

Writing Through Grammar

English Language GCSE



Boston Spa
Academy

When it comes to descriptive writing, lots of people believe that they cannot revise or learn to become better writers. This is fundamentally untrue. We become better writers the more that we read, because we can copy from writers who are already exceptionally good at what they do.

This booklet is full of descriptions of either characters or settings from famous authors. Whilst we cannot copy the words that they write without it being plagiarism, we can copy the sentence structures that they use.

Whilst working your way through this booklet, you will come across words that sound good, or whole sentences that you want to steal. Put these on the magpie list below so that they are easily accessible for you and you can revise/memorise them for when it comes to your fiction writing section of the exam. I have stolen the best bits of the example on 'Fred' (pg. 3) for you. There are additional magpie list pages at the end of the booklet if you need.



Magpie List

<u>Words</u>	<u>Sentence structures</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pugnacious• Obstinate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stunted growth, short bowed legs, powerful hairy arms, pugnacious, obstinate, resourceful; all these attributes were combined with endless chat and irrepressible good humour.

Your first task is to get you thinking about the difference sentence structures can make. Here you have a grid filled with difference sentences structures for you to try. The example upgrades the sentence 'the boy looked dirty'. Can you upgrade the sentence 'the dog looked sad'?

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Writing through grammar</u></p>	<p><u>Simile end</u></p> <p>The grubby face of the boy was flecked with mud and oil, like beard stubble across his young face</p>	<p><u>Triple adjective + colon</u></p> <p>Dirt, oil, grease: the boy's face was smeared with evidence of his grubby work.</p>
<p><u>Brackets + although</u></p> <p>The boy's face looked grubby, (although it wasn't as if he was trying to keep clean), and grease, oil and mud flecked his cheeks.</p>	<p>The boy looked dirty.</p>	<p><u>Adverb + comma</u></p> <p>Self-consciously, the boy tried to scrub the dirt from his grubby face with the back of his sleeve.</p>
<p><u>So, so, so</u></p> <p>The boy's face was so grubby, so grimy, so utterly filthy, that he was barely recognisable.</p>	<p><u>It wasn't/it was</u></p> <p>It wasn't just your ordinary, everyday dirt, it was layers of deep grime that would need hours of scrubbing to remove.</p>	<p><u>Verb start</u></p> <p>Smiling wryly, the boy's face was just about visible through the layers of dirt and grease.</p>

	<p><u>Simile Start</u></p>	<p><u>Triple adjective + colon</u></p>
<p><u>Brackets + although</u></p>	<p>The dog looked sad</p>	<p><u>Adverb + comma</u></p>
<p><u>So, so, so</u></p>	<p><u>It isn't/it is</u></p>	<p><u>Verb start</u></p>

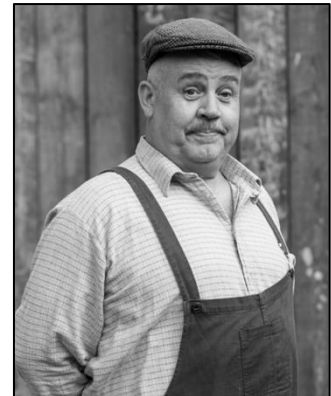
Character Descriptions:

As discussed, we can use the work of writers who have already mastered their craft to master our own if we magpie from them and use their sentence structures for our own writing. We can even steal some of their actual words if they fit with the character we are describing. First, we break down what they've written into a list we can copy from, then we re-write what they've written to form our own character. See the example below:

Fred

Call The Midwife

Fred was the boiler-man and odd-jobber of Nonnatus House. He was typical of the Cockney of his day and age. Stunted growth, short bowed legs, powerful hairy arms, pugnacious, obstinate, resourceful; all these attributes were combined with endless chat and irrepressible good humour. His most striking characteristic was a spectacular squint. One eye was permanently directed north-east, whilst the other roved in a south-westerly direction. If you add to this the single yellow tooth jutting from his upper jaw, which he generally held over his lower lip and sucked, you would not say he was a beautiful specimen of manhood. However, so delightful was his optimism, good humour and artless self-confidence that the Sisters held him in great affection, and leaned on him heavily for all practical matters.



