

Writing Stories & Descriptions

This sample paper shows the style of creative writing resources available from 11 Plus Lifeline. For more resources, visit www.11pluslifeline.com.

How to Use This Pack

Like my other creative writing resources, the purpose of this pack is to teach creative writing students **to think more like a marker**: to understand which features of their writing are good and which are best avoided, and to develop a clear sense of how to impress.

- Your first task is to **have a go at the question on page 2**. Whether you complete it within a 40 minute time limit is up to you, and should depend on how advanced your preparation is. I don't usually encourage too much timed work until a few weeks before an exam.
- After completing your story, **carefully read the marking advice on pages 6 to 8**, and think about which level your answer might reach; but don't worry about marking your work properly yet.
- The next stage is to **read the two sample answers on pages 9 to 13 and try to mark them**, following the marking tables and using your own judgement. Tick the good things in each writer's work, circle or underline the bad things, and write as many comments as possible. In the end, decide on a percentage mark for each story.
- Then **read through my discussion of the stories on pages 14 to 24**. Look out for points where my comments agree with yours, and points where we disagree. Whether you agree with me or not, try to understand **why I give the two stories the marks I do (pages 24 to 25)**.
- With your new understanding of how it all works, **have a go at marking your own writing**: ticking, circling and writing comments, and giving a mark out of 100 **using the tables on pages 6 to 8**.
- **Think about how your piece could have been better**, and what you will try to do differently next time; and **give yourself a pat on the back for the good things you did!**
- If you feel up to it, **have another go!**

Writing Question

You are a passenger on an aeroplane. A surprising thing happens.

Write a short story based on this idea. You may choose your own title.

You should aim to end your story somewhere between the solid lines shown in the answer space. This is an ideal length for most 11-plus exam stories: long enough to impress, but short enough to allow time for thoughtful, descriptive writing.

Pay attention to the accuracy of your English, and be sure to check your work carefully!

If you want to work with a time limit, you could allow 40 minutes. This allows time for a thoughtful piece of writing and for careful checking at the end, but is close to many real exam timings.

Write a short story based on this idea. You may choose your own title.

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This image shows a full page of primary-ruled paper. It features multiple sets of horizontal dotted lines for writing, separated by two thick, solid black horizontal lines. The layout is clean and designed for young students' handwriting practice.

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Mark Scheme

There are many possible approaches to this question. The **two main dangers** come from people's first thoughts when faced with the title.

When you think of surprising events on an aeroplane, your mind may be drawn to events such as terrorist attacks, or to dramatic plots from action movies. However, **action plots** tend to involve too many events for a very short story, so description and high-quality writing get lost.

What's more, it is hard to keep an **appropriate emotional register** when describing events involving actual or potential loss of life: there is a serious risk of seeming trite or melodramatic, not to mention creating two-dimensional characters.

A second risk comes from the fact that our experience of flying is comparatively constrained: we always look down the same narrow tube of packed seats, and out of the same little portals. This often means that **similar descriptions come to many people's minds**: cars are like toys, beetles or ants, the sea is azure or emerald, clouds are like cotton wool or sheep, and so on.

Avoid images like these as far as possible. Good writing shouldn't be a matter of reeling off commonplace ideas! The reader wants you to interest them by **unfolding thoughts that they would not have had themselves**.

You will notice that the two stories featured in this pack are generally effective at avoiding these hazards.

Because some schools mark stories out of 25, some out of 30, some out of 50, and so on, my mark scheme gives a percentage. It allocates **80 marks to content** and **20 to SPAG** (*Spelling, Punctuation And Grammar*). Add these together for your mark out of 100.

It's impossible to mark creative writing properly with a tick-box table. You need to make all manner of personal judgements. **That's why this pack doesn't end with the marking grids on pages 7 & 8!** By the time you've worked through to the end of the example material which follows, you will have a much better understanding of how to use the tables.

Please see next page for marking tables

Content (marks out of 80)

Level 1	72-80 marks	The writing builds an interesting and believable character(s). Effective descriptions, often strikingly original, help us to imagine the narrator's world and to find it interesting. The piece is thoughtfully structured – the narrative starts engagingly, has a sense of direction, and ends in an effective and imaginative way. The plot makes sense to the reader. If it features dialogue, this is interesting and does not turn the story into a play script. The whole response is a reasonable length (it probably gets past the first solid line in the answer space). Vocabulary is adventurous, varied and usually well chosen. In summary, the answer is mature and impressive, and it is difficult to find significant ways in which it could be improved.
Level 2	64-71 marks	The piece has many of the features of Level 1, but there are some weaknesses, or the standard is not maintained throughout. Still a very good answer, which is enjoyable to read.
Level 3	52-63 marks	The answer is sometimes a bit boring and/or poorly written, but there are significant examples of Level 1/2 skills.
Level 4	40-51 marks	Not a very good answer, but there are some attempts at Level 1 skills, and these aren't a complete failure.
Level 5	24-39 marks	Not much goes right here. However, there is some sense of how to put a story/description together.
Level 6	1-23 marks	There aren't many good things to say about the answer, but some credit is given for the things that the writer has tried to do.

