

Unit 11. Writing compositions

Practical guidelines



Introduction:

For all your writing, you will need to show that you can:

- articulate experience and express what is thought, felt and imagined
- organize and structure ideas and opinions for deliberate effect
- use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures appropriate to context
- use register appropriate to context
- make accurate use of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

You will almost certainly practise writing compositions during your course.

1. Some practical guidelines



In the following sections we consider the main challenges you might face:



Challenge 1. You don't know what the topics will be.



Challenge 2. You have to write within a time limit.



Challenge 3. You have to write to a particular length.



Challenge 4. There's only one chance to get it right.

Challenge 1.
You don't know
what the topics
will be.



You won't know what you will be asked to write about until you see the question.

From experience throughout your course, you should have a good idea of the type of composition you are best at writing. This should help you to choose which topic to write about in an examination.

Topics can fall into two categories: **narrative** and **descriptive**.



Narrative:

Narrative writing is writing that tells a story, either imaginative or true.

Descriptive:

Descriptive writing is a type of writing that gives a clear and concise description of a place, person, object or event.



**Challenge 2.
You have to
write within a
time limit**



Sometimes you need to complete your composition within a certain period of time: which is usually about one hour.

The time limit means that planning is even more important than usual, not less! Make a plan of the main points that you intend to include before you start to write. It is worth spending ten minutes on your plan.



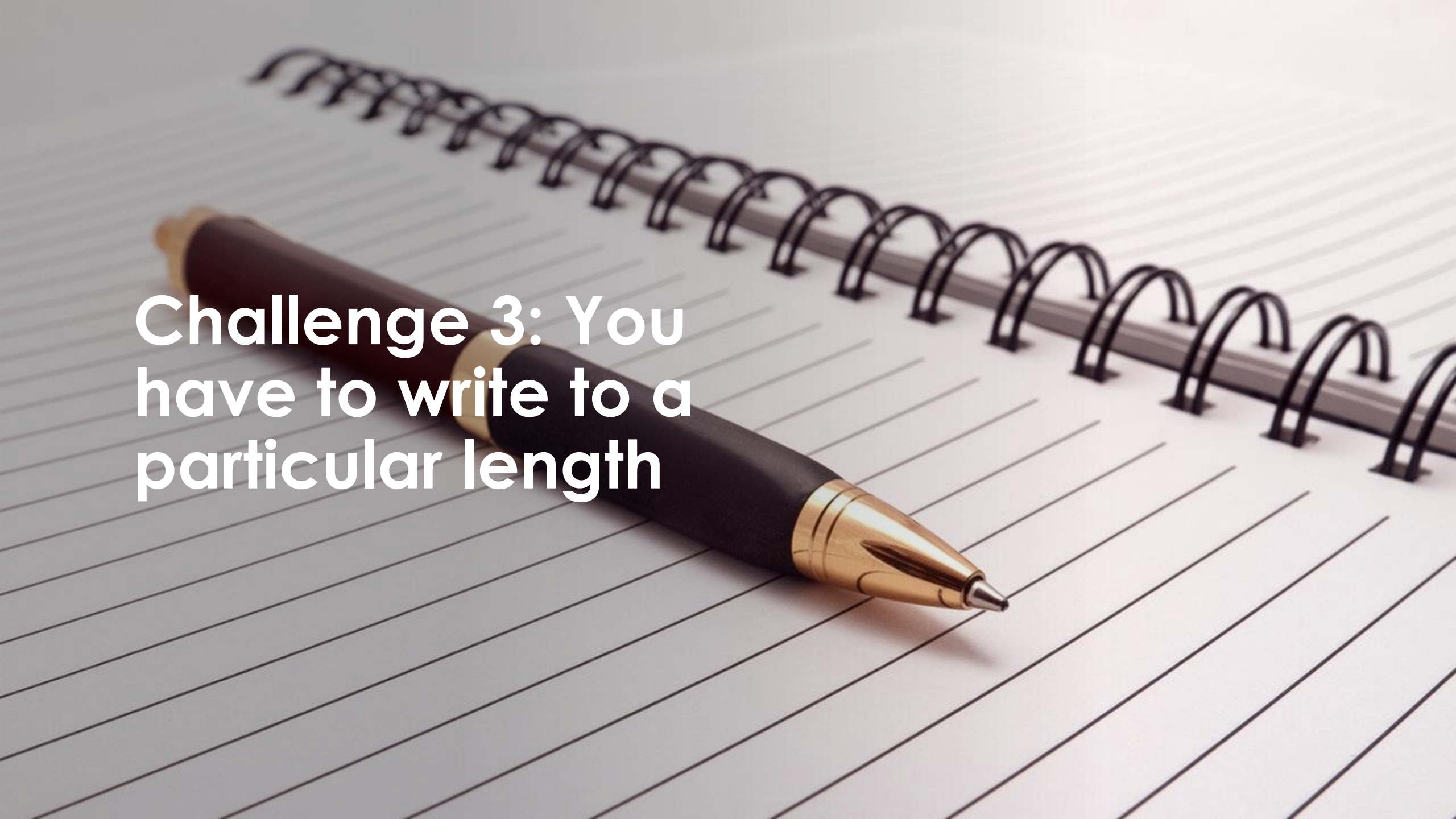
Study tip:



1. Don't write full sentences in your plan, just brief notes. Note down one key idea per paragraph, backed up by very brief notes on how you will explain or argue that idea. Overall, five to eight paragraphs should be adequate, plus...

