

Danger!

Building tension and writing action sequences

Creative writing home study unit

HIAS English Team
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Final version

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Using the home learning materials

How to use the materials

- This resource bank includes materials for several stages of learning – you can use these as individual lessons or work through them as a journey.
- You should complete all of the stages in order and aim to apply the learning from each stage to the final piece of writing.
- It is up to you how you use your time. It is likely that you will take between 3 and 6 hours to complete all the stages, but this is not a timed piece of writing and it is not to be treated as an exam piece. Take as long as you like!
- You may find it useful to discuss some of the stages with other students. However, if you prefer to work completely independently, that's fine.
- Where some stages suggest that you think about or make notes on a resource, you can use any format you like. If you would like more guidance on how to do this, examples and printable resources are attached at the end of this pack.
- Your teacher may ask you to send in your work at the end of each stage, or they may ask you to manage your own study and send in the finished piece of writing. Check that you know what your teacher expects you to do before you start.

Learning stages

This home learning journey leads towards at least one, possibly two or more, piece(s) of narrative/descriptive writing about a life-or-death moment. The main written outcome is third person narrative that tells the story of a key moment from the film *The Impossible*. The writing will build up tension and then move into a dynamic action sequence.

1. Exploring the film – understanding the director’s craft
2. Content and vocabulary research
3. Exploring text extract 1: *Jaws* by Peter Benchley
4. Noticing the way the text is structured
5. Writing challenge #1
6. Exploring text extract 2: *More Than This* by Patrick Ness
7. Noticing the way the writer has crafted sentences
8. Writing challenge #2
9. Review, edit, publish
10. Creative application

The Impossible

On 26 December 2004, a huge tsunami struck the Indian Ocean coastline in south-east Asia, devastating communities and killing more than 200,000 people. *The Impossible*, directed by J Bayona, is a film about how a single family were caught up in the events while on their Christmas holiday in Thailand.

The film is available to view in full on Netflix, YouTube and Google Play – if you want to watch the whole film, that's up to you. However, the part we will focus on is this scene, which can be watched online for free:

[The Impossible - the wave hits.](#)

You will need to watch the scene several times in order to **make detailed notes**.

Think about the way the director has planned the scene in order to build up the tension in the moments before the wave hits.

- What are the details you can see? Are all of them useful and important to the story?
- What are your thoughts about the way the director uses colours and sounds?
- How does the director gradually reveal the full power of the wave?
- How does the order of the shots make the scene more tense?

Tip: discussion can be useful for this task



Building your knowledge

Every published writer knows that it is important to research properly – otherwise they get a lot of letters pointing out their errors. When researching online, it is always useful to check at least three sources and bring the information together.

[What is a tsunami?](#)

[How tsunamis form](#)

[TED-Ed Talk](#)

[First-person account of being caught up in 2004 tsunami](#)

[2004 tsunami fact file from World Vision charity](#)

[Real footage](#)

- Write a **summary** of how the 2004 tsunami was formed.
- Identify the key vocabulary from the sources that will allow you to write about the tsunami with knowledge.

Resources to help you organise your notes available at the end of this pack

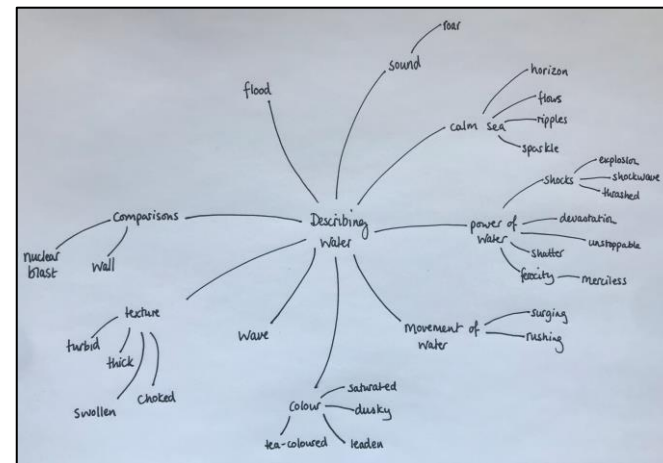
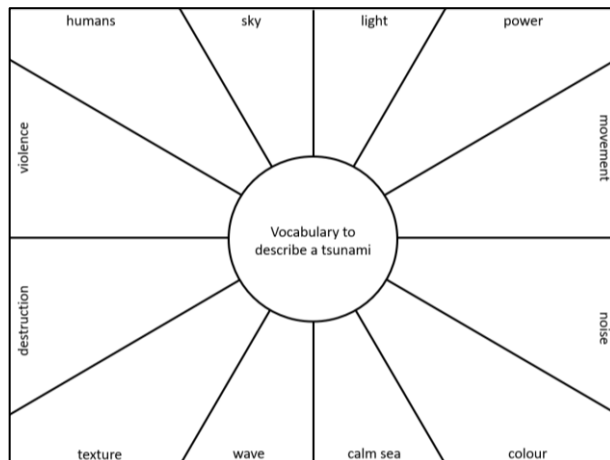


Building your vocabulary

Build and organise your vocabulary to describe a tsunami.

