

# Narrative and Descriptive Writing

## Subtle Cohesive Features



# Improving writing skills – fast!

- Opportunities for short focused practice
- Zooming in on areas that need improvement
- Providing pupils with a repertoire of writing experiences that they can call on
- Providing opportunities to model and practise the process of planning
- Developing a bank of plans that can be adapted in exam conditions



# Teaching writing backwards

Over the last couple of years, I have had cause to work with English teachers and to read some of the literature on English teaching. I have become convinced that **writing is mostly taught backwards**.

Typically, students are asked to write something. Once they have written it, they hand it in to a teacher to mark. This eats teacher time because there are so many things to comment upon in the piece of writing. Teachers have discussions about how to handle this. They may create a coding system for spelling and grammar and restrict comments to other features of the piece.

Nevertheless, it is still unmanageable and virtually all of these comments are never fully understood by the students

December 1, 2017 | **Author:** [Greg Ashman](#)



# Teaching writing forwards ...?

Instead, it might be better to **teach a skill** first, to all of the students, in class. **Students can then practise the skill**. Once we are sure that they can do the skill in isolation, **we can ask them to demonstrate it in a more complex task where they need to synthesise a number of skills**, again focusing on the application of the one we have taught them. Once we have had a look at their responses, rather than writing to our students, we could use what we have learnt to **design a plan for a new lesson where we correct misconceptions** or further develop the skill. **This would be teaching writing *forwards***

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# STRUCTURE – COHESION WITH DETAILS



# Everywhere you go, always take the weather with you...

- Your character travels through a setting, crossing thresholds and moving into new spaces.
- In each space, link back to the weather – whether or not the character is inside or outside.
- Use the weather to add to atmosphere and carry emotion.
- Use concrete details to give a reality to the situation.



# Activity

- Imagine a character who has a situation that they are turning over in their mind – an emotional issue, a dilemma, a worry...
- Start the story at the entrance to a new place, standing outside. Refer to the weather. Add details that make root the character and place in the real world.
- As they move into a new space in each paragraph, mention the change in the weather/light etc.



# For example...

Place	Character	Weather details
The beach, stones underfoot, surging tide, churned up water	A young woman, distressed, in turmoil – she has just run out on her own wedding	Bright light, sun behind clouds, white sky, absolute visual clarity – the light makes her notice every detail – there’s no place to hide
Stepping onto the promenade – more stable underfoot, further away from the sea	Wants to lose herself – just wants to get away	Gusts of wind whip up bits of grit
Entrance to the pier – lights on machines, bleeping noises, darkness inside	Welcomes the distraction and strangeness – everything seems dreamlike inside	Suddenly blinded by the shift from light into darkness – eyes don’t adjust immediately
Moves further into the pier, steps through the slot machine area, looking for a quieter area	Feels relief but also begins to feel the shock of what she has done	Adjusts to the darkness, gets used to the lights of machines – notices contrasts with outside world
Seedy café bar inside pier – dark corner, sticky table	Begins to cry and let out emotions – gradually calms down with a cup of sweet tea	Feels the tightness of the start of sunburn across shoulders; begins to shiver from the cool inside
Steps back outside the pier back into the real world	Feeling fearful but hopeful – shoulders back, ready to face things	Breaks in the cloud, patches of blue sky, some warmth in the sun on skin



# STRUCTURE – COHESION THROUGH GAZE



# Would you look at that?

Tom waved his hand. 'I knows all that. Git to the point. What d'you want?' He noticed a small boy at her side.

'It's him I've come about,' she said. 'I'm on my way to your village hall with the others.'

'What others?'

**She stepped to one side.** Behind the large iron gate which stood at the end of the graveyard were a small group of children. Many of them were filthy and very poorly clad. Only a handful had a blazer or coat. They all looked bewildered and exhausted. One tiny dark-haired girl in the front was hanging firmly on to a new teddy-bear.

Notice how Michelle Magorian has used characters' gaze to structure this opening chapter of *Goodnight, Mister Tom* – each time she wants to describe something, a character looks at it for the first time. Often, another character or a physical barrier has to move out of the way first.



# STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE – COHESION WITH IMAGERY



# How does Lee Child use the semantic field of violence in his description to make the setting seem unwelcoming?

Reacher got up and trudged onward to the corner and the siren **died**. It **cut** off mid-**wail** and tiny brittle echoes of its last **howl** came back off the ice and then night-time silence **swarmed** in. Not the dull, padded silence of fresh snowfall, but the weird keening, **crackling**, scouring, rustling **hiss** of a deep-frozen world. The **thump** of his footsteps ran ahead of him through **veins** and sheets of ice. The wind was still out of the west, in his face, **hurling** tiny frozen needles at him. He looked back. He had made it through a hundred and fifty yards. That was all. He had two miles ahead of him. There was nothing on the road. He was completely alone.

He was very cold.



