

6

Short passages for comment

Now that we have examined some of the key ideas about language and linked them to the Assessment Objectives of the examination, it is time to bring all these ideas together by looking at examination questions. In this unit and in units 7 and 8 we will work with short passages of around 300 words, with their directed writing tasks. In units 9, 10 and 11 we will look at longer passages of around the length you should expect to find in the examination.

1 Shanghai childhood

The passage below is written by an English adult, Christopher Banks, describing his memories of growing up in Shanghai with his Japanese friend, Akira.



Task

Comment on the style and language of the passage.

At the rear of our garden in Shanghai, there was a grass mound with a single maple tree rising out of its summit. From the time Akira and I were around six years old, we enjoyed playing on and around that mound, and whenever I now think of my boyhood companion, I tend to remember the two of us running up and down its slopes, jumping right off where the sides were at their steepest.

From time to time, when we had worn ourselves out, we would sit panting at the top of the mound with our backs against the trunk of the maple tree. From this vantage point, we had a clear view over my garden and of the big white house standing at the end of it. If I close my eyes a moment, I am able to bring back that picture very vividly: the carefully tended 'English' lawn, the afternoon shadows cast by the rows of elms separating my garden and Akira's; and the house itself, a huge white edifice with numerous wings and trellised balconies. I suspect this memory of the house is very much a child's vision, and that in reality, it was nothing so grand. Certainly, even at the time, I was conscious that it hardly matched the splendour of the residences round the corner in Bubbling Well Road.

Kazuo Ishiguro *When We Were Orphans*

Organising your response

Think of the key terms you have learned to describe language, and write them down. You should have something like this:

- writer's purpose and audience
- tone
- language features, for example vocabulary, figures of speech and structure.

Now take each of these key terms and try to match them to the passage. Don't think yet about your final answer, just jot your ideas down in note form.

2

Traveller's check

The passage below describes the writer's journey on the North Borneo Railway.



Task

Comment on the style and language of the passage.

Travel, as we know it today, had its roots with the appearance of trains. The train opened up the countryside and people could head off for a day's outing away from the city.



Thomas Cook was the first travel agent who organised groups of travellers to head off into England's Lake District for some rest and recreation. Since then, we haven't looked back and now there are few areas on the planet where people haven't left their mark.

Some of us still seek out a 'puffin billy' experience as part of our travels. The North Borneo Railway in Sabah, East Malaysia, is the only rail track on the island of Borneo ... these few hundred kilometres of track are a paradise for those who dream of trains. There are two choices - the daily train to the small settlement of Temon or the twice-weekly tourist train to Papar. 'Trainheads' won't need any convincing to do both trips at least once.

The renovated North Borneo Railway operates a journey south from Tanjung Aru in Kota Kinabalu along a narrow rickety train line to Papar some 66 kilometres away. Looking around the train, it's easy to see that some of the passengers fall into the 'lunatic fringe, fanatical steam train devotees' category while others appear to have only a passing interest in the nostalgia of a mode of transport that has slipped into near oblivion ... the train accommodates 180 passengers in fully renovated colonial-style train carriages ... The railway recreates the experience of a bygone era in the land once known as British North Borneo. It's like a time capsule transporting passengers along what was once the lifeline for people living here.

Going Places (magazine of Malaysia Airlines) January 2002



Sample commentary plan

Writer's purpose and audience

This is to persuade readers of the attraction of travel on this railway. The audience is the general public and those interested in travel.

Tone

This is persuasive.

Vocabulary

Think about 'head off', 'puffin billy', 'trainheads', 'rickety', 'lunatic fringe', 'fanatical', 'nostalgia' and 'oblivion'.

Figures of speech

Think about 'traveller's check', 'opened up', 'paradise', 'devotees', 'time capsule'. Think also about pun, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, idiom and contrast.

Structure

Think about paragraphing.

3

On tracks for big day preparation

The passage below describes the writers' attempts at training to run a ten-kilometre race.



Task

Write a commentary in which you explain how the writers of this passage use language to entertain the reader.

Melanie: Hope springs eternal. I read last week about a woman in the London marathon who took up running a year ago and lost six stones [over forty kilos]. So I will persevere, although I haven't lost any weight yet.