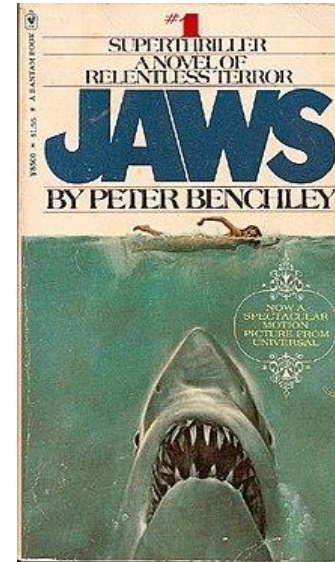
Check out the excellent website [Descriptionari.com](https://www.descriptionari.com), which includes a huge range of snippets of descriptive writing. Your task is to collect interesting vocabulary from the extracts and to organise them for yourself, thinking about what you will need to describe. When you have selected the vocabulary you like, you could also expand your vocabulary list by searching a thesaurus using the new words. Make sure that you know exactly what each word means and how it would be used in a sentence – if it is a new word to you, check in a dictionary.

You could decide to use one of these formats for your **vocabulary bank**:



Jaws by Peter Benchley

“In thirty-five feet of water, the great fish swam slowly, its tail waving just enough to maintain motion. It saw nothing, for the water was murky with motes of vegetation. The fish had been moving parallel to the shoreline. Now it turned, banking slightly, and followed the bottom gradually upward. The fish perceived more light in the water, but still it saw nothing.”



Read the whole passage [here](#). It would be useful to print it out in order to annotate.

Make notes as you read to track your thoughts and reactions. Don't try to analyse the text on the first read through – just read to understand and enjoy.

deep In thirty-five feet of water, the great fish swam slowly, its tail waving just enough to maintain motion. It saw nothing, for the water was murky with motes of vegetation. The fish had been moving parallel to the shoreline. Now it turned, banking slightly, and followed the bottom gradually upward. The fish perceived more light in the water, but still it saw nothing.

never?

what kind of fish?

FISH

BLIND?

Noticing the way the text is structured #1

Peter Benchley has structured the passage very carefully, keeping it tightly controlled in a noticeable way.

One way he keeps the text clear within a single paragraph is through the use of nouns (the fish/the boy) and pronouns (it/he) that clearly link to the same subject.

In thirty-five feet of water, the great fish swam slowly, its tail waving just enough to maintain motion. It saw nothing, for the water was murky with motes of vegetation. The fish had been moving parallel to the shoreline. Now it turned, banking slightly, and followed the bottom gradually upward. The fish perceived more light in the water, but still it saw nothing.

The boy was resting, his arms dangling down, his feet and ankles dipping in and out of the water with each small swell. His head was turned towards shore, and he noticed that he had been carried out beyond what his mother would consider safe. He could see her lying on her towel, and the man and child playing in the wavewash. He was not afraid, for the water was calm and he wasn't really very far from shore – only forty yards or so. But he wanted to get closer; otherwise his mother might sit up, spy him, and order him out of the water. He eased himself back a little bit so he could use his feet to help propel himself. He began to kick and paddle towards shore. His arms displaced water almost silently, but his kicking feet made erratic splashes and left swirls of bubbles in his wake.

Questions:

1. What effect do you think the writer wanted to achieve by referring to the shark as 'the fish' and the character Alex Kintner as 'the boy'?
2. Why does the writer choose to start most sentences with either a noun or a pronoun rather than trying to vary his sentence starters?
3. What differences do you notice between the first paragraph about the fish and the first paragraph about the boy?

Noticing the way the text is structured #2

Benchley makes the deliberate stylistic choice to alternate between description of the fish and the boy.

Questions:

1. What do you notice about the way the focus changes as the passage goes on?
2. Where does the turning point come in the passage? What do you notice about this paragraph?
3. In Spielberg's film version of this scene [here](#), what techniques does the director use to imitate the structure of this piece of writing?

In thirty-five feet of water, the great fish swam slowly, its tail waving just enough to maintain motion. It saw nothing, for the water was murky with motes of vegetation. The fish had been moving parallel to the shoreline. Now it turned, banking slightly, and followed the bottom gradually upward. The fish perceived more light in the water, but still it saw nothing.

The boy was resting, his arms dangling down, his feet and ankles dipping in and out of the water with each small swell. His head was turned towards shore, and he noticed that he had been carried out beyond what his mother would consider safe. He could see her lying on her towel, and the man and child playing in the wavewash. He was not afraid, for the water was calm and he wasn't really very far from shore – only forty yards or so. But he wanted to get closer; otherwise his mother might sit up, spy him, and order him out of the water. He eased himself back a little bit so he could use his feet to help propel himself. He began to kick and paddle towards shore. His arms displaced water almost silently, but his kicking feet made erratic splashes and left swirls of bubbles in his wake.