Break it down:

- **Character name + occupation**
- **He was a typical...**
- **5 descriptions; all these were combined with 3 more things...**
- **His most striking characteristic was...**
- **If you add to this the...**
- **You would not say he was a...**
- **So delightful was his x3 that [people's opinion of him]**
- **How people interact with them and what that could show you about the character.**

Re-write it:

I have selected Donald Trump as my person to re-write it about. You would create a character from your own imagination. Do not attempt to do a person who already exists!

Donald Trump was the President of the United States of America. He was, however, not a typical president of his day and age. Stunted growth, wispy, combed-over hair, skin tinged with an unnatural shade of orange, rude, obstinate, practically illiterate; all these attributes were combined with an unending lack of compassion and an irrepressible desire for power and money. His most striking characteristic was his spectacular inability to express himself coherently. Whether on Twitter or at the debate podium, he almost never made any sense at all. If you add to this his lack of any kind of political knowledge, you would not say he was an ideal candidate for president. However, so memorable were his political slogans and artless self-confidence, that the people of America continued to vote for him against all rhyme or reason.

Now you try...

Marilynne Robinson
Housekeeping

In her last years she continued to settle and began to shrink. Her mouth bowed forward and her brow sloped back, and her skull shone pink and speckled within a mere haze of hair, which hovered about her head like the remembered shape of an altered thing. She looked as if the nimbus of humanity were fading away. Tendrils grew from her eyebrows and coarse white hairs sprouted on her lip and chin. When she put on an old dress the bosom hung empty and the hem swept the floor. Old hats fell down over her eyes. Sometimes she put her hand over her mouth and laughed, her eyes closed and her shoulder shaking.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Pastor Bligh
John Crow’s Devil

Many forgot how tall he actually was, so like Gregory Peck midway between Roman Holiday and Moby Dick, which were still shown as a double feature at the Majestic. Pastor Bligh was wiry, a giant in the village. But disgrace diminished him. Guilt threw a curve in his back and a hunch in his stance. He had a square jaw with thick eyebrows over thin eyes and short, graying hair that was white at the temples.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Mikhail Bulgakov
The Master and Margarita

And then the hot air congealed in front of him, and out of it materialized a transparent man of most bizarre appearance. A small head with a jockey cap, a skimpy little checked jacket that was made out of air. The man was seven feet tall, but very narrow in the shoulders, incredibly thin, and his face, please note, had a jeering look about it.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Ignatius J. Reilly
A Confederacy of Dunces

A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs. In the shadow under the green visor of the cap Ignatius J. Reilly’s supercilious blue and yellow eyes looked down upon the other people waiting under the clock at the D.H. Holmes department store, studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress. Several of the outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough and expensive enough to be properly considered offenses against taste and decency.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Ben

Look Homeward, Angel

My brother Ben's face, thought Eugene, is like a piece of slightly yellow ivory; his high white head is knotted fiercely by his old man's scowl; his mouth is like a knife, his smile the flicker of light across a blade. His face is like a blade, and a knife, and a flicker of light: it is delicate and fierce, and scowls beautifully forever, and when he fastens his hard white fingers and his scowling eyes upon a thing he wants to fix, he sniffs with sharp and private concentration through his long, pointed nose...his hair shines like that of a young boy—it is crinkled and crisp as lettuce.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Bagheera
The Jungle Book

A black shadow dropped down into the circle. It was Bagheera the Black Panther, inky black all over, but with the panther markings showing up in certain lights like the pattern of watered silk. Everybody knew Bagheera, and nobody cared to cross his path, for he was as cunning as Tabaqui, as bold as the wild buffalo, and as reckless as the wounded elephant. But he had a voice as soft as wild honey dripping from a tree, and a skin softer than down.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain

He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no gray; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There was no colour in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl – a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white. As for his clothes – just rags, that was all. He had one ankle resting on the other knee; the boot on that foot was busted, and two of his toes stuck through, and he worked them now and then. His hat was laying on the floor – an old black slouch with the top caved in, like a lid.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Setting Descriptions:

Nicholas Nickleby

Charles Dickens

The public-houses, with gas-lights burning inside, were already open. By degrees, other shops began to be opened, and a few scattered people were met with. Then, came straggling groups of labourers going to their work; then, men and women with fish-baskets on their heads; donkey-carts laden with vegetables; chaise-carts filled with livestock or whole carcasses of meat; milk-women with pails; an unbroken concourse of people trudging out with various supplies to the eastern suburbs of the town. As they approached the City, the noise and traffic gradually increased; when they threaded the streets between Shoreditch and Smithfield, it had swelled into a roar of sound and bustle.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Northern Lights**Phillip Pullman**

One morning there was a different smell in the air, and the ship was moving oddly, with a brisker rocking from side to side instead of the plunging and soaring. Directly ahead of the ship a mountain rose, green flanked and snow-capped, and a little town and harbour lay below it: wooden houses with steep roofs, an oratory spire, cranes in the harbour, and clouds of gulls wheeling and crying. The smell was of fish, but mixed with it came land smells too: pine resin and earth and something animal and musky, and something else that was cold and blank and wild: it might have been snow. It was the smell of the North. Seals frisked around the ship, showing their clown faces above the water before sinking back without a splash. The wind that lifted spray off the whitecapped waves was monstrously cold.

Break it down:**Re-write it:**

Where The Crawdads Sing

Delia Owens

The morning burned so August-hot, the marsh's moist breath hung the oaks and pines with fog. The palmetto patches stood unusually quiet except for the low, slow flap of the heron's wings lifting from the lagoon. And then, Kya, only six at the time, heard the screen door slap. Standing on the stool, she stopped scrubbing grits from the pot and lowered it into the basin of worn-out suds. No sounds now but her own breathing. Who had left the shack? Not Ma. She never let the door slam.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things

Jon McGregor

If you listen, you can hear it. The city. It sings.

The low soothing hum of air-conditioners, fanning out the heat and the smells of shops and cafes and offices across the city, winding up and winding down, long breaths layered upon each other, a lullaby hum for tired streets.

The rush of traffic still cutting across flyovers, even in the dark hours a constant crush of sound, tyres rolling across tarmac and engines rumbling, loose drains and manhole covers clack-clacking like cast-iron castanets.

Road-menders mending, choosing the hours of least interruption, rupturing the cold night air with drills and jack-hammers and pneumatic pumps, hard-sweating beneath the fizzing hiss of floodlights, shouting to each other like drummers in rock bands calling out rhythms, pasting new skin on the veins of the city.

Restless machines in workshops and factories with endless shifts, turning and pumping and steaming and sparking, pressing and rolling and printing, the hard crash and ring and clatter lifting out of echo-high buildings and sifting into the night, an unaudited product beside the paper and cloth and steel and bread, the packed and the bound and the made.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Of Mice and Men
John Steinbeck

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees - willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of 'coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark.

Break it down:

Re-write it:

Stranded on Vanuatu

Cash Peters

Despite the hotel being a mere few feet from the water’s edge, where you’d think there’d be a breeze, there isn’t. The air in the main bar-lounge is unbearably hot and sticky, another harbinger, I suppose, of what lies ahead. Truly, you could steam broccoli in here, and of course, that makes the place a magnet to flies. Bluebottles especially. Big chubby ones carve a zigzag path between tables, coming in to land like ghastly winged tumours in my hair and on my bare arms to get at my sweat. Settling down in a chair on the deck, I watch the sun slide dramatically into the ocean in a tantrum of citrus hues, before finally throwing itself over the horizon. In its wake a dense, hostile darkness descends. Once the light fades you’re as good as blind. It’s coal-shaft black out there. Convulsing flames in small kerosene lamps distributed among tables in the restaurant do their best to provide occasional golden pockets of reassurance, but it’s not enough to make the slightest dent on the monolithic emptiness of the world beyond this one. At my feet, a lazy surf gurgles and eddies into rocky inlets barely visible through the gauze of night. After that, several yards out and just below the surface, lies a ring of coral one hundred metres deep. Then, nothing. You don’t touch land again for another four thousand miles, not until you hit the Great Barrier Reef. With the onset of night, I feel a slight chill skitter across the back of my neck. A fleeting, barely perceptible breath, like the icy touch of winter.

Break it down:

Re-write it:



Additional Magpie List

<u>Words</u>	<u>Sentence structures</u>

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