2. Your conclusion. Don't forget to include this in your plan; it is a very good idea to know how you intend to finish the composition before you start to write it!

3. You could use a spider diagram to sort out your ideas for your composition.

A black and gold ballpoint pen lies diagonally across the pages of a spiral-bound notebook. The notebook has white pages with horizontal lines and a black metal spiral binding on the right side. The pen has a black barrel with gold-colored accents at the tip and the top. The text "Challenge 3: You have to write to a particular length" is overlaid in white on the left side of the notebook.

**Challenge 3: You
have to write to a
particular length**



Expression:

The vocabulary you use in your writing and the accuracy of your spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Content:

The subject matter of your writing.

Structure:

The overall organisation of your writing and your use of paragraphs to support this.

Challenge 4.

There is only
one chance
to get it right





You will only have time to write one version, so it's important to allow time for certain important checks.

We all make technical errors of spelling, punctuation and expression at times, and such errors are much more likely to occur when you are writing under these conditions. Stress can lead to mistake! It is important to check through your work so that you don't make this type of avoidable error.

Try to keep at least five minutes when you have finished writing to check your work.

Check:

- **spelling**
- **punctuation**
- **paragraphing**
- **tenses**

Finally, make sure your writing is clearly legible- If you write a brilliant piece that can't be read, it won't have the same impact.



A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a desk. In the foreground, an open notebook with lined pages is visible, with a black pen resting on it. To the right, a smartphone is partially visible. In the background, a laptop keyboard and a pen are out of focus. The overall lighting is soft and natural, creating a professional and focused atmosphere.

2. Writing the composition

The main concern of those reading your work will be to assess how effectively you can convey your thoughts about your chosen topic using written Standard English. Your readers will want to be interested in what you have written. The more easily they can understand your ideas, the more effective your writing will be.

Always try to see your work from the reader's point of view!



Expressing your ideas



Remember that you will be assessed for how you have **expressed** your ideas as well as for what you have written.

Examinations test your ability to communicate in written English; they do not test the level of your imagination and creativity.

Use paragraphs logically

Make sure that your writing is divided into paragraphs and that the paragraphs are logically developed.

- The opening paragraph should provide a valuable introduction, both to the topic and to the person writing about it; it should set the tone for the composition and make clear the direction it is going to take.
- The middle section of the composition should be clearly structured and logically sequenced.
- Your conclusion should show evidence of being clearly planned for and the composition should finish with a positive conclusion.





Write in complete sentences

While you are writing your composition, always try to think in complete sentences; never start to write a sentence until you know how it is going to finish.

Make sure you use full stops to separate sentences correctly.

Take care with punctuation

A common error is to confuse the use of commas with the use of full stops. Other serious punctuation errors result from misunderstanding about how to use the apostrophe and how to use inverted commas to punctuate direct speech. Make sure you know how to use these punctuation marks correctly and check them when you have finished your composition.





Check your spelling

You will be penalised if you misspell, or confuse, basic vocabulary (*there/their; too/to/two; quite/quiet, etc.*) or if you spell simple words in more than one incorrect way.

Nevertheless, you should not let your worries about spelling prevent you from using what you know is the best word for the job.

A 3D rendering of a puzzle with one red piece standing out among many white pieces. The red piece is the central focus, positioned slightly to the right of the center. The white pieces are arranged in a grid-like pattern around it, with some pieces missing, creating a sense of a puzzle in progress. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture and depth of the pieces.

3. Features of a good composition

You will be relieved to know that you are not likely to have a mark deducted for every technical error that you make.

As mentioned earlier, your composition will be marked by impression and the reader will balance the positive and negative qualities of your writing in his/her mind. The main positive features for which you will be credited are:

1. The ability to structure and organise your ideas clearly.

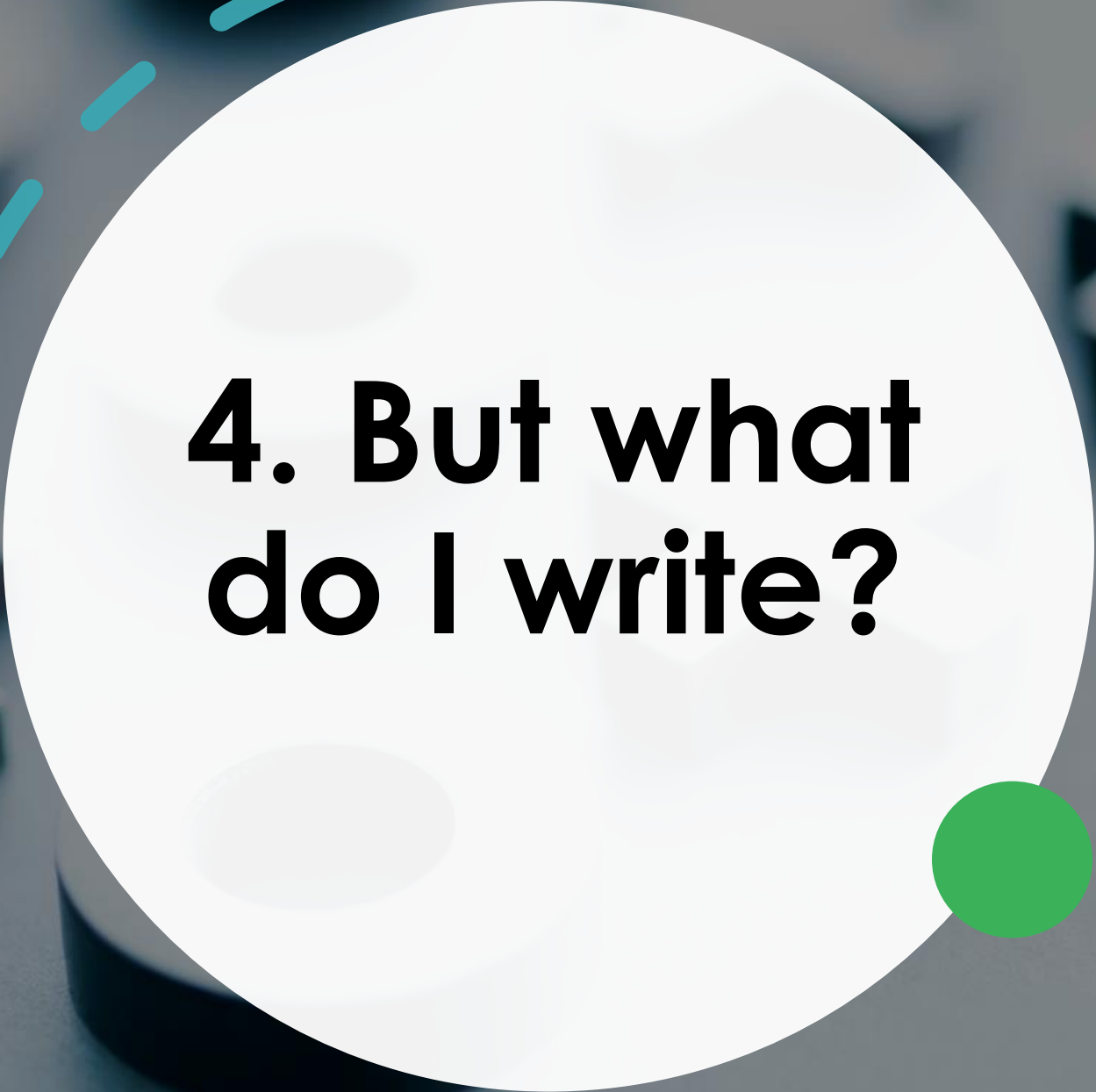
A well-controlled, well-developed composition with a positive opening and a strong conclusion will usually be well received.