The fish did not hear the sound, but rather registered the sharp and jerky impulses emitted by the kicks. They were signals, faint but true, and the fish locked on them, homing. It rose, slowly at first, then gaining speed as the signals grew stronger.

The boy stopped for a moment to rest. The signals ceased. The fish slowed, turning its head from side to side, trying to recover them. The boy lay perfectly still, and the fish passed beneath him, skimming the sandy bottom. Again it turned.

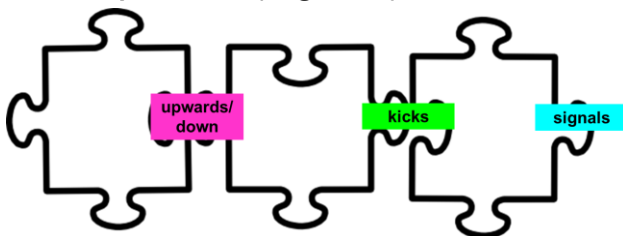
The boy resumed paddling. He kicked only every third or fourth stroke; kicking was more exertion than steady paddling. But the occasional kicks sent new signals to the fish. This time it needed to lock on them only an instant, for it was almost directly below the boy. The fish rose. Nearly vertical, it now saw the commotion on the surface. There was no conviction that what thrashed above was food, but food was not a concept of significance. The fish was impelled to attack: if what it swallowed was digestible, that was food; if not, it would later be regurgitated. The mouth opened, and with a final sweep of the sickle tail the fish struck.

The boy's last – only – thought was that he had been punched in the stomach. The breath was driven from him in a sudden rush. He had no time to cry out, nor, had he had the time, would he have known what to cry, for he could not see the fish. The fish's head drove the raft out of the water. The jaws smashed together, engulfing head, arms, shoulders, trunk, pelvis and most of the raft. Nearly half the fish had come clear of the water, and it slid forward and down in a belly flopping motion, grinding the mass of flesh and bone and rubber. The boy's legs were severed at the hip, and they sank, spinning slowly to the bottom.

Noticing the way the text is structured #3

Pay close attention to the way the writer has linked the paragraphs together. Benchley uses **pairs of words** between the final sentence of one paragraph and the first sentence of the next. These words are like the tabs of jigsaw pieces and hold the text together tightly.

- Sometimes the words are pairs of opposites (upward/down)
- Sometimes the pair of words are the same words in different forms (kicking/kicks)
- Sometimes a word is simply repeated (signals)



In thirty-five feet of water, the great fish swam slowly, its tail waving just enough to maintain motion. It saw nothing, for the water was murky with motes of vegetation. The fish had been moving parallel to the shoreline. Now it turned, banking slightly, and followed the bottom gradually **upward**. The fish perceived more light in the water, but still it saw nothing.

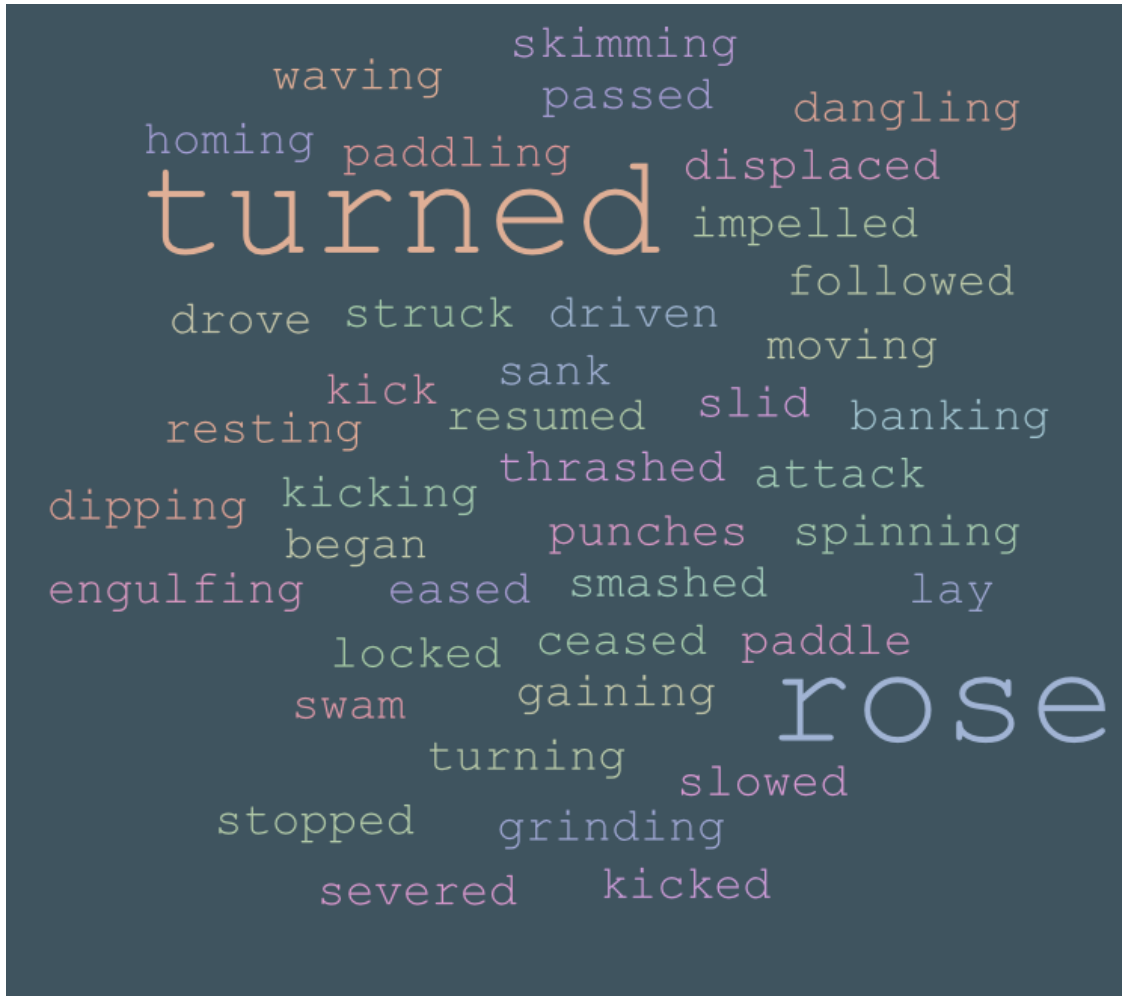
The boy was resting, his arms **dangling down**, his feet and ankles dipping in and out of the water with each small swell. His head was turned towards shore, and he noticed that he had been carried out beyond what his mother would consider safe. He could see her lying on her towel, and the man and child playing in the wavewash. He was not afraid, for the water was calm and he wasn't really very far from shore – only forty yards or so. But he wanted to get closer; otherwise his mother might sit up, spy him, and order him out of the water. He eased himself back a little bit so he could use his feet to help propel himself. He began to **kick and paddle** towards shore. His arms displaced water almost silently, but his **kicking feet** made erratic splashes and left swirls of bubbles in his wake.