Please see next page for SPAG marking grid

SPAG (marks out of 20)

Level 1	19-20 marks	There are very few mistakes indeed, and those are either minor slips or mistakes only caused by being adventurous: for example, misspellings of unusual vocabulary.
Level 2	17-18 marks	Like Level 1, but with a few more mistakes. Punctuation errors such as missing commas may be sneaking in here and there.
Level 3	14-16 marks	There are a fair number of mistakes, but not to the extent that they make the writing difficult to understand. They don't tend to distract from the story. At this level, mistakes may start to reveal gaps in knowledge: for instance, an inconsistent grasp of how to use apostrophes.
Level 4	10-13 marks	There are a lot of mistakes, but the answer is still fairly readable.
Level 5	5-9 marks	At this level the English is a real mess – very poor.
Level 6	1-4 marks	Atrocious, but just about qualifies as English.

These boxes do not offer a score of 0. This would only apply in the case of an answer which has not been attempted, or which is wholly written in a non-English language.

The Stories in This Week's Pack

I held a competition to find two answers to feature and discuss in this week's pack.

The two winning answers both take innovative approaches to the task.

- First place went to **Natalie Cory-Wright** (her second success in my writing competitions).
- Second place was taken by **Kimaya**.

You'll find that both answers are impressive, but neither of them is perfect. When you've had a go at marking them, compare your comments with my own below.

Natalie's Answer

The small TV screen in front of me blurred as a sudden jolt of airsickness made me belch loudly into my airbag. I felt weak and suddenly tired as I turned off the TV with a sigh. Travelling through the air was no fun, even the azure, twinkling sea below me was just a heaving mass of colour. I was on my own, no reassuring hand was ready for me to clutch, no gentle fingers gave me a maternal stroke.

It seemed years until I was finally asleep, the sudden jolts of the plane startling me awake. When at last the peacefulness of sleep took its calm hold on me I was able to relax. The stiffness and rigidity of my former position was gone and in its place was a slumped body, flung thoughtlessly across the seat. The darkness beneath my eyelids grew more intense, until, with a final sigh, I sunk into the deepest depths of sleep.

For a moment I thought I was still asleep, the darkness around me as penetrating as the darkness behind my eyes. The roaring of the plane's engine brought me to my senses and I realised that the black around

me was that of a powercut.

I groped around for my bag, for the first time enduring a blind man's torture. When I finally found it I had an immediate sense of foreboding. Some mysterious phenomenon told me that something wasn't right. I flung open my rucksack & my panic increasing as I rummaged through my limited contents. My phone. It wasn't there.

I stood stock-still for a moment, taking in the full meaning of my loss. My friends, my details, my whole life was installed in that precious possession. I called desperately for a member of cabin crew to come and help me, biting a wobbling lip and holding back tears. Nobody answered, my pitiful voice echoed around the darkness as if mocking my misfortune. I turned behind me, ready to ask even a fellow passenger to help me. As I turned around in my seat, I found a pocket torch in the empty seat next to me. I shone it on the row behind me, already opening my mouth to explain. No words came out. There was nobody there. Nobody in the row in front of me either. Nobody anywhere, I was alone...

Kimaya's Answer – The Shapeshifter

The Shapeshifter.

"Good morning, welcome aboard this flight to Arizona. This is your captain speaking. Have a wonderful time." I gave a wriggle of delight as I could feel vibrations on my seat as I could hear the whirring noise of the ~~edge~~ engines warming up.

Staring out of the window, I saw the melancholy, grey sky turn into a pale cerulean blue with candyfloss clouds beneath me and the smiling sun above.

I started to browse the movies on the entertainment system when the loudspeakers crackled. ~~"Sorry for any inconvenience caused,~~ but "Welcome aboard the Shapeshifter!" the captain exclaimed. I pondered over what it could've meant. No sooner did I ask myself this question that I got the answer.

I saw everyone aboard glued to the windows, their mouths agape like a surprised monkey. Elderly, adults, teenagers, children and babies. I gazed outside and was shocked soft, white feathers had grown on the plane, and it had begun to flap them!

