

How can I improve my English?

How can I revise for English?

Below you will find a selection of activities and advice to help you.

READING

The most useful thing you can do is read. This will help you:

- improve your reading skills;
- develop your vocabulary;
- learn to recognise quality writing.

START BY SETTING GOALS

- read two pages a night
- read for 20-30 minutes three times a week
- read a book every two weeks

Increase your goals gradually. You would not expect to complete a new computer game the first time you played. You would have to practise, and try different tactics until you have achieved your goal. It's the same with reading!

WRITING

There are lots of things you can do to improve your writing skills.



It is important to make your writing interesting and enjoyable. Make sure you keep to the title or subject given – if you do not you will lose marks. Examiners will also be looking for:

- ◆ a good beginning, which grabs the reader's attention and makes them want to read on.
- ◆ evidence of planning eg a sequence of events which make sense.
- ◆ interesting description which helps the reader to imagine what the people and places are really like. Eg "the baby lay limply in the cot, not moving, tubes attached to his thin little arm" or "the old man stomped down the stairs, muttering as he went".
- ◆ a **little** dialogue can bring a scene to life eg "Oi you, get out of here!" or "Oh, mum, do I have to?"
- ◆ an ending, which brings the action to a close and ties up all the loose ends.
- ◆ accurate paragraphing, sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.

Personal Experience / Creative Writing

The task given is usually worded in a general way so that all pupils can complete the task. The examiner usually explains that the events can be real or imagined. However, most people find it easier to write about people, places and events which are familiar to them. The examiner is interested in a good, enjoyable piece of writing, so you might want to change things a little to make a better story. For example, you might be lost in a strange forest rather than your local park, or you might climb a diving board 10 feet high rather than 6 feet.

The following are topics used in recent years for second or third years:

A special family occasion

A place which was special to you

The day everything went wrong

A time when you were scared

It's a good idea to practise your writing skills. Here are some suggestions.

- Find a photograph of yourself several years ago. Think about how you behaved and felt. Now write a brief description of yourself at that time.
- Plan a story when something good happened and another when something bad happened. Use the basic outline plan. These should help you complete most compositions set in an examination. You could try writing all or part of the story, and experiment with different openings, settings etc.
- Choose someone you know well and write a brief description, concentrating on interesting details, rather than just the factual appearance.
- Find a photograph from a magazine or newspaper, and write 10 lines to describe the person. Now try again, but make sure you create a different impression: frightening, friendly, glamorous, mysterious.
- Choose a place you know well and write 15 lines about it. Choose details which help to create a particular atmosphere or mood eg welcoming, sinister.
- Choose a place like an old shop or a small park. Write 10 lines about it trying to make it sound really frightening. Now repeat the exercise, but this time make it seem attractive, or mysterious, or really unusual.

Copy out the following sentence:

“The man walked down the street.”

You need to expand on this statement. Explain who the man was and where he was. Change the verb. Add some description. You should end up with something like this.

“Like a flash, the wiry robber dashed down the deserted main street, pursued by an angry security guard, who was yelling angrily and dripping blood from his right hand.”
Produce three different versions of at least 20 words each.

Now imagine that you are on your way to a secret meeting. Describe your journey if you are meeting:

1. a friend your parents have banned
2. someone you have met in a chat-room
3. a blackmailer
4. a famous personality

Imagine you have the key for your form room, and have just unlocked the door. Describe the scene if:

1. the room has been ransacked by a burglar
2. the room has been redecorated to your design in a refit costing £5, 000
3. you find a body inside the room.

If you can write a memorable description, you have developed your writing skills, and may be able to include part of this in your examination task.

Outline Plan for Story-telling

1. Introduction or Opening/Setting **Who? When? Where?**
2. Development or Problem
3. Solution/Complication -someone tries to solve the problem
4. Climax or crisis - **but things get even worse.**
5. Conclusion—the story ends.

Things get sorted out. How? Sometimes it is a good idea to keep an important fact secret hidden until the end. In Cinderella we are not told the secret of the slipper until the end, when only Cinderella can wear the slipper, and no-one else.

Writer's Toolbox

A **movie maker** is able to use several of the options listed below to bring a scene to life.