The fish did not hear the sound, but rather registered the sharp and jerky impulses emitted by the **kicks**. They were signals, faint but true, and the fish locked on them, homing. It rose, slowly at first, then gaining speed as the **signals** grew stronger.

The boy stopped for a moment to rest. The **signals** ceased. The fish slowed, turning its head from side to side, trying to recover them. The boy **lay perfectly still**, and the fish passed beneath him, skimming the sandy bottom. Again it turned.

The boy **resumed paddling**. He kicked only every third or fourth stroke; **kicking** was more exertion than steady **paddling**. But the occasional kicks sent new **signals** to the fish. This time it needed to lock on them only an instant, for it was almost directly below the boy. The fish rose. Nearly vertical, it now saw the commotion on the surface. There was no conviction that what thrashed above was food, but food was not a concept of significance. The fish was impelled to attack: if what it swallowed was digestible, that was food; if not, it would later be regurgitated. The mouth opened, and with a final sweep of the sickle tail the fish struck.

Noticing the way the text is structured #4



Without looking back at the text, put the verbs from the word cloud into the order that you think they occur in the text.

Group them into six paragraphs, then decide on the order in which they occur within the paragraph.

- **What do you notice about the effect of the verbs in order?**
- **What do you think the writer intended?**

Mapping the text

1. **Complete the table** recognising the structure of the extract from *Jaws*.

2. Planning your own writing

Now think back to the clip from *The Impossible*. In some ways, the two scenes are very similar: in both, an unseen danger draws nearer and nearer until disaster strikes.

- Shark ⇨ wave
- Boy ⇨ humans at the hotel

Use a similar grid to plan out a piece of writing based on the moment before the wave hits from *The Impossible*.

** Decide before you begin whether you are going to focus on a single human character (and if so, which one) or the humans as a group

What happens in the paragraph?	Intended effect on the reader	Jigsaw words
Description of shark at the bottom of the sea – not doing much. Describes what the shark sees/does. Starts swimming upward.	Distancing – positions reader as an observer. Details sound make it sound almost like a nature programme. Makes reader question what will come next.	Upward
Description of the boy on the lilo. Shifts to child’s perspective and looks at what he can see/what he thinks. Starts kicking feet.	Sympathy – engages with the boy’s perspective Anxiety – link with the shark	Dangling down Kick/ kicking



Writing challenge #1

Write the story up to the point where the wave hits

Try to imitate the structural features that Benchley uses in *Jaws* in your own writing:

- Keep the first paragraphs very unemotional and observant in tone
- Alternate between describing the danger and describing the human character
- Use jigsaw words to link paragraphs together
- Plan the verbs that you are going to use carefully so that they increase in intensity towards the moment when the wave hits.

This piece of writing should be at least 4-5 paragraphs long – approximately 1-2 sides of handwriting or $\frac{3}{4}$ – 1 side typed.