2. A wide range of appropriately used and precise vocabulary.

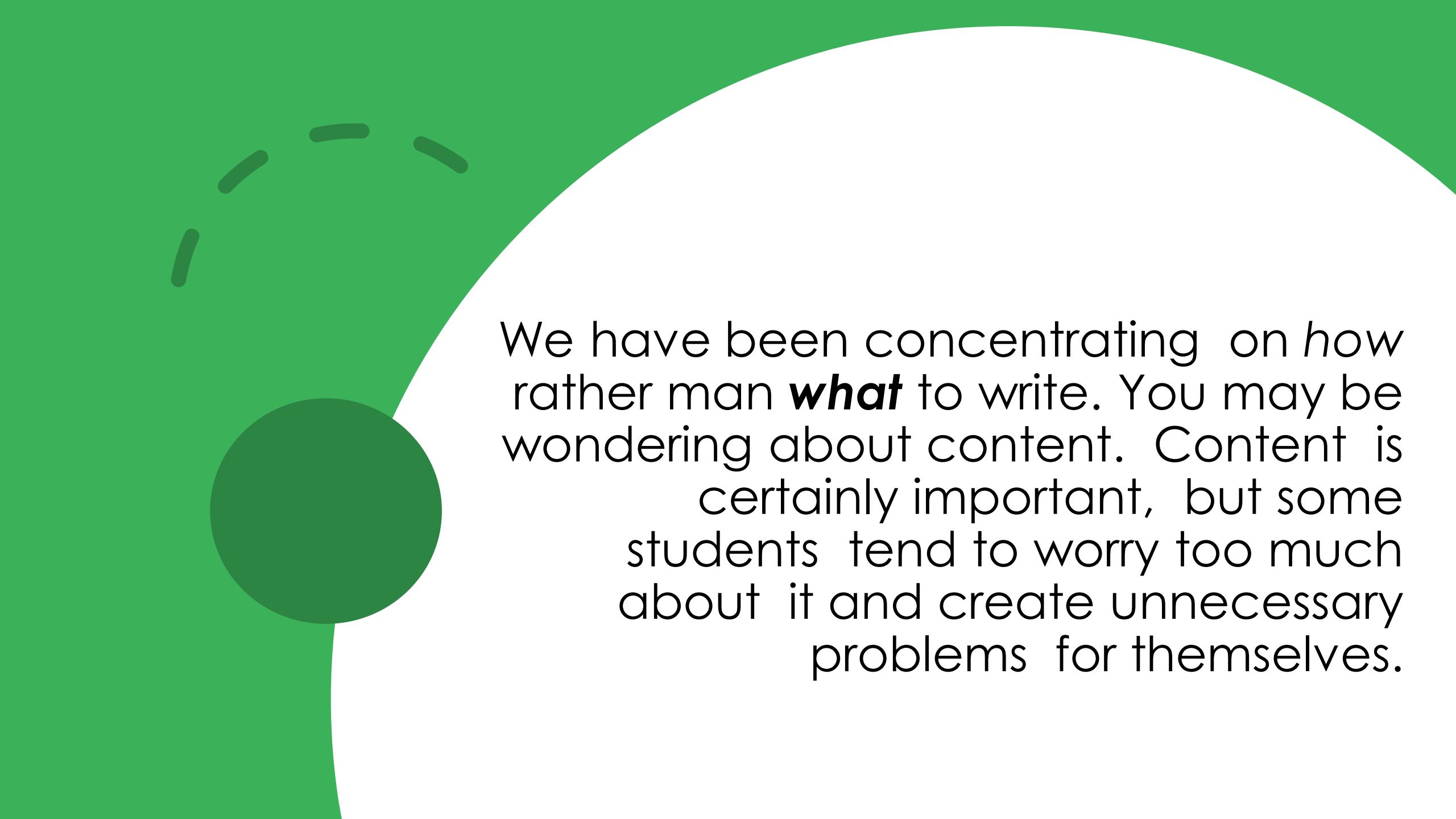
This does not mean that you should fill your composition with the longest and most complicated words you can think of. On the contrary, it means that you should have a clear understanding of what you are going to say and a good vocabulary, so that you can choose the right word to convey the exact shade of meaning that you want.

3. A good range and variety of sentence types and structures.

This helps to avoid monotony in your writing. Try not to let every sentence take the same form, or begin each paragraph with sentences of the same pattern. To do well in your composition you need to show evidence that you can handle complex sentences confidently. However, the ability to use short, simple, direct sentences when your composition requires it is also important. So, vary the length and type of your sentences (compound, complex, simple) to suit your meaning.



**4. But what
do I write?**



We have been concentrating on *how* rather than *what* to write. You may be wondering about content. Content is certainly important, but some students tend to worry too much about it and create unnecessary problems for themselves.





The main points to remember are:


1. Be realistic.

You do not have time to write a novel during an examination and you will not be expected to do so. So, don't make things more difficult for yourself by trying to think of obscure or totally original ideas: the originality of your writing will be found mainly in the way you express yourself.

2. Keep it clear and simple.

What you write should be well planned, carefully structured and organised, and clearly focused on the topic you have chosen. Your main intention should be to think how best to use the language to put across your ideas as clearly and as vividly as you can. Keep what you write simple and manageable; base your content on and within your own experience and you won't go far wrong.







Here are three sample student compositions for a Cambridge IGCSE First Language English examination. Read them through carefully. You might like to decide what grades you think they would have been awarded and why before you read the teacher's analysis that follows.

The original spellings and punctuation have been retained and major errors of spelling, punctuation and expression have been indicated.

It is important to remember, however, that in all examination you will be credited for positive merits of style, vocabulary and so on, as much as penalised for errors.

For this reason, it is unlikely that every error made by a student would be indicated and the marking of the following examples reflects this principle.



Example 1

Write a story in which severe weather conditions play a significant part.

Key

Errors of expression

Spelling/
punctuation errors

wrong word ('secret')

repetition

The perpetual wailing of the Hawaiian winds was no novelty to the professor; a veteran scientist whose name was renowned in the field of meteorological studies.

Seated on a brown leather eighteenth-century chair, the hollow cries of wind outside were a constant reminder that weather was supreme. Though the powerful evening breeze could uproot the sturdiest of trees, however, it could not touch the thin delicate clouds of smoke rising from Professor Dean's pipe, a thought at which he could not suppress a smile. It was to him, ironic that he was the creator of the 'Typhoon Eye', a secretive government project under his authority. Outside the complexe, atop a remote mountain on the island of Waikiki, in the Hawaiian Archipelago, the skies darkened as small droplets of cold rain began to fall on the island from the heavens above. At sea, some distance away, a rumble of thunder of thunder was heard, an omen of events to come.

Seated in his office, in serene relaxation, as thick smoke escaped from his lips, a loud series of knocks at his door revived the tired Prof. Dean from his quasi-slumber. 'Come in,' he called with a bored tone of voice.

