**Tips for Top Grades in Narrative writing**

**Narrative writing is the most traditional form of creative writing: it’s telling a story. The trick to getting high marks is not to tell a story in the traditional way. Think about interesting ways to tackle the different aspects of the narrative.**

# **Narrator/Voice**

Who is telling the story?

Is it **first person**? Is someone in the story telling the reader directly? In these kinds of narratives the narrator might be the main character – or it might be someone who is very minor. Imagine the story of Cinderella told from the point of view of the mouse who gets turned into her footman. He’d have a very different view of the story – and what would life be like after he’s turned back into a mouse.

 If **the narrator is a specific character**, that character needs to be reflected in the way the story gets told – the comments or ‘asides’ which they make to the reader might show who they really are. Perhaps the narrator in the example above would keep making comments about cheese. If it’s someone unexpected then keeping that quiet for a while can lead to an effective ending.

Are you **an all-knowing narrator**? The story is told in the third person, but the narrator might need to tell the audience what the characters are thinking. Or perhaps there is a secret in the character’s past which the reader needs to know to understand what’s going on.

Or, is the narration limited to what a **single observer** can see? This works well for stories which are shrouded in mystery, or follow a small event in detail. Twist in the tale stories need these kinds of limits.

The person who is supposed to be telling the story will determine the ‘voice’ you write in. If the narrator is someone serious, the tone will be serious. If the narrator is a bit of a joker, the tone will be more informal. Don’t tell the reader about the narrator directly – let the way you write do it for you.

# **Plot**

Plot is what turns a list of events into a story. It’s **the connection between different events that show cause and effect**. Make sure that events in your story happen for a reason, and that they affect the characters.

 ‘Lost’, for example, might be a story about getting lost in a wood, or losing a game, or a story set in a lost property office. Or maybe someone has lost something which is very important to them – but the reader doesn’t understand why it’s so important until the very end of the story. The plot is why it’s important, how it got lost, and why it’s needed now.

The order in which you tell the story is important. It might seem natural to tell a story from beginning to end but mixing up the **chronology** or timeline of a story is a good way to make it more interesting. It still needs to make sense, but it doesn’t have to be in order.

Some different possibilities are telling the story in **flashback**, starting from the most dramatic point and then explaining how everyone got there. Or you might want to start at the end and work your way back to the beginning. Starting in the middle of the action is a good way to capture the interest of the reader.

In the exam, make a quick bullet point plan of the plot and then write numbers next to the bullet points to remind yourself what order you’re going to write them in.

Because creative writing assessments are quite short, it’s best not to get too complicated with plot or ordering – one twist is enough, or one change to the chronology.

# **Characters**

In a short story you don’t have time to include a lot of characters– **one or two main characters** is enough. You can include some other minor characters if you need them to make the plot work, but not too many. Only give names to major characters – it will help the reader to work out who matters enough to remember.

**Make each character distinctive**. Think of one characteristic – physical or personal – which summarises them. In your planning, note down each character and their unique identifying point, with two or three different ways of referring to it. Referring to the same thing in different ways reinforces the character and it adds cohesion to the whole story.

When you check through your work make sure that each character talks in the way you’d expect them to. If you’ve got a member of the royal family in your story, they won’t talk like you and your friends.

# **Setting**

An unusual setting can be a way to make a narrative really interesting. Changing the setting can make a story out of something everyday. First think where they normally occur, and then choose somewhere completely different to produce an interesting story idea.

The same techniques apply to writing narrative as descriptive writing – make sure to use the five different senses to evoke the setting. What can your characters smell? It’s a good way to get the reader really imagining the setting of your story.

Pick two or three key details to establish your setting, but don’t describe it all at once. Unless you’ve made a deliberate choice to start with the setting – perhaps the place is the main character in the story – don’t describe it in your first paragraph. Starting in the middle of the action is the best way to grab your reader. Then they need an idea of where the action is happening. But you don’t want to bring everything to a halt while you describe everything in depth. **Sprinkle details about the setting throughout the story**.

# **Writing for effect**

Don’t forget to use your usual toolkit of effective writing techniques. Vary your sentences for effect – long ones to build suspense, and short ones to provide punchlines. Use a variety of punctuation.

You should make sure that you include some **literary devices** – but only where they have effect. A **metaphor** or a **simile** is a great way of creating an image for the reader, but it needs to be appropriate. Pick a simile which emphasises an important characteristic, or an important plot point. If a main character is cross, then perhaps his face ‘looked like a raincloud’. Try to avoid using clichés. Don’t use metaphors which don’t support the effect you are aiming for.

Choose the words you use carefully, to create an impact on the reader. Adjectives can tell us a lot about a character, but use too many and they lose strength. Even when writing prose you can use techniques like **onomatopoeia** (words that sound like their meaning) or **alliteration** (repetition of the same sound) to create an effect.

Don’t forget to check that you’ve got the basics right –capitals, full stops and spelling. There is no point in using advanced techniques if you forget the basics – you won’t get full credit when it comes to being marked. At least a third of the marks for writing go to accurate sentences, varied for effect.