

PREPARING FOR THE ENGLISH COMPOSITION

Ideas for 'free writing' section of the English Examination

This document extends the advice and suggestions for exam preparation in English in Chapter Five of *The 11+ and 13+ Handbook*, by Victoria Barker, available from Amazon.

Many 11+ and 13+ English exams and pretests include a section of 'free' or 'directed' writing, in which the student is asked to write several pages, basing the writing on a 'prompt'. The prompt may be a word, a sentence, a topic or a theme. Alternatively, you may be asked to continue the piece of writing that was used for the comprehension questions, in the same style as that piece of writing.

i. Tips for Preparing for the English Composition Exam

Is it possible to prepare for the Composition section of the English Exam? It is. Here are some suggestions as to how you might go about it:

1. Remember to have a structure in your head of what you plan to write before putting pen to paper. Do not make it up as you go along. Your piece of writing needs to be structured, so that you know how much time to devote to each paragraph.
2. Prepare for your exam by formulating essay structures in the abstract. Remember that an essay is merely a series of paragraphs, each consisting of several sentences. Each of these paragraphs, and each of these sentences, should perform a function in your essay, revealing something about the setting, the character, or the action.
3. This is how you might prepare for your exam by formulating essay structures in the abstract: Imagine that your essay consists of seven paragraphs. How will you use them? A broad outline may look like this:
 - Para 1 Introduction - sets the scene, introduces the main character.
 - Para 2 Explains the difficulty the character faces.
 - Para 3 Shows what the main character is thinking, what he/she plans to do.
 - Para 4 Introduces the action of the story. What happens?
 - Para 5 Explains the difficulty caused by this action.
 - Para 6 The resolution of the action? How does the story unfold?
 - Para 7 Points to the future: how the character has changed and/or how his/her situation has changed, as a result of the action of the story.
4. Pay particular attention to the introductory and concluding sentences and paragraphs. These will make the strongest impression on the reader, but they are often the weakest part of students' essays. Make them tight and punchy. Make sure that the grammar and punctuation is correct.
5. Have a mental list of other, more interesting words that you can use instead of dull and overused verbs such as said, walked, thought and ate and adjectives such as nice, good, bad, kind and friendly. They will brighten up your writing. Extra marks are given for varied and interesting vocabulary. Here are some suggestions:
 - said: claimed, maintained, argued, alleged, stated, uttered, declared, exclaimed, shrieked, bellowed, wailed, whispered, revealed, whimpered, whined, grumbled, etc
 - walked: strode, strolled, ambled, sauntered, dawdled, staggered, tottered, paced, sprinted, dashed, raced, galloped, etc
 - thought: believed, viewed, regarded, maintained, assumed, supposed, reflected, meditated, contemplated, theorised, reasoned, pondered, ruminated, deliberated, etc
 - ate: consumed, munched, devoured, chomped, scoffed, swallowed, dined, feasted, banqueted, nibbled, gnawed, pecked, chewed, etc

- nice: pleasant, charming, amusing, pleasing, courteous, gracious, polite, tolerant, understanding, indulgent, relaxed, accepting, respectful, etc
- good: fine, noble, decent, virtuous, just, impressive, outstanding, exceptional, comforting, wholesome, honourable, conscientious, responsible, honest, dignified, etc
- bad: unpleasant, disagreeable, repulsive, horrid, unlikable, appalling, atrocious, nasty, hideous, hard-hearted, arrogant, haughty, cruel, etc
- kind: considerate, thoughtful, caring, sympathetic, generous, gentle, compassionate, sensitive, benevolent, humane, charitable, etc
- friendly: amiable, affable, sociable, welcoming, approachable, warm, hospitable, open-hearted, patient, loyal, attentive, etc

ii. Common questions in the English Composition Exam

If you are preparing for the English paper, you should check whether any advice is given about the format of the English composition questions. Some schools provide specimen papers, which indicate the style of question that is asked. (Look in the section entitled 'Specimen Exam Papers' in the Independent Junction website.) If not, you can assume that the style of question will be similar to those in the exams of other independent schools. It is worth practising a number of different styles of question.

Many schools will give you a choice of topics to write on. Which you choose is up to your own preferences. The kinds of question asked tend to fall into these categories:

1. Questions that ask you to continue the passage from the comprehension paper in some way.

There are several variations on this theme:

- Write about the events described in the passage from the point of view of one of the characters. Describe your thoughts and feelings as the events unfold.
- What happened afterwards? Carry on from where the extract finishes. Use the last sentence of the passage as your starting point. Do not introduce any new characters.
- Using the information from the passage, write a description of another event that involved the same characters and setting.

2. Questions loosely based on the theme of the written comprehension passage:

Examples of these include:

- Write about a real or imaginary event that changed your life fundamentally.
- Write a description of the most exciting or amazing day in your life.
- Write a description of an event where you too were shocked at something someone said or did in public.
- Write the opening section of a story set on another planet. You do not need to finish the story.
- Write a short story entitled, 'The Prisoner'.

3. Questions that ask you to imagine that you find yourself in a situation and to write about it:

Examples include:

- Imagine you are approached by a very odd-looking person while you are walking home from school. Write a letter to a friend explaining what happened.
- Imagine you found something very strange on the footpath on your way home from school. Write a short story about what happened afterwards.
- Imagine you can spend your birthday in any way that you would like. How would you spend it?

4. Questions that are open, so you can do what you want with them:

There are a range of variations on these types of question, including:

- Write a short story entitled: 'A Difficult Decision'.
- Write about a character who undergoes a dramatic transformation.
- Write about a place that you will never forget and that you would love to return to one day.
- Write a short story in which the following object plays a significant role: a key.

5. Questions which ask you to look at an image or a sheet of information and write a descriptive or imaginative passage based on the image or information.

There are several variations on this theme, such as:

- Use the image as an inspiration for a short piece of writing, that can be either descriptive or imaginative.
- Write an article for the school magazine on the topic of 'Caring for your pet'.
- Write an information leaflet that will be used to publicise an upcoming 'Science Day'.

iii. Marking of the English Composition

Many schools stipulate that the written composition will be assessed according to the following criteria:

1. accuracy of the written English (spelling, grammar and punctuation)
2. the sophistication of the writing (the quality of the vocabulary, the quality of the expression, the paragraph structure, the use of varied punctuation, appropriate language, etc.), and
3. the inventiveness of the ideas behind the composition (the imagination required to come up with the ideas expressed in the piece of writing, the way this imagination is expressed in the details of the writing, etc.)

It is not unreasonable to conclude that these three elements may be assessed as of roughly equal weight in the assessment of the Written Composition piece.

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