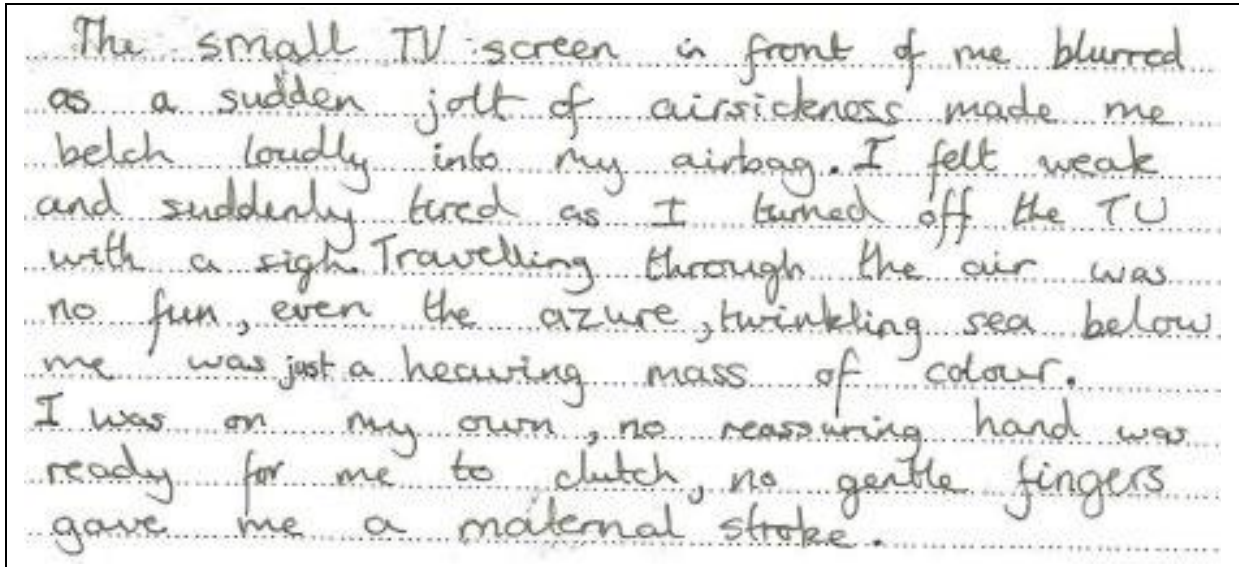
The aeroplane swooped and swerved; exactly like a bird. I bounced around and babies squealed with laughter. I was in an enormous dove! I could imagine people looking from below, seeing us as a graceful, elegant winged creature.

As we neared Arizona, laughs died down as the feathers gradually disintegrated and the plane went back to flying straight on. We neared the lush land, and I saw mesmerizing hues of pink, purple and blue fill the sky.

The aeroplane bobbed ~~to~~ as in a haste back to land. I set foot on land and looked up. I could see a beautiful evening sky swallowing ~~up~~ another ~~exc~~ exciting day into the calm silence of the dark night.

Discussing the Sample Answers

Opening: Natalie



The first sentence is terrific. The story begins with a mixture of description and action: we have an immediate sense of how the aircraft is moving, of the surroundings, and a suggestion that the narrator is an inexperienced flyer. Subtle patterns of alliteration and assonance reflect the different movements of the aeroplane: sometimes jolting, sometimes smooth.

I like the reference to a loud burp. It isn't something I see often in 11-plus stories, and it raises a smile!

The "as" in this first sentence might imply a connection between the blurring of the TV screen and the "belch". I doubt that the narrator has burped with quite this force! On the one hand, this ambiguity is amusing. On the other, greater clarity could have been achieved with "while". (I don't think it matters greatly, either way.)

I think "TU" in the second sentence is meant to be "TV". This aside, the simple description of feelings here is very well handled. In particular, the distinction between the weakness which the character already feels, and the tiredness which moves in on top of it, is subtle and believable.

The comma after "fun" is odd. This would be better as a full stop, a colon, a dash or a semicolon ... in fact, almost any punctuation apart from what it is!

I would get rid of "azure". It is a commonplace word to describe the sea, and "twinkling" is interesting by itself.

On the other hand, “just a heaving mass of colour” is a superb phrase.

The first comma in the final sentence needs to be full stop. The second comma could be kept, or swapped for a semicolon. It could be written like this:

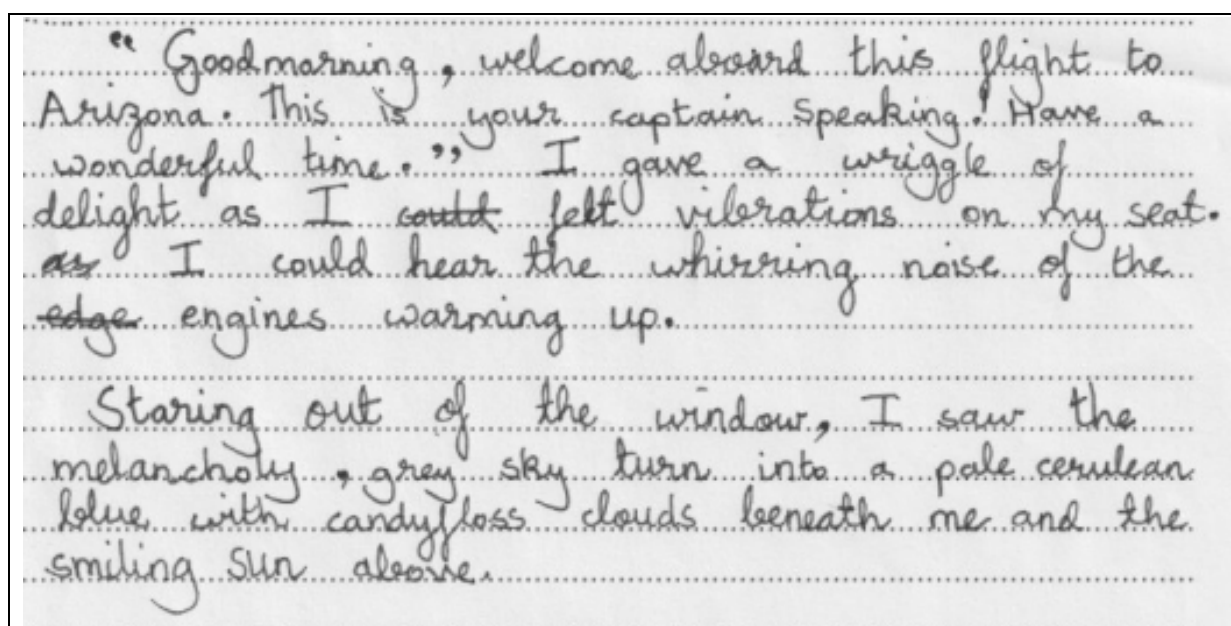
I was on my own. No reassuring hand was ready for me to clutch, no gentle fingers gave me a maternal stroke.