- **sound** e.g. music and dialogue;
- **camera angles** - close-ups, wide shots, extreme close-ups;
- **special effects** - lighting, explosions, etc;
- **location shooting** - film outdoors or on a movie 'set';
- **the acting skills** of the characters - expressions, voice or movement;
- **costumes** -from the past, present or the future;
- **edit scenes** to build excitement, tension or danger.



The task is more difficult for writers because the only '**tools**' they have are words, so not surprisingly a writer has to **choose and use** them very carefully. However, there are some '**tricks of the trade**' that authors can call upon to keep the reader interested. Try some of them for yourself.

- begin with **dramatic** first sentence;
- use a mixture of **short and long sentences**;
- include **descriptions** of people or places;
- use **dialogue** to add some variety;
- think carefully about the best **adjectives, verbs, adverbs** etc;
- use a wide range of **vocabulary**;
- use **double adjectives/verbs** for extra impact;
- **repeat words** or phrases to reinforce meaning;
- include **similes** for the reader to compare;
- use **personification, metaphor, onomatopoeia, rhetorical questions** etc
- end paragraphs or chapters on a **cliff-hanger**;
- leave '**clues**' for the reader to find;
- take **time** to build towards a **climax** (slow motion writing);
- include **thoughts and feelings**;
- write in the **first or third person**;
- use **punctuation** effectively (question marks, commas, semi-colons etc)
- **switch** between characters, place and time.



Story Starts

It is always a good idea to do your best to make a positive 'first impression'. This is something to think about when you write the first few sentences of a story. Read the following extracts taken from several stories. See if you can spot how the writer has attempted to interest the reader. Why not try to write an opening of your own designed to 'grab' the reader making them want to read on? You may like to continue where one of the examples above left off, and complete the first paragraph.

Laurie's top lip was swollen and her eyes were red and puffy. She hadn't gone to school that day.

It was like a dream - or a nightmare. Black clouds rolled slowly overhead, the rain gurgled in the gutters, and there at the end of the alley, its walls glistening with rain, there in the shadows he stood.

He didn't even have time to turn round. There was a loud clicking noise and suddenly he felt something strong seize him around the middle, and lift him off the ground so that he was hanging face down.

At half past seven that same evening, Gabriel Penberthy, who grazed his sheep on the parkland around Nethercott House, looked out of his cottage window, his eye drawn across the field to the dark silhouette of the big house.

It is many years ago now; I was a girl of fourteen, and I went to visit in a small up-country town. There was only one young girl there when I came. I remember her clearly, especially her lovely smile and her dazzlingly blue eyes, so very, very blue.

Don't forget to use connectives to improve the quality of your writing. Connectives are used to link one sentence to another or to extend a sentence. They provide continuity within your story or non-fiction text.

whoever	whenever	until
whatever	after	notwithstanding
if	nevertheless	whereas
meanwhile	yet	then
moreover	alternatively	because
nonetheless	but	so
for	since	and
while	consequently	with
when	furthermore	although
as	henceforward	besides
therefore	however	

Comprehension Guidelines



Teachers often hear the words “I can’t do comprehension” or “I always make a mess of it”. Well, here are some tips to think about and some steps to follow when answering comprehension tasks.

First of all, comprehensions are designed to test your **‘understanding’** of a passage rather than your ability to read it. Of course, there may well be some words that you don’t recognise but this should not present too big a problem. **Begin by reading through the whole passage at your normal reading** speed, hopefully by the time you have finished you will have at least some idea about **where and when** it takes place and perhaps most important, **what happens**.

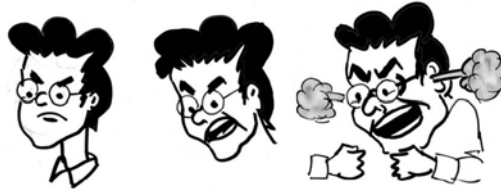
After reading the passage you should **move on to read through the questions before returning to read the passage once again**. By this time you may have actually spotted some of the answers or at least have a clearer picture about the events and those involved.

Comprehensions always begin with a couple of easy **‘warm-up’** questions just to get you going. These questions are:

- simple **‘find the fact’** questions;
- usually refer to the **opening few sentences** or first paragraph;
- can be answered in **one** or maybe **two short sentences**;
- **not worth** many marks!