My two dogs have, though. They've grown lean and mean with all the exercise they're getting. I don't know what they will do when I stop running, for as soon as I pick up my trainers, they start ululating [howling] with joy and jumping in the air, all four feet at once.

It is possible to chart some more progress. I am now doing three miles a night and feeling as exhausted at the end as I did, a few weeks back, after two miles.

Does anyone else suffer the same problems getting going?

Even with a warm up, the first half mile is dreadful, like trying to start a seized-up engine. It gets much easier in the middle of the run, before fading at the end ...

Fiona: Nine miles. In one day. In one outing, to be precise. I was exhilarated at the achievement, but completely exhausted. And it was all an accident.

Mr Bionic [her husband] had convinced me to try running five miles – a mile more than I've run before. He had the route planned out. (I couldn't get near the map because 'girls are navigationally challenged'.)

[Her husband got the map wrong and they ran nine miles by mistake.] ... my legs felt like lead ... when I found the estimated distance was nine miles, it felt fantastic (well, mentally, anyway).

The (Glasgow) Herald 20 April 2002

Sample commentary

The first writer's purpose is to entertain and create humour by her account of the exhausting efforts made and the discrepancy between her efforts and the results achieved. The second writer also portrays her husband in an amusing way. The proverb 'Hope springs eternal' as an opening suggests the eternal optimism of the human spirit, and suggests the possibility of achievement. However, anticlimax follows in the admission that she has not in fact lost any weight. Humour is derived from the discrepancy between the London Marathon woman's remarkable achievement and the writer's complete lack of it, and suggests that the writer is not really doing very much to lose weight, despite her boasts.

The fact that instead of Melanie the dogs have lost weight is also humorous, for two reasons: dogs do not set out to lose weight as humans do and in any case that was not the point of the exercise. 'Lean and mean' is melodious in its rhyme. 'Ululating with joy' is exaggerated, and the picture of them jumping so that all four feet are in the air simultaneously is both exaggeration and a source of humour – again, the dogs are shown as being ultra-fit, in contrast to the writer.

Further humour is derived from the fact that being exhausted counts as 'progress'. The reader is engaged by the question which makes up the short paragraph 4, and a

chatty, informal tone is adopted. The simile 'like trying to start a seized-up engine' is effective in that the writer's lack of fitness is compared to an engine which doesn't function properly. 'Seized-up' gives the impression of being jammed; the contrast between the reality of the writer's body and her wish to be fit is humorous.

The structure of the start of Fiona's section is three short non-sentences. The effect of this is again humorous: it emphasises that the author ran nine miles in one day and in one session, though the reader would hardly have expected her to run nine miles over more than one day. The writer makes the most of the distance travelled, which shows how exhausted she must have been. The 'accident' described is also humorous, especially when set against the arrogance of her husband who would not let her 'near the map'. He is shown to be cocky and foolish. Beginning the 'accident' sentence with 'And' further contributes to the conversational tone of the passage. 'Navigationally challenged' is humorous because it is a term made up by the husband in the style of modern, politically correct expressions using the term 'challenged'. The pompous tone of the husband provides a humorous contrast with his actual ineptitude in the matter of the map. Another simile is found to underpin the writer's lack of fitness in 'legs felt like lead' (i.e. heavy). The addition in brackets of 'well, mentally, anyway' is humorous as it introduces a qualification to what has gone before. In other words, she did not feel physically fantastic, or anything like it. She makes the contrast between her physical and mental conditions. The bracketed text is chatty and adds to the overall informal tone of the passage. The vocabulary of the whole passage consists of fairly short, simple words and the sentences are mainly short. All of this makes 'navigationally challenged' stand out and therefore heightens its pretentiousness and that of the husband.

4

Let freedom reign

Four years after his release from prison, where he spent twenty-seven years for his stand against apartheid, Nelson Mandela was elected president in South Africa's first democratic elections. This is a section of his inaugural address.

Task

Comment on the techniques and the language the speaker uses.

Today all of us do, by our presence here, and by our celebrations in other parts of our country and the world, confer glory and hope to newborn liberty.

Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud ...

The time for the healing of wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to build is upon us ... We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination ... We commit ourselves to the construction of a complete, just and lasting peace ...

We understand it still that there is no easy road to freedom ... We must therefore act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world. Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all.