

Collins

Cambridge IGCSE™

English

STUDENT'S BOOK

Also for Cambridge IGCSE™ (9-1)

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Composition

9

Composition tasks give you the opportunity to write at length. They allow you to show your understanding of the content and structure of either narrative writing or descriptive writing, and at the highest level to take risks or try out different approaches to produce an original piece of writing.

To write a composition, you will need to use your writing skills to:

- articulate experience and express what is thought, felt and imagined (W1)
- organise and structure ideas and opinions for deliberate effect (W2)
- use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures appropriate to context (W3)
- use register appropriate to context (W4)
- make accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar (W5).

Links to other chapters:

Chapter 3: Key writing forms

Chapter 4: Writing for purpose

Understanding composition tasks

You will have to make quite a few choices in your composition writing. It is important that you fully understand what those choices are and how they will affect your response. Composition tasks usually give you a choice of two types of writing – descriptive or narrative. A composition should be 350–450 words.

Top tip

Look back to Topics 4.9 and 4.10 to remind yourself of the key features of descriptive and narrative writing.

Explore the skills

- 1 Look at the two example tasks below. Which is a descriptive writing task and which is a narrative writing task? Make notes on why each task matches the type you have decided on.

a)

Describe an occasion when two people meet for the first time.

b)

'Although it was almost midnight, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching our house. I opened the door...'. Use these two sentences to start a story.



Build the skills

Each type of writing has its own conventions. These might be *structural* (how ideas and information are sequenced or ordered) or *stylistic* (how language is used).

- 2 Copy and complete the chart below.

	Conventions of good narratives	Conventions of good descriptive writing
structure	<p>structure adds interest by revealing or concealing information</p> <p>strong opening that hooks the reader</p> <p>use of flashbacks?</p> <p>surprising ending?</p>	Individual elements are tackled in turn in detail.
style	vividly paints picture of setting and characters in reader's mind using imagery	

Develop the skills

You can develop your understanding of the conventions and practise using them. However, in exam conditions you will need to deal methodically with the tasks. It can help to follow a process such as the one below.

- 1 Read the four tasks (two descriptive writing and two narrative writing).
- 2 Select the one task from the four for which you:
 - understand the conventions (the form/purpose and its style and structure)
 - have a good range of ideas (it is no good choosing a topic or theme that you know nothing about or cannot picture in your mind)
 - can write in a complex, sophisticated way (not just stating the obvious but providing detail and depth of language and ideas).
- 3 Quickly plan your answer.

- 3 Reread the two questions in Task 1. Which would you choose? Why?

Apply the skills

Once you have selected the task, make sure that you understand *what* it is asking you to do. You can do this by highlighting the key words in the question.

Narrative writing

'Although it was almost midnight, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching our house.

I opened the door...' Use these two sentences to start a story.

to be told in the first person ('I')

a narrative is a story, so I must use what I know about good storytelling

the content: a person hears someone coming to the house and opens the door

make sure I only write the beginning

- 4 Identify the key words in the following question.

Descriptive writing

Describe a scene in which a customer complains to a shop manager about an item he/she has bought.

Check your progress:

▲ I understand what each task is asking and can select a form that I can write competently.

▲ I understand the range of tasks on offer and can draw creatively on what I know of them.

Planning ideas for a descriptive task

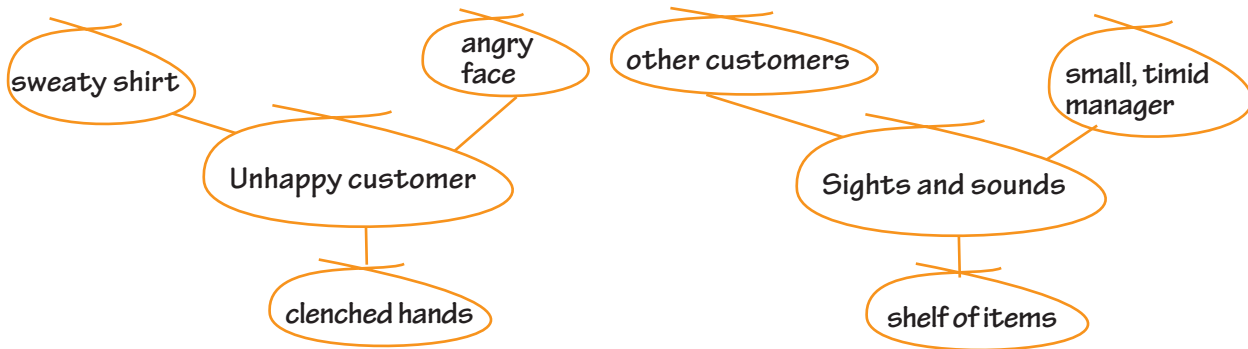
Highlighting the key words and phrases in the task is important, but how does it help you to develop a response?

Explore the skills

Look again at the following task. The key words have been highlighted.