... or like this:

I was on my own. No reassuring hand was ready for me to clutch; no gentle fingers gave me a maternal stroke.

This sentence is very emotional, in a way that I find effective. We get clear sense of a young person who feels very alone – perhaps they are flying by themselves for the first time – and we can imagine what their mother has done to calm them on past journeys.

Opening: Kimaya



This opening is also very strong. The pilot’s announcement is a perfect way to take the reader directly into the atmosphere of a flight waiting to depart.

With this, however, comes a problem. The first paragraph is clearly set on the ground: the engines are “warming up”. The second paragraph is set high in the sky, because the clouds are “beneath” the narrator. Yet between these paragraphs, there is **nothing to indicate a leap in time**, so that when I read “staring out of the window” I imagine that the narrator is about to describe things around them at the airport ... until it

becomes clear that they are thousands of metres above the ground. This is disconcerting, in a way that seems like a mistake more than a writer's trick.

An easy solution would be to write "Staring out of the window ten minutes later ..." or something of the sort.

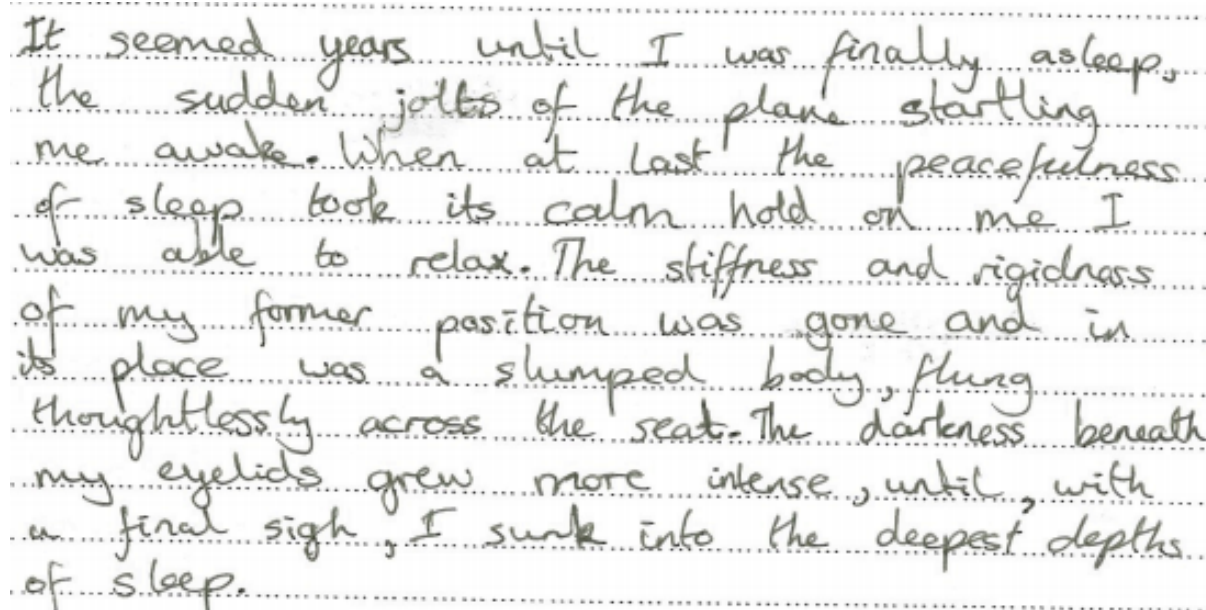
I would also have punctuated the beginning differently, with a full stop or exclamation mark after "Good morning".

The second sentence is a masterpiece. "Wriggle of delight" shows excellent judgement, because the verb "wriggle" denotes a very specific movement – and gives a flavour of the emotions attached to it – while also hinting at a certain childishness.

The word "on" could be replaced with "through", for example: to distinguish between the character – who is **on** the seat – and the vibrations that **emerge from** it. Nonetheless, this is a splendid use of a touch sensation, encouraging the reader to imagine themselves in the character's place. Always look for opportunities to use the five senses (touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing) in effective, creative ways like this.

I love the way the sky's emotion seems to change as the plane rises, until the "smiling sun" confirms the happy mood. Another reason I like "smiling sun" is that it suggests a small child's painting, with a grinning sun in the top right-hand corner! This makes a nice combination with the word "wriggle" and with "candyfloss clouds", reminding us of how young the leading character is.

Second section: Natalie



It seemed years until I was finally asleep, the sudden jolts of the plane startling me awake. When at last the peacefulness of sleep took its calm hold on me I was able to relax. The stiffness and rigidity of my former position was gone and in its place was a slumped body, flung thoughtlessly across the seat. The darkness beneath my eyelids grew more intense, until, with a final sigh, I sunk into the deepest depths of sleep.

