulse took me through the door, a strong pang of sympathy. I stepped inside and her perfume filled the room, inimitably Eunice – Revlon's Aquamarine, the scent of eau de nil and gold.

Linda Grant, from *The Clothes on Their Backs*

What does this suggest about where the character has been?

Why might this particular shop be important?

What feeling is being established?

What is assumed by just using a character's first name?

What image does she have and how does this contrast with how she is feeling? Why might she feel like this?

How well must the narrator know the character of Eunice? What might their relationship be?

- b Think about how you could create an interesting focus in your story through adding small details about the character. Make some notes on:

- what the character looks like
- how she is positioned against the wall
- the details on her clothing and shoes
- the shadows and the way the light falls on her.



- c** Write a paragraph in **third-person narrative** describing what you see. Or you could write from the point of view of someone observing her – as in the Linda Grant extract – perhaps someone watching the film whose attention is caught by the character. You could begin:

She was leaning against the wall in the golden lamplight, a faint shadow surrounding her ...

- d** Go on to look more closely by zooming in on the details in the picture you are given.

Use these observations to help you include interesting features in your creative writing. For example:

Her bluntly cut blonde hair was caught in the yellow light until she almost disappeared into the yellow wallpaper behind.

Write two more sentences of your own focusing in on:

- her facial expression
- the position of her hand.

4 Final task

- a** Using the plan and the ideas you have gathered, write a response to the examination task.

Write the opening extract of a novel based on the picture above.

Checklist for success

- Choose a narrative perspective (first or third person) and ensure you stick to it right the way through.
- Aim to include some interesting or unusual glimpses into character and location.
- Zoom in on some smaller details to engage your readers.



Half-term progress assessment task: narrative writing

You are aiming to show that:

- you can select and plan an examination task testing narrative writing
- you can organise and structure your piece of narrative writing effectively
- you can include some accurate, complex spellings
- you can control the tense of your verbs and agreement
- you can punctuate your work in a way that shows you are clear and accurate
- you can vary your sentences for effect.

Testing: AO5 and AO6

For: Paper 1 Question 5 Creative writing

What you can expect in the exam

In Paper 1 Section B of your exam, you will be asked to complete a piece of creative writing in Section B. The topic will be based on the extract of fiction you have read and answered questions on in Section A. It is a 45-minute task, but is worth 40 marks in total – half of the marks for the paper.

You are able to earn 24 marks for the **content and organisation** of your work.

You are able to earn 16 marks for the **technical accuracy** of your work.

You could be given:

- a choice between two **narrative tasks** such as the ones you have been working on in Weeks 5 and 6.
- a choice of a **narrative task and a descriptive task** (you will learn more about this in Week xx)
- a choice between two **descriptive tasks**.

Step 1

This is the type of mark scheme that will be used to mark the **content and organisation** of your work for Question 5. Use the annotations to help you to understand exactly what the examiner is looking for.

AO5 Content and organisation	
Upper Level 3 16–18 marks 'Consistent'	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Register is consistently matched to audience • Consistently matched to purpose • Increasingly sophisticated vocabulary chosen for effect; range of successful linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective structural features • Engaging with a range of clear, connected ideas • Coherent paragraphs; integrated discourse markers
Lower Level 3 13–15 marks 'Clear'	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Register is generally matched to audience • Generally matched to purpose • Vocabulary clearly chosen for effect; appropriate linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually effective structural features • Engaging with a range of connected ideas • Usually coherent paragraphs; a range of discourse markers
Upper Level 2 10–12 marks 'Some success'	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained attempt to match register to audience • Sustained attempt to match purpose • Conscious use of vocabulary; some linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some structural features • Variety of linked, relevant ideas • Some paragraphs and discourse markers
Lower Level 2 7–12 marks 'Attempts'	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to match register to audience • Attempts to match purpose • Begins to vary vocabulary; some linguistic devices Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts structural features • Some linked, relevant ideas • Attempts paragraphs with some discursive markers

Key terms

Register: the kind of 'voice' or tone that you take in your writing

discourse markers: words or phrases that help to organise your writing into sections. For example: nevertheless, however, so

Are you writing in a way which would be acceptable to your reader, using the right tone to engage them without being offensive or inappropriate?

Have you remembered if you are narrating a story or doing a description and stuck to it right the way through? (You will learn more about describing next half term.)

Are you choosing words to interest your reader? Can you use language special effects such as similes and metaphors? (You will learn more about this next half term.)

Are you using some of the features a real writer uses to add interest to the structure such as shifts in time or flashbacks, patterns such as repetition, effective and coherent openings and endings?

Are you organising your work into paragraphs to show where the topic changes in your writing?

Week 6 . Lesson 2

Look at the section highlighted in yellow.

If you follow the ladder of skills in the bullet points it suggests you need to:

- ✓ remember to use **paragraphs** to organise your work or other interesting ways to **structure** your piece of writing
- ✓ include a good selection of interesting **vocabulary**
- ✓ make good **choices of language**, special effects. Use **interesting details** to create characters and impressions of places just like the professional writers' work you have been reading so far on the course.

Step 2

Choose **one** of the examination tasks below.

Either:

Write a **short story** using the title 'The Lost Boy'.

Or:

Write the **opening chapter of a novel** inspired by the photograph below.



Or:

Write a **short story** about a group of friends who become lost whilst exploring an unknown place.

You have 45 minutes to complete this task.

Spend 5–10 minutes planning your task using the method you learned in Week 5.

Introduction:

Complication:

Rising action:

Climax:

Resolution:

Step 3

Write up your narrative in no more than 25–30 minutes.

Step 4

You are now going to check the accuracy of your writing using the mark scheme grid that an examiner will use to check your work.

In an examination situation you would have 5–10 minutes of time left to check your work. However, bear in mind that there are 16 marks at stake here. Look carefully at what is required for **Level 3** and above in order for work to be 'clear'.

Work carefully through your narrative, using the questions below to help you achieve maximum accuracy. In this practice, there is no set time limit for this task.

Note here that the ladder of skills includes:

- two bullet points that focus on your **choices of words** and how you **spell** them
- two bullet points that focus on your **control of grammar** and ability to vary your **sentences**
- two bullet points that focus on how you **punctuate** your work.

Level	Skills descriptors
Level 3 9–12 marks 'Clear'	<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 'Some' 'Attempts'	<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

Have I ensured all of my sentences are marked with a full stop, or, if required, an exclamation mark or a question mark?

Have I used commas in lists, perhaps tried a colon or semi-colon, remembered to put any dialogue into speech marks? Have I used apostrophes correctly?

Have I used different types of sentences to add variety to my work to create a different pace, add surprise, drama, tension, detail?

Have I written in Standard English and thought carefully about using the right tenses and auxiliary verbs?

Are all of my basic spellings okay and the tricky words I have used as good as I can get them?

Am I trying to use more imaginative and complex words?

Check your progress

Grade 8

- I can communicate with impact.
- I can produce an ambitious and effectively structured piece of writing.
- I can use a wide range of well-selected sentence types and structures and precise vocabulary for impact.
- I can spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately so that writing is virtually error free.

Grade 5

- I can communicate effectively and hold my reader's interest.
- I can produce a well-structured and purposeful piece of writing.
- I can vary my sentence types and structures and use vocabulary for effect.
- I can spell, punctuate and use grammar accurately with occasional errors.

Grade 2

- I can communicate simply in English with some clarity for my reader.
- I can produce writing with a basic structure and some awareness of purpose.
- I can show some control over sentences and use familiar vocabulary.
- I can spell, punctuate and use grammar with a little accuracy.