Descriptive writing
 Describe a scene in which a customer complains to a shop manager about an item he/she has bought.

- 1 Quickly generate ideas about the *content*, based on the key words. Jot down:
 - what the *customer* and *manager* are like
 - what the customer is *complaining about*.
- 2 Create two spider diagrams to help you focus on the *descriptive elements*. Copy and complete these spider diagrams, or come up with your own.



The grid below collects some possible notes on the initial ideas you might have.

Paragraph	Overall focus	Descriptive elements	Up close
1	customer entering the shop	his/her speed of walking carrying object clothing – coat	wooden crate with pet’s eyes just visible
2			

- 3 What would you put in your second paragraph? Jot down some ideas.

Build the skills

- 4 Follow the same process for the task below. Pick out the key words and then jot down:
- the main content of the task (and what you should/should not include)
 - the descriptive elements (the things you plan to describe – for example, swings, flowerbeds, benches).

Descriptive writing

Describe a summer afternoon in a park.

Develop the skills

Another way of generating ideas is to use word associations or links to add related ideas and build each descriptive element. For example:

child chasing pigeon – *pigeon pecking in the grass* – *flies up in old man's face* – *green grass* – *scared face*

- 5 Note down linked words or phrases for each of the following.
- children with football – *shouts...*
 - water fountain – *stone basin...*
 - old men playing chess – *square table...*
- 6 Now consider how you can look at your descriptive task in an original or unusual way. For example, think about the shop task: how would the description change if:
- the shop was one from 100 years ago
 - the shop sold very unusual, out of the ordinary objects
 - the customer complaining was a small child
 - the shopkeeper was someone you (or your narrator) knew?
- 7 Choose one of these options. Write a list of key nouns or noun phrases related to the shop, the customer or the shopkeeper or manager.

Apply the skills

- 8 Read the descriptive task below. Note down the key words and then generate ideas using one of the methods above.

Descriptive writing

Describe someone exploring an underground cave.



Top tip

Look back to Topics 4.9 and 9.1 for help if you need to.

Check your progress:

- ▲ I can generate basic ideas for a descriptive task.
- ▲ I can generate a range of ideas and choose one that is original or striking.

Structuring description creatively

Descriptive writing is about creating a vivid picture through your choice of words. It is also about how, and in what order, you reveal that picture.

Explore the skills

Look at the following task:

Describe someone's impressions of a new town or city.

There are several ways you could approach structuring a response. You could look at it through *time*:

- Has the person just arrived or are they *arriving*? (For example, you could describe their impressions as they come into the city on a train.)
- Are they just waking up in a new place, ready to see it in the light? If so, is it dawn – or when?
- Could the impressions be at different times – for example, as they wake up, then later in the day?

Alternatively, you might decide to structure your description according to *place*.

- Are you describing the whole of the city – the cityscape?
- Could you describe different locations (a café, a busy crossroads, then a peaceful park)?
- Could you contrast this new place with the one your narrator has just come from?

Here is a plan for structuring a description.

Paragraph 1: Late night: arriving by train – city lights

Paragraph 2: My first view of the city up close as I leave the station

Paragraph 3: Dawn. Sunlight. The view from the hotel window.

Paragraph 4: Lunchtime: more to be seen from my balcony...

Paragraph 5:



- 1 What structural device does the plan mostly use to divide up the description?
- 2 Add a further change for paragraph 5.

Build the skills

Structure also relates to how you reveal details within and between paragraphs. Will you describe a whole scene? Will you focus on small, individual details?

Note how in this example below, the paragraph begins by setting the whole scene, then 'zooms in' on more precise detail.

compound sentence gives a specific example of one of the buildings

Through the window, a row of office buildings opposite slowly come to life. A modern glass tower reflects the rising sun as the blinds are slowly lifted. One window reveals a businesswoman in a smart blue suit who sits at her desk sipping a cup of coffee, reflecting on the day ahead.

topic sentence gives the general view

complex sentence provides even more detail of what is happening in the 'glass tower'

3 Write a paragraph following a similar structure.

- In the first sentence, describe a new scene from your window.
- In the second, add more detail – what can you 'paint in' to make the place more vivid?
- In the third, describe a specific person or object connected to the scene you are describing (use a longer sentence to provide more detailed information).

Read an example of how this idea could be developed.

From my hotel window, I watch as the long street lined with shops, shuttered and shut, slowly awakes [1]. At one end [2], a café's lights flicker before they illuminate fully, while at the other [2] blinds lift up on a fashion display. Here, a young girl stands outside and stares at the mannequins [3], then retreats inside and steps into the glass box. [4] Like a ballerina, on tiptoes, she reaches and adjusts an amber scarf on a pale and static neck. [5] On the pavement, a sparrow picks at crumbs in the gutter.

4 How does this response apply 'camera techniques'? Link the types of camera shot below to the numbered sentences in the text.

