

Planning a story set on a dark night

The AQA specimen paper (3) includes a question based on an image of a dark night:

You have been invited to produce a piece of creative writing about how children play imaginatively. Write a story set on a dark night as suggested by this picture.

This question is the basis for the following activities. Here is a similar image:



Task 1: complete a plan

A student has started their plan to the image response question above. Complete their plan.

1. Describe setting to be in keeping with the end, including weather:

.....
.....

2. Describe one child, conveying: innocent, vulnerable, bullied, weak, intelligent

.....
.....

3. Describe second child: bully, cruel, physical, intelligent, neglected

.....
.....

4. Describe the game going wrong. Could include a twist:

.....
.....

5. Loop back to opening:

.....
.....

Task 2: top tips for narrative writing

Read the advice below and summarise it in four top tips for narrative writing in an exam:

- There is a considerable amount of narrative in this plan, which is quite ambitious! It would take a professional writer at least a day, probably longer, to write even a *short* 'short story'. In an exam setting, you will probably have just 45 minutes! If you get embroiled in too much plot, you're going to neglect all the other things that get you the marks: imagery, word choice, punctuation variety, careful crafting of structure etc.
- Less is more. Your writing will not be weighed. Many students need to write less and craft more. This means careful planning. If you cross words/ideas out and improve them it explicitly shows 'evidence of crafting'.
- As a rule, never try to have more than two characters - it leads to cumbersome and bland explanations of who's who, which distracts you from where the real marks are.
- For the same reasons, only ever have one setting - but describe it in vivid detail.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Task 3: a detailed plan

Read the plan below and compare it with your own. This is an example of a plan which:

- includes the right level of detail
- includes numbered ideas which aren't necessarily paragraphs
- sticks to **one** setting and **two** characters
- doesn't include planned imagery, but could.

After reading this plan, go back to your own and make any changes.

Plan

1. Describe setting to be in keeping with the end, including weather:
November. Drizzle. Brooding. Fires across city. Guy Fawkes hoisted onto the conflagration to burn. Two boys at the Bonfire Night party.
2. Describe child, conveying: innocent, vulnerable, bullied, weak, intelligent.
James. Has been bullied by Ethan.
3. Describe second child: bully, cruel, physical, intelligent, neglected.
Ethan.
4. Describe the game going wrong. Could include a twist:
James and Ethan playing with the sparklers, James leading Ethan into danger with firework.
5. Loop back to opening:
The explosion echoes through the streets. The fires continue to burn across the city. Guy Fawkes slumps in the flames as symbol of what may have happened to Ethan, and tying together themes of rebellion/brutality/revenge.

Task 4: showing, not telling

‘Showing not telling’ is the essence of good creative writing. It means making the reading *infer* what you want them to infer, rather than simply telling them what to think.

For example, the student wants to convey that one character is ‘innocent, vulnerable, bullied, weak, intelligent’.

‘James was weak, but intelligent. He was bullied all the time, even though he was intelligent.’

This writing *tells* the reader those ideas. Better writing shows the reader these things instead.

Finish the paragraph below to have a go at showing not telling:

James’s scrawny arms and legs were rarely used to lift anything heavier than a pencil. He waltzed through classroom activities with ease. But he often seemed nervous,

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Task 5: narrative writing

Now have a go at writing your response. Here are some more tips for your narrative writing, which you could use as a checklist.

- Plan so that you can include ideas from the start which help prepare the reader for the ending.
- Use your plan to help you stick to timed conditions.
- Title your writing - but not necessarily at the start.
- Use phrasing from authors you enjoy reading, if it fits the genre and style of your piece.
- Control your sentence structures, perhaps using fragments for effect.
- Show, don’t tell the reader.
- Use ambitious vocabulary when you know the word’s meaning, even if you are unsure of the spelling.

If you’re not sure how to start, you could begin like this:

The November night was chill, drizzle misting in the air, clinging to coats and hair, impossible to escape. Across the cold city ...

Task 6: assess your work

Use an exam mark scheme or the checklist above to assess how well you did. Give yourself some areas for improvement next time.