# Activity: The Power Station

‘He slowly walked up to the chain link fence, keys loosely grasped in frozen cold fingers. The power station squatted in front of him, its skeletal frame empty and forbidding against the black sky...’

**Pick up the semantic field started by ‘skeletal frame’ – plan out 5-10 words to do with skeletons that could be used in this description. Avoid making it too obvious – use words that have second meanings to do with buildings/structures – e.g. use ‘rib’ but not ‘collarbone’.**



# Light and Darkness

- Very useful as a symbol, to create atmosphere and to show the passing of time
- Light usually symbolises positive, comforting things such as hope or safety, but think carefully – harsh, glaring light can create an uncomfortable, exposed feeling and can be very effective in a more menacing description, especially combined with glass



# Glaring, wounding glass

- Glass is useful for conveying emotional pain and offers lots of opportunities for using ‘delightful’ vocabulary
- Describe the glitter and shiny surfaces of glass and mirrors to create an atmosphere of glamour that can all-too-easily be destroyed
- Describe the fragility of glass to symbolise insecurity and loneliness in a cold, hard world
- Describe the broken edges of glass to create a sense of pain and danger



# Birds

- Birds can be used to create the effect you want
  - they are great in similes
    - Scratchy, clawing, cruel (pigeons, seagulls)
    - Fluttering, panicky, delicate (small birds)
    - Graceful, elegant, proud (swans)
    - Soaring, free (hawks, falcons, swallows)
    - Domestic, comforting (I'm thinking chickens, mostly)





# Stones, rocks and metals

- Very useful for describing things *other* than stones, rocks and metals in order to create the atmosphere of a hard, forbidding world
  - granite sky
  - her slate-grey eyes
  - the obsidian surface of the lake
  - his leaden complexion



# Jewels

- Use jewels in similes and metaphors to convey brightness, clarity and preciousness – very useful for describing something that stands out from its surroundings by colour or sparkle (e.g. an island, a lake, a flower)
- Build a jewel vocabulary bank

***“Time could not wreck the perfect symmetry of those walls, nor the site itself, a jewel in the hollow of a hand.”***



# Menacing plant life

- Use personification to make plants seem threatening – compare plants and trees to an army or branches to arms reaching out to tear and grab
- Alternatively, make tendrils and creepers seem like lovers ready to embrace...when it's not welcome



e.g.  
*Rebecca*  
by Daphne  
du Maurier

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter, for the way was barred to me. There was a padlock and a chain upon the gate. I called in my dream to the lodge-keeper, and had no answer, and peering closer through the rusted spokes of the gate I saw that the lodge was uninhabited.

No smoke came from the chimney, and the little lattice windows gaped forlorn. Then, like all dreamers, I was possessed of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me. The drive wound away in front of me, twisting and turning as it had always done, but as I advanced I was aware that a change had come upon it; it was narrow and unkept, not the drive that we had known. At first I was puzzled and did not understand, and it was only when I bent my head to avoid the low swinging branch of a tree that I realized what had happened. Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers. The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end. They crowded, dark and uncontrolled, to the borders of the drive. The beeches with white, naked limbs leant close to one another, their branches intermingled in a strange embrace, making a vault above my head like the archway of a church. And there were other trees as well, trees that I did not recognize, squat oaks and tortured elms that straggled cheek by jowl with the beeches, and had thrust themselves out of the quiet earth, along with monster shrubs and plants, none of which I remembered.



# Activity

- Choose one of the following scenarios:
  - a dirty and abandoned kitchen is overrun by ants
  - a teenage couple fall in love at the beach
  - an actor arrives for an audition
- Decide on your choice of image
- Create 5 details using the extended image you have chosen to establish the atmosphere



# COHESION THROUGH GAZE AND SEQUENCE OF TENSES – THE MEMORY-JOGGER



# Building cohesion through use of tenses

- A character returns to a place they once knew well. As they walk through the scene, the objects they look at trigger memories of the past.
- Use a range of past tenses to tell the story:
  - Simple past
  - Past continuous
  - Present perfect
  - Past perfect



# Activity

The young man (reach) \_\_\_\_\_ the rusted iron gate. It (be) \_\_\_\_\_ glossy black the last time he (see) \_\_\_\_\_ it; now it (be) \_\_\_\_\_ grey, faded and peeling with patches of orange rust showing through where the paint (crack) \_\_\_\_\_ over time. After twenty years, he (think) \_\_\_\_\_, it was not surprising that it (change) \_\_\_\_\_. Pausing for a moment, he (wonder) \_\_\_\_\_ whether he would recognise anything inside the house or if it would (alter) \_\_\_\_\_ beyond recognition. He (take) \_\_\_\_\_ a deep breath and screwed up his courage, then (step) \_\_\_\_\_ hesitantly onto the cracked and overgrown flagstones of the path.

**Simple past  
(did/ -ed)**

**Past  
progressive  
(was doing)**

**Present perfect  
(have done)**

**Past perfect  
(had done)**

**Supply the right form of the verb in brackets to make sense of the timeline in the story**