- wide angle
- panning from side to side
- long shot framing a person
- tracking shot
- zoom-in to close up

Top tip

Think of this technique as the 'camera' method: you zoom in from a general wide-angle view to a close-up of a particular person or object. It can give your writing a strong sense of **perspective**.

Key term

perspective: the particular angle or direction from which something is seen or experienced; it can also refer to someone's attitude towards something

5 Here are some ideas for a further paragraph. Match each one to the type of camera shot.

crumpled can of fizzy drink on pavement

long shot framing one thing

school student on bike cycling past

zooming in

sun coming up over distant hills

panning from one side to another

6 Put these ideas together to create your own 'zooming-in' paragraph. Begin with the wide-angle view before narrowing to a close-up.

Develop the skills

It is important to be clear in the way you link or sequence words, phrases or sentences. Prepositions can help you.

Prepositions can indicate the time or sequence of events, or the place or position of people or objects. The table below shows some common prepositions.

Prepositions of time	Prepositions of place/position
on, in, at, since, for, before, to, past, from, til/until, by	in, at, on, by, next to, beside, near, between, behind, in front of, under, below, over, above, through, across, towards, onto

7 Identify the prepositions of time or place in the examples below. Note down what each preposition tells us.

- a) Through my window I see the row of office buildings opposite come to life.
- b) ... a businesswoman in a smart blue suit sits at her desk...
- c) ... a cafe's lights flicker before they illuminate fully...

8 Here is a further paragraph from the city scene. Copy and complete it, adding appropriate prepositions.

The sun has risen and ... the dawn the quiet hush of the morning has been replaced by the bustle of life... the lamppost a little mouse sniffs and scurries past... the yellow light splutters and goes out. A jogger runs... it, and screams in fright... running off... the street to her waiting car.

Conjunctions are also useful in descriptive writing. Conjunctions that indicate events happening concurrently (at the same time) can stop you from slipping into telling a story. For example:

A modern, glass tower reflects the rising sun as the blinds are slowly lifted.

At one end, a café's lights flicker before they illuminate fully, **while** at the other blinds lift up on a fashion display.

- 9 Rewrite each pair of sentences below, using a conjunction to make them a single sentence.
- The fisherman hauls in the nets. The small fish slither free.
 - The businesswoman stands up. Her first visitor enters the room.



Apply the skills

- 10 Write two or three paragraphs in response to the task below.

Describe a street market as it opens up for customers.

Checklist for success

- ✓ Decide how you will structure the text as a whole.
- ✓ Use camera-style techniques to control the perspective.
- ✓ Use linking words and phrases to sequence your ideas.

Check your progress:

- ▲ I understand how different structures can help me organise my work.
- ▲ I can use a range of structural devices at whole text and paragraph level to enable the reader to follow my perspective clearly.

Using the senses and imagery in descriptive writing

Explore the skills

Imagery is the creative use of words to create sensory pictures in the mind. **Similes** and **metaphors** are both types of imagery. Images play a key role in bringing your descriptive writing to life. The senses are also very important to descriptive writing. Good descriptions often evoke sounds, smells, textures, sights and tastes.

Here are two good examples of imagery in description:

- The man's hoarse voice was like a **broken brick on sandpaper**. (simile)
- The child's fingers on mine as I opened the door were **tiny splinters of ice**. (metaphor)

- 1 Make notes on the following questions.
 - a) What different senses does each description appeal to?
 - b) What is particularly effective about each description?

Build the skills

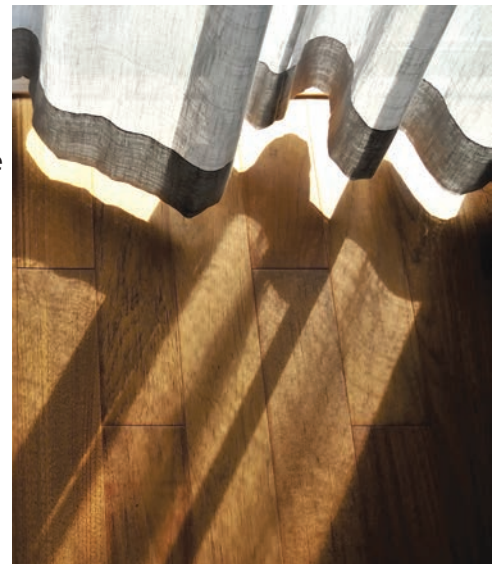
The best imagery is about choosing your ideas carefully.

- The man's hoarse voice **was like flowing honey**.
- 2 Read the beginning of each description below, then decide which of the similes fits best with what is being described.
 - a) The customer's angry words hit the manager like a *soggy towel / sharp whip / bowl of warm rice*.
 - b) His powerful serve crossed the net like a *speeding missile / gentle butterfly / hovering helicopter*.
 - 3 Now have a go yourself.
 - a) *The light burst through the wide gap onto the floor like...* (add your simile; think of a liquid)
 - b) *A narrow... of light shone onto the floor.* (add your metaphor; think of something thin, nasty and sharp)

Key terms

simile: using *like* or *as* to compare things

metaphor: which describe one thing in terms of another



Develop the skills

The best descriptive writing combines images to create an *overall effect*.