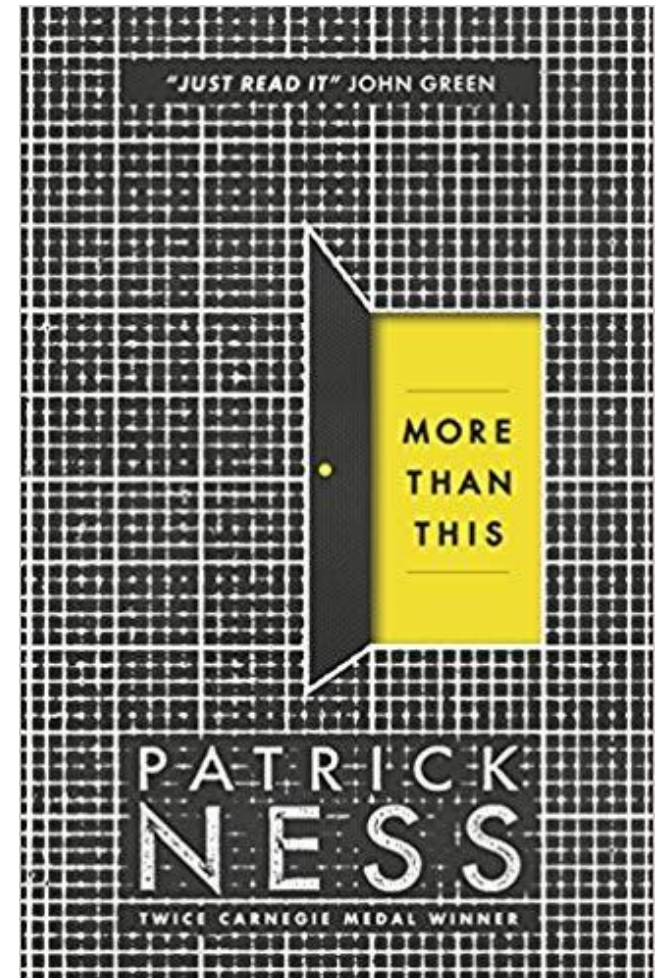
More Than This by Patrick Ness

“Here is the boy, drowning.

In these last moments, it's not the water that's finally done for him; it's the cold. It has bled all the energy from his body and contracted his muscles into a painful uselessness, no matter how much he fights to keep himself above the surface. He is strong, and young, nearly seventeen, but the wintry waves keep coming, each one seemingly larger than the last. They spin him round, topple him over, force him deeper down and down.”

Read the whole first chapter [here](#). It would be a good idea to print it out so that you can annotate it with your thoughts as you read. Don't read to analyse – just read to understand and respond. On your second read-through, spend a few moments thinking about where you think you are in relation to the boy – how has the writer positioned you there? When do you feel closest to him?

Tip: If you want to consolidate your skills, look at this passage in the same way as you looked at the Jaws extract. You could complete all of the same activities again.



Noticing the way the writer has crafted sentences #1

Patrick Ness has deliberately crafted sentence structures in a way that is closely linked to the meaning and the mood of the passage.

For example:

'He is strong, and young, nearly seventeen, but the wintry waves keep coming, each one seemingly larger than the last.'

- In this sentence the writer uses a list of three reasons why the boy ought to be able to survive – these three reasons are in short phrases and each one is separated by a comma.
- In order to be correct grammatically, the first comma is not strictly necessary: the writer must have put it there for a reason.
- Think about what is happening in the story at this point: the boy is struggling to stay alive in the water – the previous sentence says that he *'fights to keep himself above the surface'*.
- It seems to me that the way the list is deliberately broken up with commas suggests the gasping of the boy as he gets his face above the surface of the water and then sinks back under again.
- In the second half of the sentence, 'but the wintry waves keep coming, each one seemingly larger than the last', the clauses are longer – this makes me think that he is bobbing to the surface less often and that the gaps are longer as he loses strength.

Noticing the way the writer has crafted sentences #2

Many of Ness's sentences are long and complex, using a number of commas to manage the way the clauses pile up on one another. This seems to reflect the way the boy is being tossed and turned by the waves almost endlessly. However, at key points in the passage, Ness shifts into much shorter sentences, sometimes as stand-alone paragraphs.

For example:

'It is too late for him.

He will die.

And he will die alone.'

- Each of these short sentences is a clear, simple statement.
- In contrast to the long, descriptive sentences that bring out the panicky feel of the situation, these are completely free of confusion – they seem like statements of fact and leave no room for doubt.
- These sentences are the boy's thoughts. By separating each one into a paragraph by itself, the writer allows the moments of realisation to sink in.
- By using three of these stand-alone paragraphs in a row, Ness completely breaks the flow of the description and makes the horror of the situation clear and stark. It is a moment of stillness and clarity.
- There is no need for the writer to add any extra description, detail or emotive language because what the boy is realising is bad enough on its own.