Answer them directly and move on!

Questions about Character



The next type of question is a bit more difficult so it is **worth more marks** and will take **longer** to complete. These questions usually focus on **one or more characters** in the story. The marker wants to see if you can **reach decisions** or **draw conclusions** about them by hunting for little clues which hint at the sort of people they are. Obviously we reach decisions about people we meet all the time; relatives, friends, neighbours, pupils, teachers and ‘celebrities’. This is easy if we can watch and listen to them in real life or on the telly but the only way we can come to conclusions about characters in a passage is to **look very carefully at the words used** when they are mentioned. Questions on character will require you to work out what people are like by:

- the things they do;
- the things they say;
- words used by the writer when dealing with them.



Markers are looking to see if you can **find and list several ‘characteristics’** which is a fancy word for **labels** we could use to describe what they are like. To do this you will need to **‘zoom in’** on the parts or parts of the story where they are mentioned. Quite often you will be guided towards where to look by **specific line numbers, bullet points** will also be included to help you answer. **Do not expect to see the actual characteristics written on the page!** Use the bullet points to help you **‘work out’** what they are.

Look at the example below to see how this works.

‘He never passed around as much as one single sweet’. **characteristic = selfish**

‘She **flung** the book down and **slammed** the door. **characteristic = bad-tempered**

‘I’ll look after things till you get back. Don’t worry” **characteristic = thoughtful**

Sometimes **the writer himself will provide the clues** by using **certain words** instead of others. For example:

‘His eyes were **dark, empty and cold**’. – this may mean that the character is **‘unfeeling’** or **‘evil’**. ‘Dark’, ‘empty’ and ‘cold’ are used deliberately to create a particular impression of a unfeeling person.

‘She turned and **spat** out the words’. The use of the verb **‘spat’** suggests the character is **‘angry’ ‘moody’ or ‘nasty’**

Questions on characters and their characteristics will be looking for 4-6 points, each one with proof or evidence!

The Skill of the Writer

Comprehensions always save the best till last! The most **difficult questions** come at the end and of course are **worth a lot of marks**. These types of questions are usually about the **'skill'** of the writer; not **what** they do but **how** they carry it out. Film makers can use music, special effects, live action, lighting, sound, etc to bring scenes to life in order to thrill, amuse and shock, the skill of a writer is **to do all this using only words!**

A 'skill of the writer' question might ask:

How does the writer make you feel sorry for the old man?

or



How does the writer create a feeling of danger, tension and fear?

You will be given **more bullet points** which will help to **break the question up** into smaller **'bite-sized'** pieces. Use them to **guide** your answer. Once again you will need to hunt for clues, draw conclusions as well as provide proof and explanation to score well. It is **useful to use phrases** such as the following when **'explaining'** points you have made.

- It seems as if ...
- We get the idea that ...
- This makes us think that ...
- This suggests that ...
- We get the feeling that ...
- This creates the impression that

Do not fall into the trap of copying out lumps of text! Keep the question in your mind as you answer. Don't panic! Think! Use the bullet points and build your answer piece by piece. 'Skill of the writer' questions will take longer to answer so make sure that you have left enough time to finish!

Simple Steps to follow!

1. Read the passage – to get an idea what it is about.
2. Read the questions – make sure you understand what they are looking for.
3. Read the passage again – you may be able to spot some answers.
4. Answer the ‘find the fact’ questions in one or two sentences and **MOVE ON!**
5. Character questions are looking for ‘labels’ to attach to people in the story. Make 4-6 points and give evidence.
6. ‘Skill of the writer’ questions focus on how a writer creates a feeling, atmosphere, mood, emotion etc. Include an ‘explanation’
7. Highlighters can be used to pick out relevant facts. Don’t ‘paint’ the page!

Non-fiction

Despite what we may think most of what we read everyday is **non-fiction**. It comes in many different forms, shapes, and sizes. It also has many **purposes** for example: to inform, educate, explain, persuade etc. It is often aimed at a particular group of people or **audience**.