The midnight lake shone like a huge, silver brooch, and around it, in the swaying grasses, glow-worms glittered like miniature diamonds. A cool mist frosted my skin. The moon, which hung from the sky's dark neck, was an enormous locket which I felt I could reach out and touch. I was poor in terms of money but living in such a beautiful place, I was like the richest prince on earth.

- 4
- Identify the three similes and two metaphors in the text.
 - What *main* sense do these images appeal to? What other senses you can identify?
 - What links all these images together? (Is there one overall comparison or **analogy** being made?)

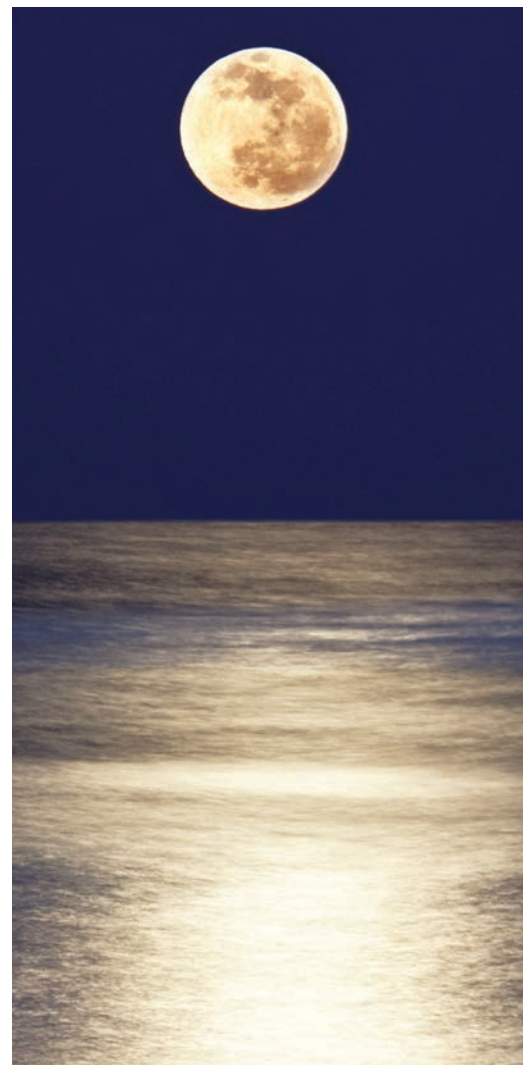
Here is another paragraph on a different topic.

There was a wild rush to get to the front to see the band. Like bees racing towards their favourite lily, we sped towards the stage. From the sides of the arena, other people swarmed over the barriers like soldier ants or a tide of beetles swallowing up the space.

- 5
- Look at the three possible final sentences below. Which fits best with the paragraph above? Why?
- I was a tiny leaf swept up in a huge, unstoppable storm.
 - I felt like a leader of an army.
 - I was a shark speeding through the water.

Apply the skills

- 6
- Write your own description (100–125 words) about a journey into an unknown town or city. Create a mood that suggests the experience is like enjoying a delicious feast.



Key terms

analogy: a developed comparison between two ideas

Check your progress:

▲ I can use the senses and imagery in my descriptive writing.

▲▲ I can select from a range of sensory ideas and imagery to create the greatest impact.

Narrative writing: structure and detail

Narrative writing needs:

- a strong opening to hook the reader
- a complex, interesting narrative (the events are told in an original way)
- a carefully managed ending (that fits with the story as a whole)
- detailed description and ambitious vocabulary used when appropriate.

Explore the skills

Look at the following task, which you came across in Topic 9.1.

'Although it was almost midnight, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching our house. I opened the door...'. Use these two sentences to start a story.

How can you respond to this task, fulfilling the requirements of narrative writing listed above?

- 1 Think about creating an interesting narrative. This means writing the start of a story that will engage the reader. Copy the table below, then add more ideas to the right-hand column.

Who is approaching?	A stranger in the house? Another member or members of the family?
Who are 'you'?	Are you a teenager in a house like your own? Or are you someone else, older, an adult?
Why has the person come to the house?	To meet someone? To reveal a secret? To steal something?
What will happen next?	An argument? A chase? A mysterious event?
What might have happened earlier?	Other visitors? Someone watching the house for weeks?

You may have come up with lots of ideas, but now make your key decisions (for example, who the person is and why they are there). Bear in mind that the more original the idea is (without it being ridiculous), the better the story will be.

- 2 Make your key decisions based on the table you created in Task 1.

Build the skills

A good narrative often:

- uses flashback (the writer recalls or goes back to an earlier time)
- includes a surprise and/or suspense (things are not as they first appear)
- withholds information (does not tell the reader everything at once).

