Your notes

GCSE English Language: revision notes

Descriptive and narrative writing

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The task

- (AQA) Paper 1 Question 5 (40 marks) gives a choice: a description, or the opening of a story. 24 marks are for content and organisation (AO5) and 16 for technical accuracy (AO6).
- (AQA) Since 2026 the description is from your imagination: you may use the picture for ideas, but you don't have to describe it. The story option asks only for the opening, so it can stop on a question.
- Spend about 45 minutes: 5 planning, about 35 writing and 5 checking.
- (Edexcel, OCR and Eduqas) Edexcel Paper 1 Section B, OCR Component 2 Section B and Eduqas Component 1 Section B are 40-mark creative tasks with a choice of tasks.
- (Eduqas) Your Component 1 writing must be a **narrative** or recount: purely **descriptive writing** can't reach the top marks.

Descriptive writing

- Create a vivid picture of a place or moment, rather than a plot.
- Give it a shape: move through time (dawn to dusk) or through space (far away to close up).
- Use more than sight: sounds and smells feel real. Use precise vocabulary, fresh imagery and a variety of sentence structures.

Narrative writing

- Keep the plot simple: few characters, one main setting and a short time span. One person, one place, one problem.
- Hook the reader at the start with something unexpected: not the weather and not waking up.

- **Show, don't tell**: reveal feelings through actions and details ('her thumb kept finding the same loose thread') rather than stating them ('she was scared').

Crafting and accuracy

- Vary sentence openings (adverbs, prepositions, -ing words) and lengths, and use paragraphs for effect, such as a one-line paragraph at a key moment.
- Use **pathetic fallacy** (weather that reflects mood) if it helps, and avoid **clichés**.
- Technical accuracy: correct spelling, a range of punctuation (including semicolons, colons and dashes), accurate grammar, varied vocabulary and Standard English. Punctuate dialogue correctly.

How to get top marks

- Plan five short moments, one for each paragraph. A short plan is what stops you from drifting.
- Make each choice on purpose: a very short sentence after a long one, or one odd detail nobody else would think of.
- About 450 to 600 good words is plenty. Keep 5 minutes to check: 16 marks are for accuracy.

Common mistakes

- A whole action film in 45 minutes, ending 'then I woke up'.
- **Clichés** such as 'a shiver ran down my spine'.
- Comma splices and missing paragraphs: these cost the most accuracy marks.

Key terms

Narrative	A piece of writing that tells a story.
Descriptive writing	Writing that creates a vivid picture of a place, person or moment.
In medias res	Starting a story in the middle of the action.
Show, don't tell	Revealing feelings through actions and details instead of stating them.
Pathetic fallacy	Using the weather or setting to reflect a mood.
Sensory language	Words that appeal to sight, sound, smell, taste or touch.
Cliché	An overused phrase, such as 'as cold as ice'.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. How many marks is Paper 1 Question 5 worth? (AQA)

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2. How are the 40 marks for Question 5 split? (AQA)
3. What does 'in medias res' mean?
4. What does 'show, don't tell' mean?
5. What is pathetic fallacy?
6. What is the best advice for a story written in 45 minutes?
7. How should descriptive writing differ from narrative writing?
8. Which of these is a sensory detail?

Answers

1. 40
2. 24 for content and organisation, 16 for technical accuracy
3. Starting in the middle of the action
4. Reveal feelings through actions and details rather than stating them
5. Using weather or setting to reflect mood
6. Keep the plot simple, with few characters
7. It focuses on a vivid picture rather than a plot
8. The bitter smell of smoke

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.

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