Here are some examples of **non-fiction texts**, perhaps you can think of others:

- school textbooks - ‘Skills in English’
- reference books -encyclopaedias; ‘Fishing for Beginners’
- autobiographies; - the life story written by a famous person
- letters and diaries – ‘The Diary of Anne Frank’
- brochures; - a holiday brochure e.g. Airtours or Thomas Cook
- newspaper or magazine articles - The Portadown Times
- posters and leaflets; - Disneyland Theme Park
- application forms; - passport, driving license
- guidebooks – Paris City Guide

Non-fiction also looks completely different. Here are some of the **main features** of non-fiction, not every piece of writing will have them all!

When you come across non-fiction text think about:

- **audience and purpose** – who is it aimed at and what is it trying to do?
- **layout and presentation** - what does it look like on the page?
- **choice and use of language** – how are words used to influence the reader?
- it often uses **photographs**, or graphics – to create a particular impression;
- it may use **bullet points** -to draw attention to certain things;
- it may use ‘**text-boxes**’ i.e. text inside a shaded or ‘boxed’ area – to make it stand out;

- **headings**, titles and sub-titles – draw the reader’s attention;
- there may be several **different fonts** – to make it obvious;
- a variety of **colours** can be present; - to influence the reader
- information may be presented in a **list** – highlights the main points;
- **tables** and **graphs** may also be used – to give more information;
- ‘**facts**’ and statistics may be included – to impress the reader;
- the ‘**layout**’ of the text may not be in paragraphs – to catch the eye;
- sometimes the personal pronoun ‘**you**’ is used to speak directly to the reader;
- **rhetorical** questions may also be used eg **Can you imagine living life this way?** Questions such as these don’t really expect an answer.

- **emotive** words/phrases (**words to do with feelings**) may also be included – for example; pain, loneliness, lost, cruelty, despair, ‘fight for survival’ ‘life and death struggle’ etc. These can be used to make us feel guilty or ashamed.
- **persuasive terms** – sometimes sentences include words such as **obviously, no doubt, beyond question, surely, certainly, definitely** etc. These words suggest that any other view would be wrong or is not that of the majority of people.
- **tone** – this can vary according to audience and purpose ie from **humorous** to **serious**.



Features used in Persuasive Writing

You may get a question in your exam on an advertisement or leaflet which asks you to look at how it has been put together in order to persuade you to buy something, go somewhere, or do something (like give money). In order to be able to answer this type of question you need to:

A – look at the language;

B – look at the presentational features.

Language.

• **Facts and opinions** – you need to identify the difference. A fact is a statement that can be proved to be true e.g. It is Tuesday today. An opinion is a statement where someone gives their views on a topic e.g. I think Arsenal are rubbish. But many writers use opinions as if they are facts. For example, Jamaica is the most beautiful island in the Caribbean.

Figures of Speech – these are devices writers use to add variety to their writing. Here are the main ones:

- similes (he runs like the wind/she is as white as a sheet)
- metaphors (my love is a red, red rose/crystal clear water)
- personification (the trees danced in the breeze/Death came closer and cast a shadow over me)
- alliteration (royal row rocks palace/sun, sand, sea)
- onomatopoeia (hiss, plop, crash, sizzle, snap)

- **Comparatives and Superlatives**

– these are extreme adjectives which make things sound really good or bad.

Comparatives are words which compare 2 things e.g.

bigger/better/louder/stronger/weaker/more modern/less dirty.

Superlatives are words which show the most of something e.g.

fastest/biggest/cheapest/best/longest/richest/most modern/ most unusual/least poor. These words are used to exaggerate and are therefore opinions made to sound like facts.

- **Puns / Expressions** –

these are well known sayings which writers use because they happen to fit the subject they are writing about. For example, when writing about pollution in a local river, the phrase, ‘Something fishy is going on!’ Also, an ad for ointment which will cure blindness said, ‘In the blink of an eye you can give someone their sight back.’ When chefs went on strike their bosses were described as ‘turning up the heat’ (or, putting pressure on them) to go back to work.

- **Persuasive devices** – tricks which writers use to get their point across.

Emotive words – adjectives which make things sound really good or really bad e.g.

fantastic/awful/exciting/horrible/cool/new/ancient/superb.

Directive words, imperatives or commands – verbs which start sentences and give orders, or sound as if they do. For example, GET up and get going! MOVE it! CHANGE your life.