The beginning of the narrative is a vital element. It will shape and form what follows, including the use of these techniques.

- 3 Here are two potential openings to the story. Decide which one uses the techniques above.

Although it was almost midnight, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching our house. I opened the door. In front of me stood my brother, Paulo. He had gone missing ten years earlier and although he had changed, I knew it was him.

Although it was almost midnight, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching our house. I opened the door. For a moment, I peered into the darkness. Was there someone there or not? I took a step forward and a hand grabbed my shirt.

'You?' I gasped.

Suddenly, I was five years old again, playing in the yard, making a mess, making our mother yell at me.

- 4 Using the second example, note down your own ideas for what happened to the brother. Consider the following questions.

- Did he run off and get lost?
- Did he go off to find work and not return?
- Did he get into trouble?
- How old was he?
- What sort of person was he?

- 5 Continue the flashback from this point (writing about 100 words). For example:

We were always close, even though he was much older than me, but that day in the yard was the last day I saw him – Paulo. My brother...

- 6 If possible, compare your flashback with a partner's.
- Did you come up with similar ideas?
 - Whose works best? Why?
- 7 Flashbacks only really work when they have some impact later in the story. Imagine that the person at the door is the brother who has disappeared. Note down some reasons for his return – for example, he is in trouble and needs help.

Develop the skills

Good stories work towards a **climax**, when everything comes together in a dramatic moment, followed by an ending that resolves or completes what has occurred, for good or bad. For example:

Stage 1: grab reader's attention	<i>Mysterious stranger at the door turns out to be brother, Paulo.</i>
Stage 2: development or complication	<i>Flashback – why he left, has returned because he is penniless, living rough. Wants me to steal food for him from the cupboard. Makes me promise not to tell parents.</i>
Stage 3: climax	<i>Parents catch me and brother in the kitchen.</i>
Stage 4: ending	<i>They forgive him for running away – all is well.</i>

- 8 This plan ends 'all is well', but the best stories often contain twists – something surprising – in their conclusions. What could be the twist or unexpected ending here?
- 9 Read these two endings and complete one of them with a final twist, or come up with a completely new ending of your own.

My parents hugged my brother, and we all sat down around our small wooden kitchen table. My father poured us all some water with lime juice. Then my brother sighed, 'I have something else to tell you.' He got up, went to the door and opened it...

Key term

climax: the most interesting or exciting point in a story

Top tip

Look back to Topic 4.10 to remind yourself about the basic five-part story structure.

As we sat there drinking lime water, I looked at my brother again as he raised the glass to his lips. There was something wrong – something not right...

Another way in which you can organise and structure a story is through your use of sentences – and in particular, your use of tenses. For example:

I **am waiting** here, **hoping** to be rescued. I **remember** how it all **began** – the moment when I **decided** to explore the caves.

present progressive

present simple

past simple

The use of the two present tenses plunges us straight into the action. The past tense sends the reader 'back in time' to how the narrator got into this position.

- 10** Which of the sentences below would fit both grammatically and in terms of making sense? Think about where the writer is taking us – forward, back or keeping us in the present.
- It had been a glorious day – perfect for exploring.
 - It is a glorious day – perfect for exploring.
 - It will be a glorious day – perfect for exploring.

- 11** Now, imagine that the trapped narrator begins to think of the future – he dreams of escape. Use future tense forms (*I am/he is going to* or *llhe/they will/might/may*, and so on) to write the next paragraph. Begin:

I try to think about the future. How someone...



Apply the skills

- 12** Now return to the original task ('Although it was almost midnight...') or think of an entirely new story of your own. Plan and then write the first draft of your narrative piece. It should be 350–450 words long.

Check your progress:

▲ I can plan and write a story which has an effective plot.

▲ I can plan and write a story using a range of techniques to engage the reader's interest and sequence my ideas in an interesting way.

Narrative writing: characterisation

You will not have much space in which to tell your story, so you need to balance dialogue and description, and use language cleverly to reveal characters.

Explore the skills

It is important that you *show*, rather than *tell*, the reader about a character or situation. For example, your story may hinge on the actions of a bored child that lead to a dramatic event.

Which of the following examples is more interesting to read?

Mina was bored. She spent all day in her room thinking about what to do.

Mina lay on her tiny bed staring at the ceiling. She had already counted the rows of dull, fading flowers on her wallpaper and had read her tatty school book three times. She sighed heavily and listened as her bedside clock ticked slowly.

Top tip

When implying character and context, small details can reveal a lot: for example, tatty school book implies that Mina is perhaps untidy and disorganised as well as bored!

1 The second example not only implies something about Mina's character – that she is bored – but cleverly shows her being bored. How is this done? Note down answers to the following questions.

- What is Mina doing?
- How is she acting? What details add to the overall tone?