The first sentence is a bit confusing, because the second clause – “the sudden jolts of the plane startling me awake” – is written as though it is part of what sent the narrator to sleep! Something like “... because the sudden jolts of the plane kept startling me awake” would solve the problem without making things too wordy.

Apart from that, the first sentence is great.

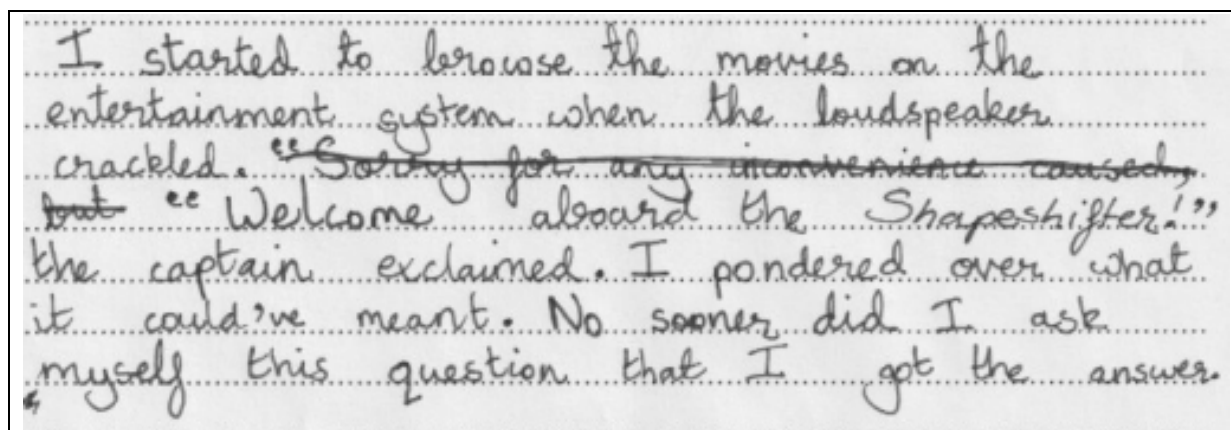
The second sentence describes an excellent idea, but it covers the ground a bit too thoroughly. “... the peacefulness of ...” could be deleted without taking away any of the sentence’s meaning.

“Rigidness” would be better as “rigidity”, and I wonder whether the word “stiffness” is necessary: it means essentially the same thing. These are the only (very minor) flaws in a wonderful image.

I like the slight weirdness of this sentence: how a “slumped body” replaces a “position” (How *can* a thing replace an abstract concept?), and how the narrator is suddenly talking about themselves from an out-of-body perspective. “Flung” and “slumped” are excellent word choices. “Thoughtlessly” is clever, because it implies “sloppily” and (literally) “unconsciously” at the same time.

The description of falling asleep that ends this section is fantastic.

Second section: Kimaya



This is a simple section, but still effective.

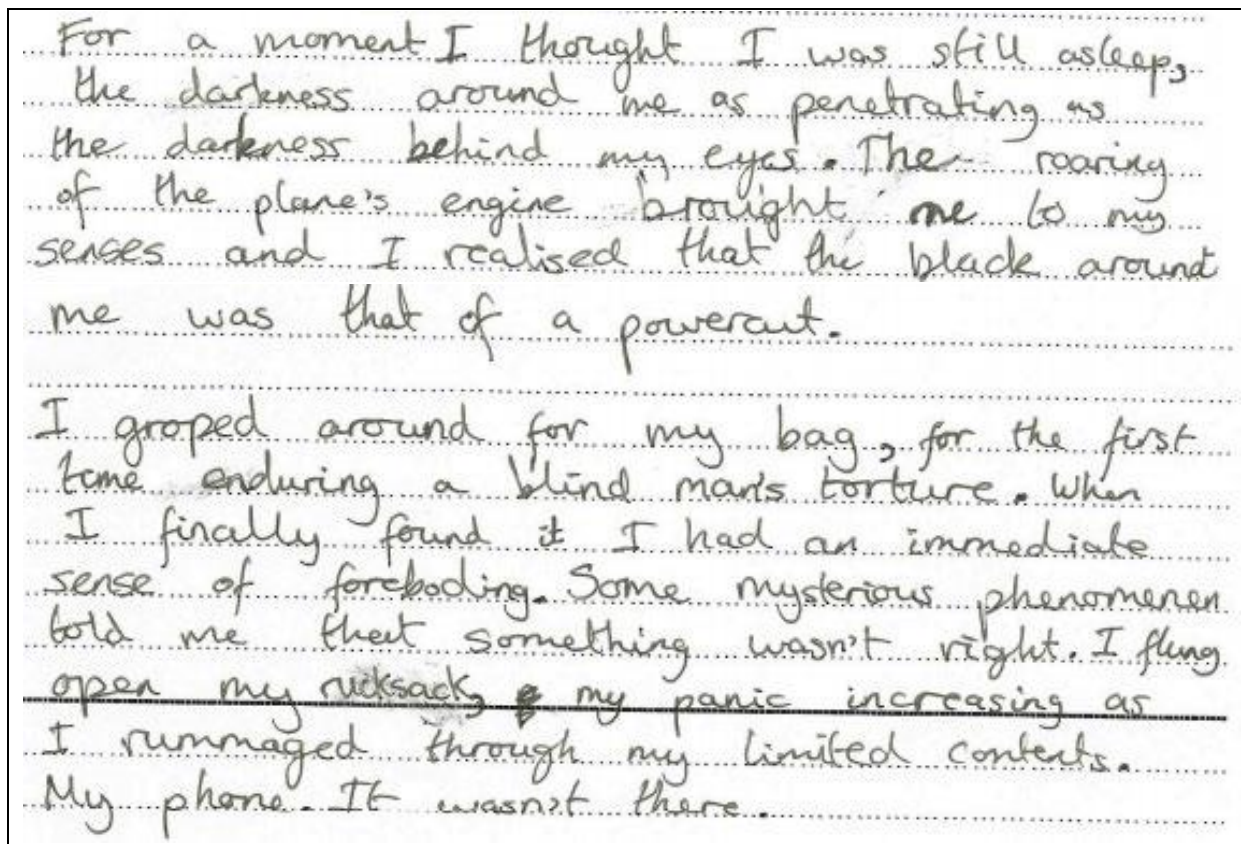
I like “crackled”, but there should be a “had” (“I had started to browse the movies”) and/or a comma before “when”. This is to make clear that the crackling speakers happen **after** the narrator is browsing the movies – the crackling doesn’t *cause* the browsing.