Rhetorical Questions – questions which are asked in a text, they don’t require an answer because the writer gives the answer. They are designed to

make you think e.g. Isn't life mad? Wouldn't it be better if people had more time for each other.

Repetition – same words repeated over and over for impact e.g. Great products, Great prices, Great news! Sometimes a writer will repeat an idea but use different words eg large, giant, massive.

Personal Pronouns – use of words like – you, your, us, we etc. They are used to appeal to the reader and draw you into the text. For example, You deserve a break. We all do!

Persuasive Words – words used to emphasize a point/opinion e.g. of course/certainly/definitely/without a doubt/absolutely etc.

Presentational features.

Colour – advertisers will put much thought into the look of their text and colour is a major feature. Each colour represents certain things e.g. white = purity/cleanness, red = excitement/passion etc. Colours will be chosen to appeal to the audience, e.g. blue/pink/yellow for children, gold/silver/black for adults. Usually the more colourful the text the more successful it will be in catching your attention.

Pictures/Photographs - often the first things our eyes will be drawn to are pictures. Visual images can be understood by all of us and help us understand what a text is about straight away. They can appeal to our emotions –pity, fear, sadness, love, desire etc. This then can be enough to make us want to read on. Ask yourself if the photo is a close-up, soft-focus, eye-level etc.

Font style -the type of font used will be chosen carefully. A standard font like 'Times New Roman' will be used to give facts/serious information. Whereas a font like '**Broadway**' or '*Forté*' is more dramatic and lively. These might be chosen to give news of special events, to catch people's attention.

Text, writers use different ways to break up the text, so that it is easier to read and not so off-putting. For example, **short paragraphs, bullet points, text boxes, captions, headings and subheadings.**

If you are faced with a non-fiction text, you now know what to look for.

Novel Question

Make sure you have read your novel carefully. It's a good idea to record the key points in each chapter, and to keep a timeline of events which relate to the main character. To help you find important information again, record page references.

Your examination task will require you to write an essay, rather than answer a series of questions.

What kind of question can you expect?

- Retell all or part of the story.
- Write about a main character.
- Retell all or part of the story from a different point of view or in a different format eg a letter or diary

A character study will expect you to describe what your character does in the novel, as well as explaining what kind of person he or she is, how he or she relates to other characters and how he or she may have changed . It's important to focus on the thoughts and feelings of the character, not just their words and actions.

It's a good idea to prepare answers. A pupil who has studied their novel thoroughly should be able to pick up extra marks in this section.

Main features of a newspaper report.

A newspaper report contains a number of unique features which separate it from other types of report writing.

- the report contains a main ‘**short and snappy**’ **headline** designed to grab the reader’s attention;
- there is often an additional **sub-heading** or ‘**strap**’ to add more information to main headline;
- the opening paragraph makes use of the **5 W’s**;
- **more information** is added throughout the report;
- text is written in **columns**;
- there may be several variations in **font and size**;
- the **past tense** is used throughout;
- reports contain a lot of **factual** information;
- the text contains a mixture of “**direct**” and **indirect** speech;
- **sub-headings** may be used throughout the report;
- **pictures** often play an important part in a newspaper report;
- newspaper reports may be ‘**biased**’ in their views;
- sentences are often introduced using some of the following;
 - According to our sources...
 - According to an eyewitness....
 - It is believed that...
 - Apparently...
 - Allegedly...
 - We have learned/been told that...
 - A witness stated ‘...



Newspaper Writing

The Five Ws of Journalism

In a news report, the opening paragraph or sentences are the most important in establishing a summary of the whole story and encouraging the reader to find out more. In this way they differ from narrative stories, which tend to start by introducing the setting and characters, developing a chronology (sequence) of events until the end, when the outcome is revealed. The opening paragraph of a news report usually answers the following questions, which are termed the five Ws of journalism. These are:

- **What** happened?
- **Who** is the story about?
- **Why** did it happen?
- **Where** did the story happen?
- **When** did the story take place?

Journalism tends to reverse narrative writing (inverted pyramid). It is top heavy with information. This is because most readers skim the news and read just two or three paragraphs unless they are particularly interested.

Telling a Story



The Five Ws of Journalism

