

T823 Creative Writing for GCSE Sample Pages

CHAPTER 4: THE ELEMENTS OF A STORY

STORIES COME IN all sorts of 'flavours' and lengths. There are short stories and full-length novels, books and trilogies (a story in 3 volumes) and even longer. Most writers will tell you that short stories are harder to write than full-length novels. (Why do you think this should be ?) As for kinds of stories, there are Science-Fiction Stories, Detective Stories, Mystery Stories, Adventure Stories, Ghost Stories and Horror Stories (quite different); there are Love Stories and Historical Romances¹, Novels of Manners² and so on.

Not all stories, particularly not all short stories, follow the same pattern. They do not always have a beginning, a middle and an end, in the traditional sense, often the more successful ones plunge you straight into the middle of the action and - at the end - leave you wondering what will happen next. However, all stories, whatever their length and whatever their kind³ have at least three elements in common:

They have a *setting*

This is the time and place when and where the story happens. It may be contemporary, historical or futuristic; it may be realistic or fantastic. To carry off a historical setting successfully, you really need to know your period extremely well. Unless you do, leave this one alone. It is best either to stick to what you know, if you are writing a 'realistic story'; or to write your story against a 'futuristic' Sci-Fi setting or a complete fantasy setting.

We have already spent a lot of time on setting, when we were doing descriptive and atmospheric writing

They have a *plot*

This is the plan of the story - what happens, the events that take place. Plots can be very simple or very complicated. For GCSE purposes, writing a comparatively short piece, it is best to keep your plots simple. There is a short chapter on plots, later in the book.

More years ago than I care to remember, I gained grade 1 CSE (as it was then) for two stories with very simple plots.

The first was a humorous story and the plot was this: An outrageously unsuccessful confidence trickster dies and goes to heaven. Because of an administrative mess-up, he is let in. Because no-one else in the place ever tells anything other than the strict truth, a sarcastic comment he makes leads to him being mistaken for a great saint...

¹*Romance*, here does not mean the same thing as "love story". A Romance is a story of adventure in a setting that is not that of everyday life.

²Ask your English teacher to explain this.

³The technical term for any particular 'kind' or type of story is its '*genre*'

The second story was very different and very simple. A man on a solitary hiking holiday in a remote part of England keeps getting tantalising glimpses of a curious, white, temple-like building in the distance. He is drawn to it. He investigates it. It is indeed a temple of some modern-day pagan cult. He ends up as the sacrificial victim.

They have one, two or more *characters*

These are the people involved, the ones to whom the events of the plot happen. In short stories, it is best to keep the number of characters to a minimum. If you are writing anything other than fantasy or humour (very difficult, this), it is best to use realistic, believable names for your characters.

Character creation and depiction is something many GCSE candidates find difficult. The next chapter is devoted to this aspect of story writing.

TO THE TEACHER: A good exercise at this point, is to spend some time, with the class divided into groups, inventing plots. *Don't worry about settings or characters, just invent as many plots as you can.* Get the class to write them down, as in my two examples, above. Each group could be responsible for coming up with two plots.



FOR DISCUSSION: The groups might then report back to the class as a whole on their plots and one or more fruitful discussion sessions might usefully follow, in which groups offer one-another constructive criticism, and suggestions: what works, what doesn't, what would be the difficulties of a particular plot, how might a particular plot be made more interesting or more convincing and so on. *Such sessions may contribute to Oral Assessments.*

FORMS OF NARRATIVE: FIRST OR THIRD PERSON NARRATIVE ?

THE TWO MOST common ways of writing a story are to write in the First Person Singular or in the Third Person Singular⁴. First Person Singular narrative is where all the action is seen through the eyes of the main character, and it is written as though he or she is writing it - a bit like autobiography. The advantage of this is that it is fairly easy to do and does not demand very complex grammar. The disadvantage is that your reader can only know what your main character knows. If something happens somewhere where your character is not present, you cannot 'know' about it unless someone else in the story tells your character about it.

⁴ A brief explanation follows, but it might be a good idea to have an English lesson on this, if you haven't already.

Third Person Singular narrative is where the action is seen through the eyes of the storyteller. You are like a TV or film camera and you can see everything that is going on. Your main character does not have to be in every scene. You - and your reader - can 'know' things that your main character does not know.

There is, of course, no reason whatsoever why you cannot mix the two forms, some very great writers like Charles Dickens⁵ have done it very successfully. Here is the same passage written in two different ways, firstly in First Person Singular form, and then in Third Person Singular form, for you to compare.