- Compare “I came inside when my dad called to me”, and ask yourself whether the father called before or after the speaker went inside!

“Exclaimed” is the wrong word. To “exclaim” is to cry out in surprise or pain.

In the next sentence, “over” isn’t needed and “could’ve” is very informal. It’s better to use “could have” unless you are writing quoted speech (in which case you can be as informal as you like, so long as it is appropriate to the character and the situation).

Third section: Natalie



The description of darkness in the first sentence here is superb. It includes the idea of darkness as “penetrating”, which is unusual – almost a paradox – because darkness is generally perceived as something that light penetrates *through*, rather than as something which *itself* penetrates. This draws the reader’s attention to how shocking, and how deep, this darkness is.

“Roaring” continues an exploration of the senses, as “groped” does by implication. This makes it easy to imagine ourselves in the narrator’s predicament.

“Engine” should probably be plural (“engines”).

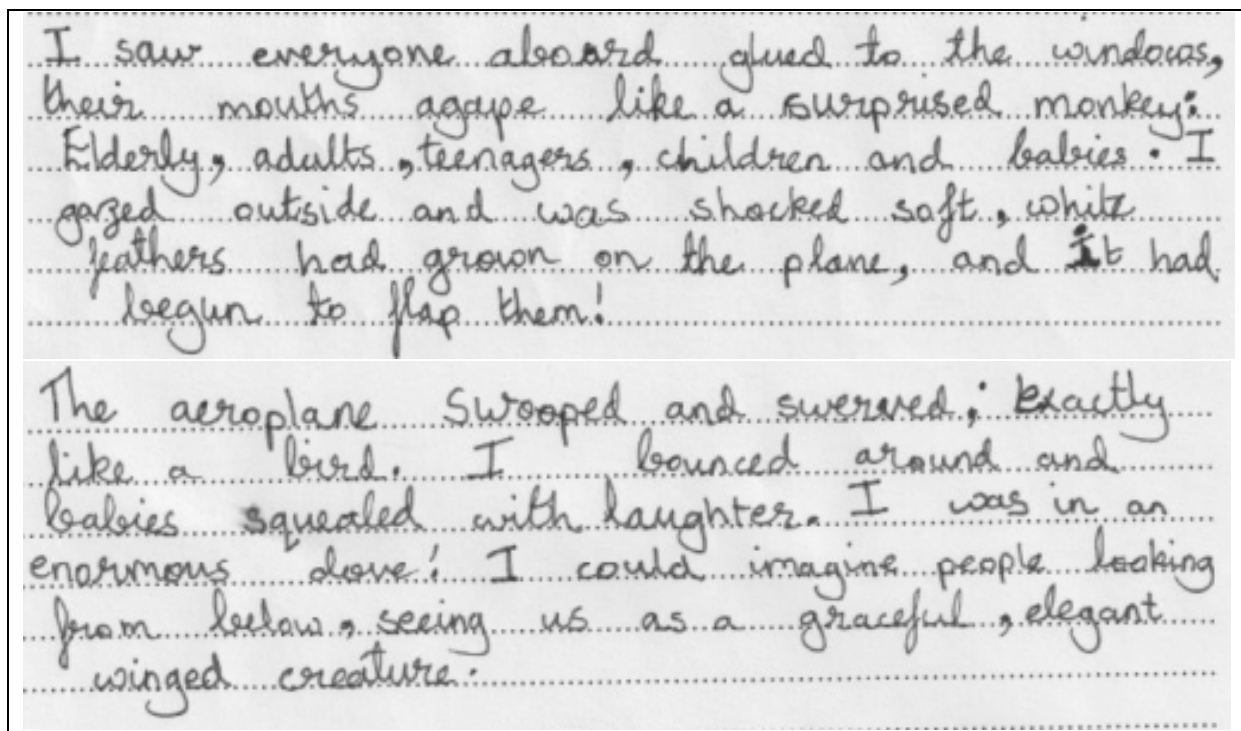
I don't quite understand the phrase "blind man's torture". For a blind person, not being able to see is normal; and I imagine that having to search for objects by touch is a fairly common experience for them. Nothing described up to this point is likely to fit a word as strong as "torture".