Build the skills

Try not to spend too much time on just one part of your story. You must create a *balance* between the different elements. For example, if you spend too much time on Mina bored in her room, you might not have enough space to write what this makes her do. A good plan might look like this.



Introduction:	Mina is bored in her room.	75 words
Development and complication:	Flashback: she's been sent there for not doing her homework. She climbs out of window, tries to find her friend's house but it is dark and she gets lost.	150–175 words
Climax:	She is chased by someone or something and cornered; it turns out to be her father, desperate to find her.	100–125 words
Resolution:	Back at home, she now finds her room a comfort.	75 words

- 2 Complete the section about Mina in her room using 35–40 words.

Develop the skills

Dialogue can help bring your story and characters to life.

- 3 Read these two dialogue extracts, then complete the improved version.

First version

'Well, Mina, I have to say that I'm very disappointed in you because you haven't done your homework so I'm really, really cross,' said Mina's mother angrily.

'It's not my fault I haven't done it, you know. It's because I've been helping with Granddad. So, I don't think that's fair,' replied Mina stubbornly.

Improved version

Mina knew she should have done her homework, but she sat down with a thump and...

'I'm very disappointed, Mina,' said her mother, angrily turning her back and starting to wash the plates.

Apply the skills

- 4 Write your own narrative in response to this task or complete the story about Mina:

'The Escape' – write a narrative with this as a title.

Checklist for success

- ✓ Keep the conversation simple; make it reveal something about the characters.
- ✓ Make sure that the speech is broken up with action or description.

Check your progress:

- ▲ I can create main characters in a well-organised plot.
- ▲ I can create interesting characters through a range of effective techniques.

Practice questions and sample responses: composition tasks

Key skills

You will need to show the following skills when answering composition questions.

Descriptive writing:

- Generate a range of interesting ideas, including ones from an unusual or original perspective.
- Include vivid details, using the senses to express what is felt or experienced.
- Use imagery or other techniques to create a strong impact.
- Organise your description in interesting ways, through time, place or a combination of both.
- Use a variety of 'focusing' techniques to move from wider overviews to close detail.
- Link ideas structurally through prepositions, conjunctions, and so on.

Narrative writing:

- Generate a range of interesting plots, including ones with unusual forms of narration.
- Use structural or organisational devices such as flashbacks or changes of tense to engage the reader.
- Create compelling and engaging characters.
- Use dialogue accurately and to add meaning and impact to your stories.

Your task: descriptive writing

- 1 Read the following descriptive writing composition task. Then write a response of 350–450 words.

Describe a hidden or secret place.

Exploring responses: descriptive writing

Now read this example response to the task.

Response 1

The secret place I enter is through a tall hedge. There is a door with a large handle and when I pull it, the door opens slowly. Through the door, the garden opens up and I can see, feel, hear and smell so many things.

clear opening sets the scene but with no sense of where the garden is or how the writer got there

The first thing to attack my senses is the smelliness of the flowers. It is almost overpowering and hits me in a great wave. I am not sure I like it all that much, but the discovery of the garden is so amazing that I control myself and continue walking. It's just so amazing.

use of the senses to convey feeling

Now I see old trees bending down over me with curved branches like old men's arms which seek to grab me. I push them to one side and find I am standing on a stone bridge over a sparkling stream. There are lots of fishes to see.

use of imagery, if a little unoriginal

All around the garden is the tall hedge, like a box, and inside there are lots more hedges creating a maze-like effect. I feel like I am inside a game and don't know where to turn. Now I am not sure of the way out so I go back the way I came over the little bridge and past the old man trees. But I cannot find the door.

I look up above and the sky is a brilliant blue. Birds from the garden, ones I don't recognise – they don't look very nice or friendly – well, they swoop down and peck close to me. I think they are some sort of seabird, which seems strange because we are not near the sea. The grass by the path is like a green blanket, soft and inviting, so I sit down while I consider what to do next.

Now the smell of the flowers is really getting to me. They are so sickly and suffocating. It is surely time for me to leave so I go to have another look for the door, which will let me escape. This time, miraculously, it is there.

I feel like Alice in Wonderland waking up but I haven't been asleep so this is not a dream. I will come back to this garden again if it is still here.

intriguing idea that could have linked to the game concept, but not really fully explored



Feedback

While the response presents a clear and vivid picture, there is something lacking here. There is little sentence variety and the descriptions, though easy to visualise, are sometimes a little dull and repetitive given the possibilities. Ideas are suggested but not fully developed. There is evidence of original thought, but it never quite gets going. Having said that, this is a more than competent response that does have imagery, control and a fluent structure.

- 2 Identify three further things in this response that could be improved. Use the 'Excellent progress points' on page 240 to help you.

Now read this second sample response.

Response 2

At the top of my parents' dull, grey apartment block is a set of iron stairs that lead onto the roof – or so I thought. The metal sign warns, 'No entry – danger,' so I can't tell you what gets into me that afternoon when I decided to climb them.

change of tense correct?