The hinges creaked with a dull sound as a tall, youthful figure entered in the office clad in thick clothes and a clean white labcoat.

'Oh, what is it, my boy?' inquired the professor without turning to face his guest.

'I just came to tell you, sir, that our guest from Washington is anxious to activate the device' replied the young assistant.

'Are all preparations complete?'

'They are, sir.'

'Well then,' continued the arthritic, greying scientist, 'I'll be there shortly.'

Teacher's analysis: This composition is a long (946 words) but well-sustained narrative. This is obviously written by a student who enjoys writing and has relished the opportunity of entertaining the reader. It opens forcefully, and immediately engages the reader's attention. The vocabulary is wide, varied, ambitious and fully appropriate. The writer uses a good range of sentence structures and types: there are well-controlled complex sentences, for example:

Outside the complex, atop a remote mountain on the island of Waikiki, in the Hawaiian Archipelago, the skies darkened as small droplets of cold rain began to fall on the island from the heavens above.

and some effectively used short, simple sentences, for example: 'Silence was his only reply.'

The writer has chosen to write a long and involved narrative and does so with confidence. There is no doubt that this writer is consciously trying to impress the reader with his/her mastery of the English language and he/she does so in particular through a plentiful use of adjectives ('The arthritic, greying scientist') and a deliberate use of literary language ('Preparing to don more formal attire'), although, in places, this approach is somewhat overdone. It is an extremely confident piece of writing; there is a clear narrative flow which is emphasised by the controlled use of long and short paragraphs for effect.

With a nod, the youth left, carefully shutting the door as he egressed. Removing his cashmere jumper and preparing to don more formal attire, Prof. Dean glanced outside his window. He saw a tangled mass of tropical trees, swaying in the wind. Evidently a hurricane of some sort was indeed approaching.

'Welcome to Command Central. Please Identify yourself.'

Walking through the dimly lit corridors as he was observed by the highly disciplined guards which flanked the hallway, Prof. Dean reached into his pocket and inserted his access card into a brightly-lit panel.

humorous

'Thank you, Professor Gordon H H Dean ...' replied the wall in a mechanistic tone of voice. The thick titanium doors shuddered open. Walking through them, he entered a new environment all together: at Command Central, several dozen scientists and researchers were hastily preparing for the prototype test. Moving back and forth between the project itself, a huge device named the 'Typhoon Eye' and the terminals of advanced computers which controlled it, the men moved with almost robotic efficiency. No voice could clearly be heard, sideline conversations and idle chattering darted chaotically across the room.

'Professor, you're here at last!' cried an enthusiastic diplomat seated some distance away.

Emerging from the trance the mayhem of the room had caused him, Dean recognised him as Murray Bunton, their liaison to Washington.

effective short sentence

'We're ready to activate the device!' he said as the room fell silent.

After a brief pause, Dean moved towards the main control module and pressed the large button labelled 'BEGIN'.

Immediately the device shook and emitted many sounds. ✓

Standing dumb in awed silence, the scientists let out a collective cheer.

'This is a great moment for mankind,' whispered Bunton, 'Now, at last, men control the weather! With this device, mankind can manipulate the elements to our advantage!'

The atmosphere slowly ionised the surrounding area, releasing strange types of energy in all directions.

After toasting to their success with glasses of Martini, the group retired for the night, expecting a clear sky the next day.

Awoken from his sleep, Dean stumbled out of bed to replace his clothes. Looking at his clock with sluggish, blood-shot eyes, it read five o'clock in the morning.

'Hurry, Professor!' came the voice again.

Key

Errors of expression

Spelling/

punctuation errors

Some time later, while the weather outside continued to worsen, Dean sat down to drink a final cup of malt whisky. The room was deserted, a collection of empty chairs and dysfunctional machines with paper strewn **al over** the floor. And of course, there was me, the youthful scientist who had summoned the Professor to Command Central. I had stayed behind too, when offered a chance to evacuate. I could not deny my own responsibility for this disaster.

Outside, the cyclone had once again grown in strength, and had wiped out everything in the Hawaiian Islands.

The storm would remain here, its source of strength was this island, as it had now been polarised and filled with this energy. The storm would grow, slowly but surely gaining strength, eventually covering the entire planet.

Having gone to fetch some coffee, I heard a sudden gun shot, and a dull thud. I collapsed in a corner and wept. I could not bear to see the professor's corpse. Outside, the storm began to tear the building apart. I would soon be dead. As the outside breeze slowly infiltrated the room from holes in the roof, I pondered on man's underestimation of the wind. And now I realised that I had as well. ✓

Rushing through the security doors, his eyes were greeted by a room of haunting silence, the only sounds a series of murmurs from the main control panel operators. Outside a terrifying clap of thunder roared across the ocean.

'What's happened?' Inquired the professor, highly concerned despite his condition. There he was told that far from dissipating the storms, Typhoon Eye had had the reverse effect. Tropical cyclone 'Lethea' was now being drawn to Waikiki.