The vocabulary in the following section is very good. I like "flung" and "rummaging".

However, the phrase "I rummaged through my limited contents" is quite odd as a whole ... as though the narrator has cut a hole in their own belly and is having a good root around! Replace "my" with "the", and the problem is solved.

The short sentences at the end work well.

Third section: Kimaya



There are a few mistakes in the first paragraph here, which I ought to start by pointing out.

- Lots of people can't be like "a monkey"! The simile should have been "like surprised **monkeys**".
- The usual phrase is "**the** elderly". Also, when a colon is used in this way, with what follows not being grammatically a sentence in its own right, there wouldn't usually be a capital letter after it.
- "... shocked soft ..." clearly needs some punctuation (a full stop or a colon) in the middle.

- To be very picky, the plane will be flapping its wings (to which its feathers are attached), rather than moving its feathers directly.

The ideas and language in this paragraph are otherwise very good. However, when there are mistakes, there is a strong risk that the marker will only see them – and not notice the quality of the ideas that the writer is trying to express.

The next paragraph, however, is splendid.

I love the way that the narrator “bounces” while babies “squeal”: this makes the narrator seem like a baby themselves. It’s an amusing effect, showing the childlike joy of this magical experience.

“Swooped and swerved” is also a very nice phrase.

“As” in the last sentence could be more effectively replaced by a colon, in my opinion.

Final section: Natalie

I stood stock-still for a moment, taking in the full meaning of my loss. My friends, my details, my whole life was installed in that precious possession. I called desperately for a member of cabin crew to come and help me, biting a wobbling lip and holding back tears. Nobody answered, my pitiful voice echoed around the darkness as if mocking my misfortune. I turned behind me, ready to ask even a fellow passenger to help me. As I turned around in my seat, I found a pocket torch in the empty seat next to me. I shone it on the row behind me, already opening my mouth to explain. No words came out. There was nobody there. Nobody in the row in front of me either. Nobody anywhere, I was alone.

To start with, I think that there should be a paragraph break after “misfortune”. I might also break after “explain”, in the third line from the end. However, this is not a disaster.

The section up to “misfortune” is wonderful and (to me) amusing, because it is such a melodramatic, over-the-top way of describing a lost phone: an object that can, after all, be replaced. The idea that one’s “friends ... [and] whole life” are “installed” in a phone is ridiculous – and also an effective commentary on many people’s attitude to technology these days.

“Possession” is spelled incorrectly. Apart from this, “was” may seem a little odd because several things are listed. An easy solution would be to add a cunning ellipsis:

My friends, my details ... my whole life was installed in that precious possession.

The ellipsis suggests a deep intake of breath, and that “my whole life” **includes** “friends” and “details”, rather than just being another item in the list.

There should be a full stop after “answered”, or “echoed” could be changed to “echoing”. This sentence doesn’t work at the moment.

The details I like here include an exaggerated fear of strangers (“**even** a fellow passenger”); so English!

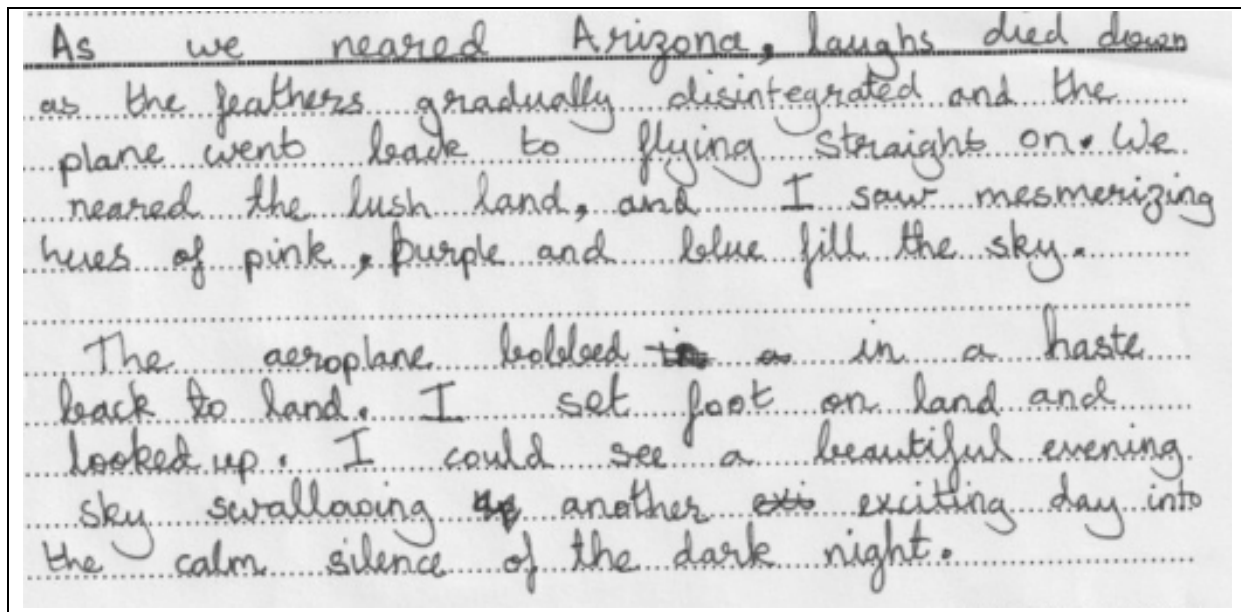
One slight distraction is the repetition of the verb “turn”, used in consecutive sentences.