Forcing open the heavy trap door, I stepped into another world. For there, facing me was the most lush, luxuriant garden I have ever seen. An arch, twisted round with the delicate fingers of fragrant pink roses confronted me, and beyond was a matted walkway, sprinkled with sand, like golden paper.

good variety of sensory adjective

zooms in, using imaginative metaphor

As I took my first tentative steps, the tinkling sound of tiny fountains at either side rose up, like a thousand mini-orchestras tuning up. They glimmered as water spouted from sculptures. Below, the sound of the brutal city streets continued. Cars snarling like wild cats. People chattering like monkeys. I am at peace. Away from it all.

effective simile, if not the best comparison

excellent, original simile

short sentences provide effective contrast

Yet there was more. Off the main pathway were further routes. I explored each in turn, each revealing a new delight. Down one, a hammock swung between bamboo trees, as if its owner had just disappeared. Down another, were rows of tiny flowers I didn't recognise, which seemed newly planted. I had no idea what was watering them but despite the intense tropical heat they were thriving.

new topic sentence and connective links to new description

How could I have missed this place? Who created it? Whoever it was must have realised that we all need an escape from the speed of everyday life. This was a real oasis, not a mirage. It felt like mine, as if I was the first explorer.

My dreams were broken by a melody interfering near my side. I glanced down at the pathway railing. On it, a row of tiny bluebirds, six or seven, I can't recall exactly, sat like a little choir, chirping out their song – just for me! I reached down and one hopped onto my hand and tilted its head as if checking me out. Then, in a flash of blue it was gone and so were the others. Perhaps they'd heard something.

focused attention on physical movement adds to atmosphere

I suddenly felt like an intruder. Time to leave. Will I tell my parents? I felt like I wanted to keep the place to myself, like a dream which you think you will ruin if you reveal it.

feelings of the writer

I closed the door behind me. Immediately it was as if the garden had never existed. Below I could hear the sounds of couples arguing in their apartments, pots bubbling in kitchens, televisions blaring out.

excellent list of details provides contrast at distance

I was back in the real world.

effective single sentence paragraph to conclude

Feedback

This is an excellent piece that really conveys the setting and atmosphere of the garden. The description is built up very well, with each paragraph developing what has gone before or taking the reader down new pathways (literally). There is a real variety of vocabulary and imagery, although for the answer to be improved it would need to be inventive and perfectly matched to the desired atmosphere. We also get a real sense of the 'interior voice' of the writer and his or her feelings. Occasionally it feels as if the description is going to spill over into storytelling but fortunately that does not occur. Very occasionally, too, tenses are a little insecure, although overall the account is consistent in this respect. The use of sentences is excellent, with shorter sentences used for effect. All in all, a very impressive piece.

- 3 Identify three further specific features of this response that are an improvement on Response 1.
- 4 Using the responses and feedback in this topic, and the 'Excellent progress points' on page 240, evaluate your own response and improve it where you can.

Your task: narrative writing

- 5 Read the following narrative writing composition task. Then write your own response of 350–450 words.

Write a story that begins with you overhearing a phone call which is meant to be secret.

Exploring responses: narrative writing

Read the example response to the task below.

Response 1

I was on the stairs in the middle of the night when I heard the phone call. It was a very hot night and I couldn't sleep and needed a drink. I was coming down the stairs, rubbing my eyes, when I saw my father by the phone. He was speaking quietly and he had his back to me so he couldn't see me. The hall is long and narrow so there was no way he could spot me.

'He mustn't find out. Have you got that?' my father whispered.

I could not tell if he was worried or angry, but I began to ask all sorts of questions to myself. Who was 'he'? I was the only boy in the house, so it must be me. My father and mother had been acting quite secretly, it was true. They seemed to be whispering to each other all the time.

'I realise this is the best time to phone, but be careful. Don't call again. I'll call you,' my father said.

Be careful about what? Was my dad involved in something bad? Had he got into debt? But why hide it from me?

The next day, I watched my parents carefully. But they didn't give anything away. I even followed my dad to the train station one morning before going to school, but nothing strange happened.

In any case, my mind began to think about other things. It was my birthday at the weekend. That was when it all made sense! Of course, my dad had been talking to someone about my present! He wanted to keep it secret from me. But why speak to someone in the middle of the night? That was still weird.

good use of questions, but we need to find out more about the narrator

The day came. I opened my presents which were what I'd asked for – like a new bike but no real surprises. Then my dad said he needed to pop out to get something – and could I help him? I said yes of course.

Suddenly, we seemed to be going to the airport. What was going on?

Our car pulled up at the short stay parking. I saw someone walking towards us. No. It couldn't be! It was! It was my older sister who had emigrated to America five years ago. She had come back just for my birthday. So that was why my dad was talking in the middle of the night.