'How could this happen?' demanded Bunton, still half-dressed.

Silence was his only reply.



Teacher's analysis:

Direct speech is used convincingly and correctly punctuated, apart from a tendency to misplace commas ("This is a great moment for mankind", whispered Bunton), and the writer is not afraid to risk a humorous touch ('replied the wall'). The composition is not without blemishes, both of spelling (renound, complexe, studiest) and expression ('Seated in his office ... a loud series of knocks') but these weaknesses are very much the product of first-draft writing and the writer's ambition. They do not impede the reader's understanding and are more than compensated for by the composition's many merits, not least the way it remains clearly focused on the title throughout. The story is original and well developed.

Perhaps the most disappointing part of the composition is the end: the writer could obviously have written more had there been more time, but what is here is a most impressive achievement for the limited time available, and it is likely that this piece of writing would be assessed as a secure **grade A** response.

Example 2

'The only worthwhile thing in life is going to parties.' What are your views?

two words not one

I reckon this statement is rubbish. Many factors influence me in **beleiving** this way. As much as partying is fun it can equally be exhausting and unhealthy in some cases. By, keeping on partying, you are causing a huge **deteriaration** in your health which could **inturn** be quite life threatening. Certainly almost every party will have some **alcoholic** beverages **in entertain** it's customers, and definitely, if you are a drinker, you **would'nt** hesitate from staying away from the booze. It is just almost impossible to do so and therefore you **would'nt** refrain.

At the age of fifteen, partying may seem the most worthwhile thing to do in life as an adolescent, but looking ahead to the future, it does indeed seem quite bleak for someone partying all the time at this age.

wrong word
two words not one

A student that **party's** all day is certainly not going to get good marks or grades in their examination, and this **inturn** will reflect upon the student's causes. A bit of common sense and awareness of the present situation is all that is needed to realise exactly what the **main objective** is at this point of our lives. Studies should **unduly** be the priority right now **Ofcourse** socialising is another aspect of life that is quite important as inter-personal communications and relationships could be demanded all our lives, but is it

really the priority right now? Do our social commitments have to overshadow our whole future in front of us? I would say not. When the time comes to party, you can party but it is definitely not the only worthwhile thing in life at the adolescent age of fifteen.

Other than the health factor and the education factor, I would believe that partying would be joyful. But only someone who is either peripherally blind or intellectually numb would say that it is the ONLY worthwhile thing to do in life. How many years will you party for? Is it going to get you anywhere in life? I wouldn't think so. 'Going to parties' may seem as 'fun' at the time but in the long term, I really doubt as to how far in life it is really going to help you.

Also, most parties occur during nights and drag on till midnight or past. This will be a huge drain of energy from the party goer's part. It is definitely worth it at the time, but the after-effects are rather disturbing and uncomfortable.

Is it really worth wasting your whole life that way? Especially at this age, I would reckon, that it is much more of a use to prioritise as to what is worthwhile now, now instead of regretting it in the future.

Teacher's analysis:

Teacher's analysis: This composition begins with a forceful and unambiguous opening which is expressed directly but is not entirely appropriate in its tone of voice: 'I reckon this statement is rubbish.' As the composition develops, it becomes clear that the writing is poorly organised.

The writer possesses quite a wide vocabulary, but it is not always used with precision ('Studies should unduly be the priority right now.'). The word the student should have used is 'undoubtedly' or 'indubitably'.

Some statements, which sound linguistically quite impressive if read superficially ('inter-personal communications and relationships could be demanded all our lives') do not make clear sense on closer reading.

The development of the writer's argument is uncertain and lacking in cohesion; the ideas, although potentially interesting, are underdeveloped. The end of the penultimate paragraph is a good example of this; more details could have been included as to how the after-effects are disturbing and uncomfortable – the writer's meaning has not been made entirely clear to the reader.

There are several technical errors of spelling (beleiving, alchoholic, adoloscent) and expression (“Going to parties” may seem as fun.).

The inappropriate tone of the opening sentence has already been referred to and this over-colloquial approach appears at other points throughout the writing, where it sits rather inconsistently with some over-formal expressions (“Many factors influence me”), with the result that the work lacks a clear focus on the audience.

The reader is required to re-read paragraphs to understand fully what the writer is trying to say, with the result that communication becomes blurred. The whole of the third paragraph is a good example of this.

This piece of writing is an ambitious attempt but, in this case, the writer lacks the linguistic security to communicate the ideas clearly. The ending is also disappointing as the writer has run out of time and has not managed to produce a satisfactory conclusion. This student has made a fundamental mistake: he/she has chosen to write a difficult type of composition (an argumentative one) and has made the task harder than it need be. Had he/she chosen a descriptive or narrative topic, the outcome would most probably have been more successful, as less time would have had to be spent on constructing arguments and more time would have been available to concentrate on making the most of the writer's positive merits of vocabulary. The material which was written is unlikely to gain higher than a **grade E**.

Example 3

'Hidden Treasure'

Write in any way you like about this topic.