Natalie uses an effective technique to vary the pacing of her narrative, when she describes things happening simultaneously: “as I turned” and “already opening my mouth” show the instinct of a skilful writer.

The repetition of “no” and “nobody” towards the end sounds like a terrified person stuttering out words they hardly believe: it works very well.

However, the comma in the final sentence would be better as a full stop. In my opinion, the final ellipsis (“...”) would also be better as a full stop, creating a more impressive sense of finality.

Final section: Kimaya



I love the way Kimaya unwinds the magic and takes us back to normality. You can imagine people rubbing their eyes and looking around themselves, feeling a little embarrassed and wondering whether things happened for everybody else *quite* as they seemed to them!

At the same time, she creates emotional continuity by allowing a touch of magic to linger, in the “mesmerizing hues of pink, purple and blue” which “fill the sky”.

However, “lush land” feels like a slightly forced moment. From an aeroplane’s height, would you particularly notice that the “land” was “lush”? *Possibly*, but to me this reads like a determined effort to ‘do’ alliteration, and sticks out unnaturally.

“... in a haste back to land” is a slightly awkward phrase. “Hastily” would achieve the same result more simply.

“Land” is repeated. One of them could be “the ground”, for example.

At any rate, between the two uses of “land” there is a leap in time: between when the plane is landing, and when a passenger can step out of it. It might help to put a paragraph break at this point. One easy solution would be to move the first sentence of the last paragraph, so that it become the last sentence of the penultimate one.

The last sentence is terrific, apart from an excess of adjectives, distracting the reader from the most effective ones. Here’s Kimaya’s sentence:

I could see a beautiful evening sky swallowing another exciting day into the calm silence of the dark night.

I wouldn't slash it to pieces: it is Kimaya's style to use a lot of description. However, I might cut it back a little, like this:

I could see a beautiful evening sky swallowing another exciting day into the calm of the night.

... or like this:

I could see a beautiful evening sky swallowing another exciting day into the silence of the night.

You might even remove "the" from before "night".

Marking the Answers

Please refer to the complete marking tables on pages 6 to 8.

Both of the stories featured in this pack are excellent, although both have some flaws.

If you haven't yet had a go at marking them yourself, why not do this before reading my assessments here? Once you've compared your views with mine, you'll have a much better understanding of how to evaluate your own work.

Natalie's Answer

As this is a strong piece of work, we can start by considering the top band for content:

Level 1	72-80 marks	The writing builds an interesting and believable character(s). Effective descriptions, often strikingly original, help us to imagine the narrator's world and to find it interesting. The piece is thoughtfully structured – the narrative starts engagingly, has a sense of direction, and ends in an effective and imaginative way. The plot makes sense to the reader. If it features dialogue, this is interesting and does not turn the story into a play script. The whole response is a reasonable length (it gets past the first solid line in the answer space). Vocabulary is adventurous, varied and usually well chosen. In summary, the answer is mature and impressive, and it is difficult to find significant ways in which it could be improved.
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Natalie hits all the criteria here, even though there are (for example) occasional descriptive moments which don't work completely.

I find myself agreeing with what I wrote for Natalie's *Andean Condor* story: "Natalie's answer is very solidly inside this top band, but with a few faults which prevent it reaching the top. 76 seems fair."

It's impressive to produce work at such a consistent level.

Meanwhile, Natalie's work feels like a robust Level 2 for SPAG:

Level 1	19-20 marks	There are very few mistakes indeed, and those are either minor slips or mistakes only caused by being adventurous: for example, misspellings of unusual vocabulary.
Level 2	17-18 marks	Like Level 1, but with a few more mistakes. Punctuation errors such as missing commas may be sneaking in here and there.
Level 3	14-16 marks	There are a fair number of mistakes, but not to the extent that they make the writing difficult to understand. They don't tend to distract from the story. At this level, mistakes may start to reveal gaps in knowledge: for instance, an inconsistent grasp of how to use apostrophes.

Therefore, Natalie scores 18.

Natalie has scored 76 for content and 18 for SPAG, giving $\frac{94}{100}$ or 94% overall.

This is a really superb mark.

Kimaya's Answer

Again, we're clearly in Level 1 for content.

There are a few weak points. For example, some of the descriptions could be refined. It might be a stretch, looking at the last sentence of the marking band, to say that it would be hard to improve the work: there are moments that could be refined.

Nonetheless, there is a striking imaginative force at work, and some impressive and original writing.

In the end, 73 feels fair for content.

The SPAG is at the very top of level 3, so 16 marks.

Kimaya has scored 73 for content and 16 for SPAG, giving $\frac{89}{100}$ or 89% overall.

You now have all the knowledge you need to mark your own story accurately, and perhaps have another go. Good luck!

END