The imitation game

One way to develop your own writing is to imitate what other writers do. Sentence imitation is a good way to practise writing in a more complex style than usual.

- First, choose a sentence that you think is interesting – this does not have to be the most complex sentence in the text, just one that you think works well in the context.
- Next, work out which words in the sentence are crucial to the meaning and which are the grammatical ‘framework’ of the sentence.
- Keep the ‘framework’ and replace the content words.

For example:

*‘In these **last moments**, it's not the **water** that's finally **done for him**; it's the **cold**.’*

Now imagine that we wanted to shift the action completely to a different situation: let's move the boy from the water to an Australian bush fire.

*‘In these **crucial minutes**, it's not the **heat** that's finally **driven him back**; it's the **smoke**.’*

We have kept the grammar of the sentence structure exactly the same, but we have changed the meaning completely.

Sentence imitation #2

Here's a slightly more complex example of sentence imitation from the *Jaws* extract you looked at earlier.

Original sentence:

'In thirty-five feet of water, the great fish swam slowly, its tail waving just enough to maintain motion. It saw nothing, for the water was murky with motes of vegetation.'

Framework:

*In... of ..., the XXXXX ----ed -----ly, its ... -----ing just enough to ...
It ----ed ..., for the xxxx was ... with*

Imitation:

'In the furthest reaches of the solar system, the dwarf planet Pluto orbited silently, its perma-frosted surfaces glistening just enough to be seen through the telescope. It stopped for nothing, although the reaches of space were thick with drifting asteroids.'

Using sentence structure to reflect meaning

Explore these sentences and consider how their structure reflects the meaning of the words.

They spin him round, topple him over, force him deeper down and down.

He forces his legs to kick, forces his arms to heave himself upward, to at least get his body the right way round, to try and grasp another breath just inches away –

He is unable to even try and swim now, unable to brace himself as the waves turn him over once more.

Then, without warning, the game the sea seems to have been playing, the cruel game of keeping him just alive enough to think he might make it, that game seems to be over.

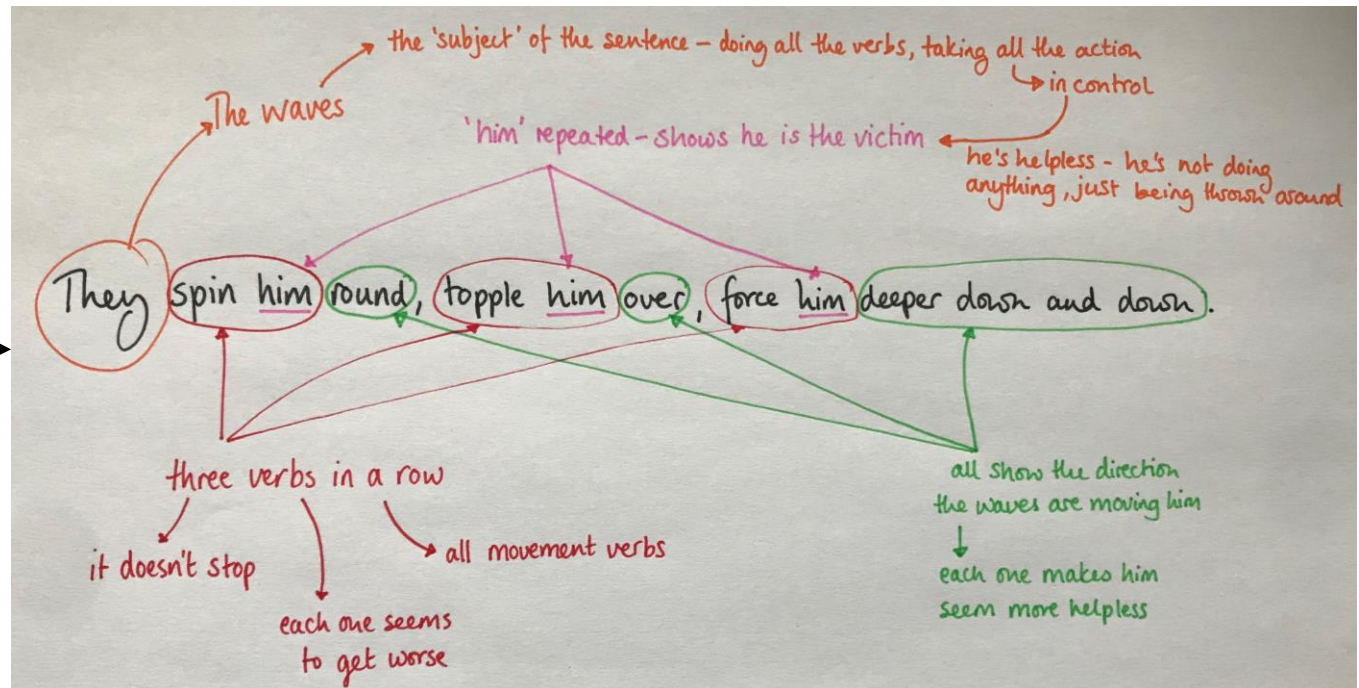


Explain

For each sentence on the previous page, **explain**:

- What is happening in the sentence
- What feeling the writer is trying to create
- How the structure of the sentence reflects that feeling
- How the way the sentence is written links to the meaning of the words

You might decide to write out your explanations in the same way as the examples on previous pages, or you might decide to annotate each sentence, like this:

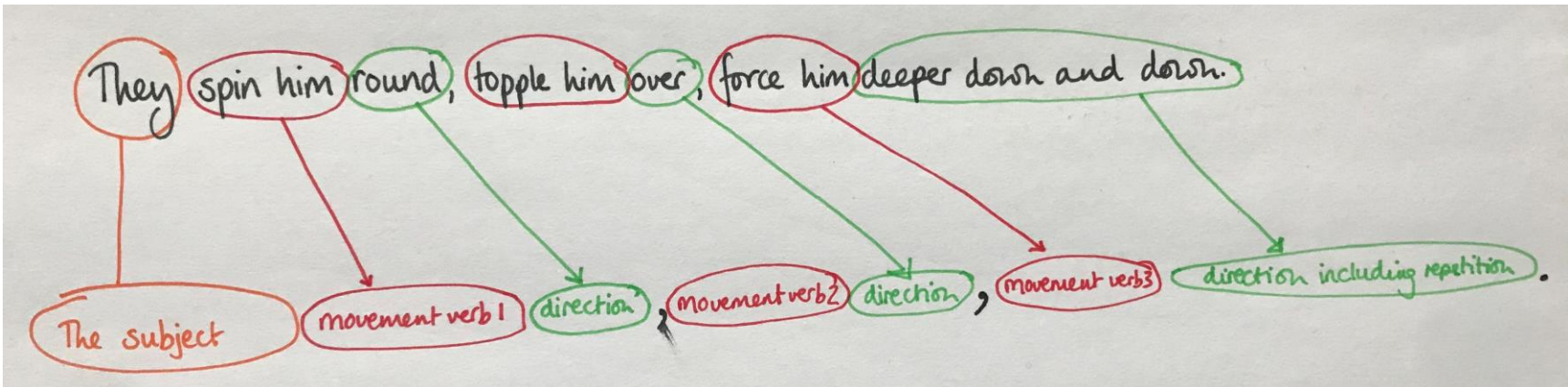


Change

For each sentence:

- Create a sentence framework for the sentence
- Re-write the sentence for a different situation

**Remember that the feeling you create needs to be similar



Create: writing challenge #2

- Imitating the author's style, write the next section of your story based on *The Impossible*,
- Include in your writing some sentences that imitate Ness's sentence structure as you try to recreate the feeling of breathless helplessness and fast movement as the characters are being swept along in the water.
- [Play from 1 minute 50 seconds](#)

Review and evaluate

Look back over your narrative inspired by *The Impossible*. You should, by now, have drafted a piece that tells the story shown in the film from the formation of the tsunami far out to sea, through the moment when the wave strikes and on to describe the experience of being swept along by the wave.

- **Have you:**
 - Used alternating paragraphs focusing on the wave and the humans?
 - Used your research to ensure that you have written accurately about tsunamis?
 - Linked your paragraphs carefully and closely?
 - Thought carefully about your vocabulary choices?
 - Used a range of interesting sentence structures to reflect the meaning of the words?
- **Have you:**
 - Built up tension?
 - Brought your story to a violent climactic moment?
 - Created a sense of desperation and helplessness?

Edit and improve



What do you need to **ADD** to your writing?

Does your writing need more detail for the reader – maybe to build a more vivid description, or add detail to help the reader understand the event / issue / character viewpoint?

said

What do you need to **REPLACE** or **REVISE** in your writing?

This might be individual words / phrases or a whole paragraph. Could you revise some of your choices to more appropriate words or more / less intense word choices? Think in particular about the intensity of the verbs you use.



What words / phrases / paragraphs should you **TAKE AWAY**?

Perhaps they are overloaded with adjectives, perhaps there is unnecessary repetition. You need to think about quality rather than quantity. Sometimes less writing is more powerful. Consider how to make the moments of clarity stand out.



Which words / phrases / paragraphs need to **MOVE AROUND** ?

You need to make sure your writing makes sense and flows easily for the reader. How will you ensure your writing has cohesion and a strong overall structure?

Polish and publish

Hand in the final version of your narrative to your teacher.

Extra credit: If you have typed your work, print your final version with wide margins and double-spaced lines. In the space around the text, annotate your writing to explain the choices you have made and the way that you have included the key features from this unit. Photograph this annotated version to hand in.

Creative application

Once you have completed the final piece of writing from this home study unit, consider applying the learning to a completely fresh task. By working through the stages and imitating some of the features that the writers of the extracts have used, you should have built up your confidence and produced some excellent writing.

What other situations could you write about that would work well with the methods you have studied for creating tension and writing action sequences?