Key

Errors of expression

Spelling/

punctuation errors

two words not one

'Runners for the 800 metre race, please go to zone 3,' announced one of the judges at the scoring table.

I knew that was my call. Once I stood up, I hurriedly turned to a slim, tall girl called Mary Anne. (Eversince) she joined the training team, I had this bad feeling and imagined that I would be beaten by her.

As I walked boldly, I looked up at the cloudy sky. It had such a dirty grey colour. But I told myself no matter what the weather was like it wouldn't influence me because I was going to win!

'Can you all stand separately? The race is about to start,' shouted a woman with a grim face. I found myself in an excited crowd. Out of them, my eyes found themselves on Mary Anne who was quietly doing warm ups.

✓THUMP! THUMP!

My heart was hammering at my ribs. Why was I nervous? I had success in numerous races before, and this would not be an exception.

CONCENTRATE, EVA, YOU MUST WIN THIS RACE!

'On your marks, get set ...'

YOU ARE DEAD, EVA.

... go!'

'were' not 'was'
inconsistent tenses – was
(past), cannot (present)

All I saw was darkness. I opened my eyes and found myself running as fast as I possibly could.

DRIP! DROP! DRIP! DROP!

I felt waterdrops. It wet my dried throat when I opened my mouth to breathe. Amazingly, the rain drops gave me a rush of energy. I was on the road again. Not only did I keep a good pace, I ran faster and faster. The track in front of me seemed like a mile long. I ran all I could towards the finish line. Suddenly I felt a great pain in the ankle. I kneeled down desperately and found out that I twisted the ankle while running. Other runners ran pass me and I saw Mary Anne had this worried look on her face as she ran pass. It was hopeless, now, even though there was only 100 metres left to the finish line, I cannot possibly finish it?!

Before, I felt like I was going to cry. I saw a shadow, a person, coming towards me in the rain. The person's hands helped me up and I saw the face just above mine was Mary Anne's! She kindly comforted me and said, 'Come on, Eva! You can do it!' With her help I was able to topple along and before long, I finally reach the finish line. It was like a door to paradise! If it wasn't Mary Anne's encouragement and help, I wouldn't have done it. From this memorable event, Mary Anne and I became very close friends as I found after talking to her that we were a lot in common.

wrong word ('had')

I realised that I have gained a treasure, it was not the winning medal or any prize but a caring and trustworthy friend.

This was the hidden treasure that I have never known before and I am so glad that I found it!

Teacher's analysis:

Teacher's analysis: This composition opens confidently and leads into a controlled, well-structured story which develops towards a definite conclusion. There are positive merits in its structure, particularly the skilful way in which the details of the race are woven into the action of the story ('YOU ARE DEAD, EVA.' '... gol'). The story is sufficiently clear to engage the reader's interest and to sustain it. There is quite a wide range of vocabulary which is appropriately used ('rush of energy', 'I was able to topple along'). The writer's expression is secure and confident enough for him/her to concentrate on selecting words and phrases which are designed to appeal to and interest the reader.

However, despite its many good qualities, this composition lacks a variety of style. Overall, there is not a great variety of sentence types and structures, and the writer tends to rely on short, simple sentences. It would appear that the writer is using these as a result of linguistic limitations rather than deliberately to create a sense of tension and excitement.

Overall, this composition is the work of a writer who is aware of his/her limitations and strengths and, in general, does not try to go beyond them. Assessing this composition involves balancing the good and less good qualities. On the whole, the good qualities outweigh the others and the composition was assessed as a solid **grade C**.

A stack of four books is shown against a blue background. The top book is red with the word 'ENGLISH' on its spine. The second book is orange with 'GRAMMAR' on its spine. The third book is blue with 'EXCELLENCE' on its spine. A white circle is overlaid on the books, containing the text '6. Practise writing a composition'. A dashed blue line is on the left side of the circle, and a solid green circle is on the right side.

**6. Practise
writing
a composition**

Now that you have looked at some sample student compositions, here are some titles which you can use for practice. To help you, we have indicated next to each topic whether it is narrative, descriptive or argumentative. (In some cases, you will notice, the same topic could lend itself to more than one approach.) Two of the topics are *discursive*, which means you can approach the question in any way you choose.

- 1 'Television is a bad influence; it stops people thinking and ruins family life.' What are your views about the value of television? (Argumentative)
- 2 Which is your favourite day of the week and why? (Descriptive)
- 3 Write a story beginning with the words 'The noise was growing louder and louder,' and ending 'And then there was silence.' (Narrative)
- 4 What have you taught yourself that is not taught at your school? (Argumentative/Descriptive)
- 5 Do we spend too much time watching sports instead of playing them? (Argumentative)
- 6 Describe a place you know well at two different times of the day. (Descriptive)
- 7 'Castles in the Air'. Write in any way you like about this topic. (Discursive)
- 8 Write a story called 'The Empty House'. (Narrative)
- 9 'Decisions'. Write in any way you like about this topic. (Discursive)
- 10 What do you think are the greatest challenges facing young people today? (Argumentative)
- 11 Describe your favourite shop and some of the people who work there. (Descriptive)
- 12 'A Journey I Will Never Forget'. (Narrative)

Examples of composition plans

Skeleton plan for Question 1: 'Television is a bad influence; it stops people thinking and ruins family life.'