'Hello, little brother!' she said, hugging me.

needs detail or imagery to create pictures in the mind

good, concise ending that shows us how close they are

Feedback

The structure of this response is clear, achieving a balance between dialogue and events, although it ends very suddenly. The characters are clearly drawn but they are not described in any detail. There is a lack of imagery and sense of location or setting, and rather too much 'telling' of information to the reader rather than 'showing'.

- 6 Identify three further things in this response that could be improved. Use the 'Excellent progress points' on page 240 to help you.

Now read the second sample response on the next page.



Response 2

I heard my older brother Fabrice's hushed tones as I walked past his room. The door was slightly open, a shard of light slicing the air, and I could see him, in his tracksuit, sitting on the edge of his bed, speaking on his mobile

good opening tells us how brother is speaking

'No way, man. I can't do it! You got me?'

realistic speech and good characterisation

Fabrice sounded anxious, upset. What was going on?

Suddenly it went quiet. The call was over. I heard footsteps padding over the floorboards coming towards me. I froze. My brother opened the door wide.

'What you doing? Listening, huh?' he said, angrily. He pushed me up against the wall, his eyes sparks of fire.

'No – well – I heard something, but I didn't understand,' I replied worriedly. 'I mean... I didn't have time to finish.'

a bit repetitive and not really a proper word

'Keep it that way!' He slammed the door.

That weekend we were at a big athletics meeting at Wood Park. My brother was a brilliant runner and he was the favourite for the 100-metre race. It was mid-afternoon, the sun baking the sandy track. He was prowling about beside it, like a caged cheetah, his muscles rippling in his back. In his own world. But then, just before the race began, the cheetah seemed to melt away. I saw him talking to a gang of older boys. One of them – a thin, pale boy with a ring in his nose – grabbed him by his white vest. The boy poked a finger into Fabrice's chest. What about those muscles, Fabrice, I asked in my head? You don't have to take this!

good 'showing' rather than 'telling'

But next I knew, Fabrice was coming towards me. He had tears running down his face, but walked straight past.

Something got into me. Maybe a little bit of that cheetah spirit. I needed to know what was going on. So, I followed them. Hid out of view while they gathered behind the old pavilion, smothered in graffiti, smears of white and red. Tears, they looked like. I heard it all.

Soon I was back in the grassy arena, and tracked my brother down. He was tying up his running shoes – left shoe first, always the same routine.

'I know what is happening,' I told him. 'You mustn't lose the race. It's not right!' I added, as forcefully as I dared. He didn't look up, just paused and then moved on to the other shoe, meticulously folding the perfect white laces over each other.

He stood up, stared for a moment into the distance, at nothing it seemed...

Before I knew it, the race had begun. At first my brother was a long way behind. But that was his usual style. His strength would batter through in the last 30 metres. But he'd left it late. Too late, surely? He was going to lose because of that gang, because someone wanted to fix the race for a bit of cash. But no... I was wrong. Suddenly he was surging through! It was like he was in his own corridor of air, swift as the cheetah, swifter maybe. He dipped on the line. He'd won! He'd won!

Soon a man in a business suit was giving him a long red sash with a shiny medal on it. When the man had shaken Fabrice's hand, I went over.

As I approached I saw the gang of boys walking over too. They did not look happy at all.

'What are you going to do?' I asked.

Fabrice put his arm around my shoulders.

'Guess we'll just have to face the music together, won't we?' he said, gripping me tightly.

this is the climax but it is over too quickly

good ending – resolves situation between brothers but leaves us wondering too

Feedback

This response demonstrates good characterisation by showing characters' individual actions and contrasting ways of speaking. There are also some nice pieces of descriptive detail, but more is needed. Elements of the plot are a bit unbalanced: there could be more suspense at the climax (for example, would Fabrice lose the race deliberately or not?).

- 7 Using the responses and feedback in this topic, and the 'Excellent progress points' on page 240, evaluate your own response and improve it where you can.



Check your progress



Sound progress

- I understand what a task is asking and can select a form I can write competently.
- My understanding and planning of the task shows that I know what the form is and have some ideas for my response.
- I am able to use basic sentence structures in descriptive texts.
- I can use some imagery to make my writing memorable.
- My stories contain the main structure of introduction, development, climax and ending.
- I can sequence stories clearly and use simple sentence structures and vocabulary.
- I can include easily understood characters and a recognisable setting.
- I can include all the main elements of a story with equal balance.



Excellent progress

- I can think creatively of detailed and original ideas for my chosen task before I start.
- I can use a range of structural devices to enable the reader to follow my perspective.
- I can select from a range of imagery and sensory ideas to make my writing memorable.
- My stories contain the main structure of introduction, development, climax and ending, and include features such as flashback, twists and holding back information.
- I can manage elements such as the climax and ending well, fitting them to the story in a way that satisfies the reader.
- I can use complex, but appropriate and varied sentence structures and ambitious vocabulary for effect.
- My characters are clearly drawn, detailed and believable with the right balance of dialogue and action.
- My settings and descriptions are vivid and interesting.