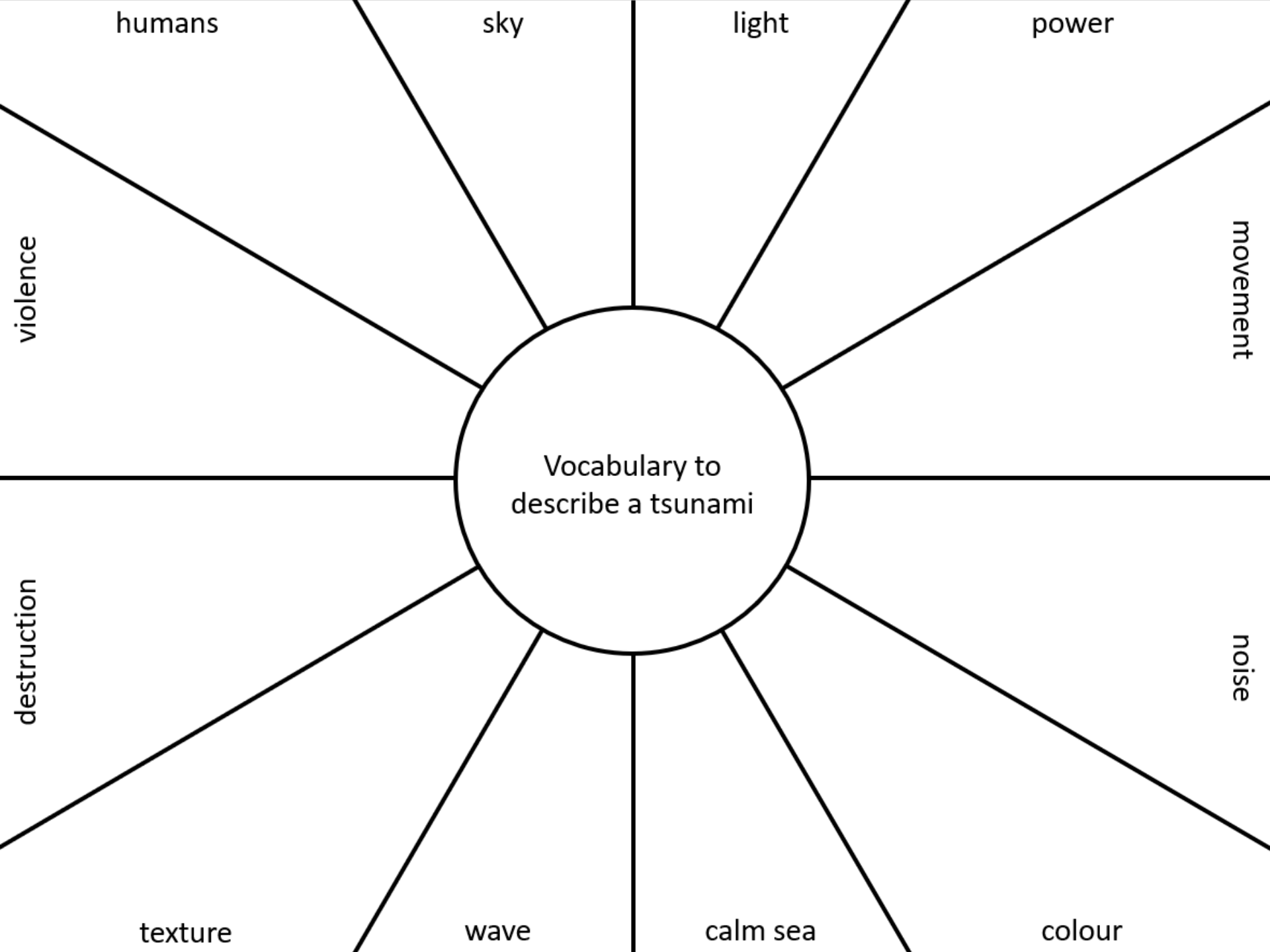


Printable resources

- [*Jaws extract*](#)
- [*More Than This extract*](#)

Building knowledge of tsunamis

What happens at each stage of a tsunami?	Key words



Mapping out your writing

What happens in the paragraph?	Intended effect on the reader	Jigsaw words

They spin him round, topple him over, force him deeper down and down.

He forces his legs to kick, forces his arms to heave himself upward, to at least get his body the right way round, to try and grasp another breath just inches away –

He is unable to even try and swim now, unable to brace himself as the waves turn him over once more.

Then, without warning, the game the sea seems to have been playing, the cruel game of keeping him just alive enough to think he might make it, that game seems to be over.

HIAS English team

The HIAS English team offer a wide range of high-quality services to support schools in improving outcomes for learners, including courses, bespoke consultancy and in-house training.

During the current school closures, we are still offering school support in a variety of ways such as video conferencing, phone calls and bespoke creation of resources remotely. Coming soon will be teacher training via virtual classrooms. We would be happy to discuss your needs.

For further details referring to English, please contact the English team leader:

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For further details on the full range of services available please contact us using the following details:

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