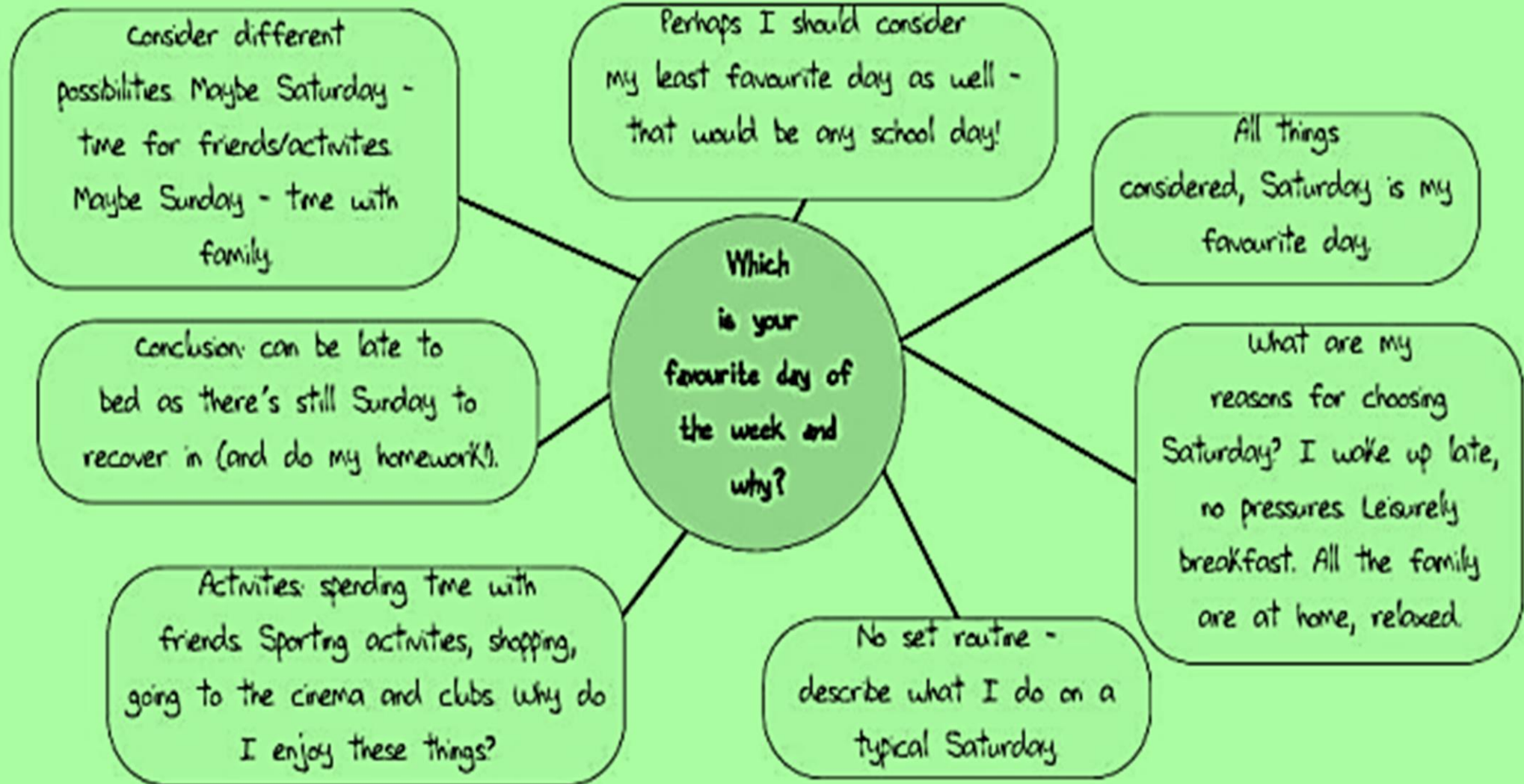
Introduction: *General comments on TV; its popularity, ubiquity; it is now a focal point in most households; it has become a major part of our lives.*

Points against: *It stops conversation and limits communication among people; it can cause family arguments over what to watch; it stops families doing more constructive things together; many of the most popular programmes are superficial; it is very easy to become addicted to certain programmes (soap operas, etc.) with the result that studies take a back seat; it tells you what to think.*

Points for: *It provides company for people who are on their own; it brings news and sporting events direct into the home and allows you to feel as though you are present at them even if they are on the other side of the world; it has some educational value – in fact, something can be learnt from most programmes; it can develop and refine one's analytical powers; it provides a ready topic of conversation with your friends.*

Conclusion: *Sum up the main points made above, refer to own experience and that of friends and state conclusion about how much truth there is in the topic statement.*

Spider diagram plan for Question 2: Which is your favourite day of the week and why?



Good luck!