A YOUNG woman in a white coat was tapping on the glass door of Dr Peters's office. I recognised Emily at once, though I thought she looked rather younger and less sophisticated in her lab' coat than she had behind the bar the other evening.

Peters left me for a few minutes while he exchanged a few words with her just outside the door. They spoke quietly so, although I strained my ears I could not hear the substance of their conversation, except that it didn't appear to be very business-like. Then she handed him a manilla folder.

"I think this is what we were waiting for." He told me.

A YOUNG woman in a white coat was tapping on the glass door of Dr Peters's office. Inspector Horne recognised Emily at once; she looked, he thought, rather younger and less sophisticated in her lab' coat than she had behind the bar the other evening.

Peters got up and exchanged a few words with her just outside the door. They spoke quietly so that even though Horne strained his ears he could not hear the substance of their conversation, but it didn't appear to be very business-like. Then she handed the doctor a manilla folder.

"I think this is what we were waiting for." He said to the Inspector.

CHAPTER 5: CHARACTERS

Introduction

CHARLES DICKENS was perhaps the greatest creator of literary characters who ever lived. Even people who have never read his books have heard of many of his greatest characters: heroic, sentimental and comic characters like Ebenezer Scrooge, Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller, Oliver Twist, Little Nell, Tiny Tim, Mr. Micawber, Sarah Gamp, and the great villains such as Mr. Quilp, Wackford Squeers, Fagin and Bill Sykes. Every one of his fifteen or so novels teems with fascinating, grotesque, larger-than-life, and yet somehow eminently *believable* characters.

Dickens was a very great writer, in my opinion perhaps the greatest novelist who ever lived. But many lesser writers have produced thoroughly believable characters. In fact, George Orwell, himself a great novelist, once wrote that there was a small group of fictional characters who were so well created that they seemed to have a life of their own outside the pages of the books in which they appear: **Mr. Pickwick** (Dickens), **Falstaff** (Shakespeare), **Sherlock Holmes** (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) and **Billy Bunter** (Frank

⁵ See particularly *'The Old Curiosity Shop'*.

Richards). I would add **William**, created since Orwell's time by the woman writer Richmal Compton. You might have your own names you would want to add to that list. That's the point, really. No-one would list Frank Richards or Richmal Compton (nor even, possibly, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) amongst the 'great' writers, yet they have created truly believable characters with have a life that seems to extend beyond the pages of their books.

Only a few, exceptional, writers can write engrossing stories without creating believable characters (Isaac Asimov is one such writer). By-and-large, it is characters rather than incidents that make stories memorable.

Experiencing someone else's life

A FAMOUS FILM of the 1930s was called, simply, 'M'. It was about a compulsive murderer. On trial for his life by a bunch of Nazi vigilantes, the killer, played by the actor Peter Lorre, says to them "*who knows what it feels like to be me ?*"

This is one of the most exciting things about reading and about Creative Writing: they enable us to imagine what it is like to be someone else, to *identify* with another character. When we are reading a novel or other story, we identify with characters in the story either because they seem real to us or because they appeal to our dreams and fantasies. The essential thing about any main character in a story is that he or she should be in some way interesting or intriguing. They must do and say things not just because that's the story, but because they have *motives* and reasons for doing and saying what they do.

Characters have lives

The characters you put into your stories have got to be *real* to you, otherwise, they won't be real to your readers. This means you must have, in the back of your mind, some idea of every aspect of the lives your main characters at least, even if all we see of the characters is a small slice of their lives, a 'snapshot' taken from the whole.

TO THE TEACHER: Get everyone in the class to create a new character for himself or herself. Tell them they are spies, and they have been equipped with false identities. They are going to be interrogated, and must have answers ready. Give them a the length of a lesson or an evening's homework to prepare a thorough 'file' on the character that they are going to be, and to learn the details of that character's life, ready for interrogation. *The following lesson (detailed below) can be devoted to the interrogation, which can form part of an oral assessment, if you wish.*

ORAL WORK: Set a chair at the front of the room. Call out one of the class at random, or ask for a volunteer, to sit in the chair and be 'grilled'. Now proceed with the

interrogation. Ask easy questions to begin with: name, address, and so on. Go on to asking details about occupation or education. Here is a list of harder questions you can ask:

Where did you go to school ?

When did you sit your GCSE exams ?

Have you got any brothers or sisters ?

What was the date of the day before your birth ?

What did your father do for a living ?

Who was your first Form Teacher ?

What grade did you get in Maths ?

Where are they now ?

How old were you in (name a year) ?

What was your worst experience as a child ?

My own experience with this kind of work has been that the first few 'victims' will fall by the wayside very quickly, but that the class will soon catch on and, before long, an interrogator will find it very hard to catch the 'victim' out.

All these facts about 'your' character's life and background are what we might call his or her *personal history*.

LONGER WRITING ASSIGNMENT: After you have been 'interrogated', and using the personal history of the character's life you have put together in your 'file', write a formal biography of that character. The biography you write must be *at least* the length of a standard GCSE piece of work (i.e. about 450 words). Remember what we learned about biography writing in an earlier chapter.

CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY

EVERYONE HAS A personal history, but people are much more than collectiond of facts about their lives and backgrounds. A real person has a *personality* as well as personal history. In stories, it is much harder to give your characters convincing personalities than to provide them with personal histories, because people are such a mixture. Even a monster of evil like Adolf Hitler had positive personality traits. Hitler loved dogs and children and was fond of art; he won the highest medal for bravery during World War I; he was a 'charismatic' man, who could inspire people to follow him with devotion. You might think he was the stuff of which heroes are made, and indeed that's how he saw himself and his Nazi movement. But on the subject of race and destiny he was a *monomaniac*⁶. His monomania made him put all normal, decent human feelings on one side and launch his vile program of genocide⁷.

⁶ Look it up.

⁷ Look this one up as well.

On a smaller scale, I knew someone who was very, very mean. Let's call him 'Reg' (not his real name). He never gave anything to anyone and never did anything for anyone. A classic miserable miser, you might think. But in spite of these unlikeable qualities, Reg managed to be very good company. He had a sense of humour, was an interesting talker and, as long as you didn't push it too far, had a good sense of fellowship

Here are some personality words to help you think about your characters. If you are not sure of their meanings, look them up now and make a note of them.

conceited	selfish	egoistic	arrogant
unselfish	altruistic	introvert	extrovert
emotional	sentimental	proud	shallow
romantic	vain	cynical	apathetic
sympathetic	intense	vulgar	devoted
immoral	amoral	determined	charismatic
blowsy	stubborn	precocious	sadistic

In the end, no-one can teach you how to write convincing characters; all anyone can do is to point you to examples in literature, and guide you. When writing a story, you should ask yourself, of your characters: is this really the sort of thing a person like this would do or say or think in these circumstances ? That's where the exercise above about creating a background for your characters will prove to be very helpful.

Describing a person's appearance is easy enough, but how can you set about portraying his/her personality ? This is not so easy. It is not always enough to say outright, "Phyllis was a caring person", or "Frank was a bighead." It is often necessary to *show* Phyllis being caring or Frank being conceited (big-headed). About the best way to convey a character's personality within a short space is to relate some revealing little story about the character, a sort of story within the main story, like the one that follows.

IN MANY WAYS, Reg was a genial enough companion, but he was very mean and completely self-centred. I don't think he ever considered other people's feelings in the slightest. One day, I was walking home from school with a couple of friends, when Reg went past us on his bike. He turned to wave, taking his eyes off the road. Just then, a young girl stepped out from behind a parked car. Fortunately Reg wasn't travelling very fast when he collided with her. But, down she went and down he went, in a tangle of arms, legs and bicycle.

The girl's mother came running out of the shop, full of concern both for her daughter and for Reg. The girl was startled, of course, but otherwise unhurt. Reg, on the other hand, was furious. He stood up and shook his bicycle angrily.

"Stupid bloody kid !" He snarled. "You've dented my bell !"

That's the kind of person he was. Of course it's always possible he wasn't being callous, just that he found it hard to express feelings for others - maybe he thought it somehow embarrassing or sentimental, I don't know.

That little incident tells us a lot about Reg. It shows us both his genial streak (in turning to wave to his friends) and his self-interest (in being more concerned with the damage to his bike than any injury to the little girl).

You should also try to imagine how your character gets on with others in the story. In any particular scene, try to picture exactly how your character is sitting, standing or walking. Imagine the expressions on his face while he is saying or doing something. Eyes are good clues to people's moods and feelings. Someone who is an ineffectual character might have weak or watery eyes; the eyes of a strong character may seem to stare right into you. Someone who looks you right in the eye can make you uncomfortable, whilst someone who never looks at you at all appears dishonest or anxious to get away.

Choice of clothing can say a lot about character, as can mannerisms of speech and the things a person thinks are important:

ANDY WAS THE kind of person who only caught up with the latest fashion after it had stopped being fashionable, he only latched on to verbal expressions just as they were going out of