

A LEVEL
Topic Exploration Pack

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (EMC)

H474
For first teaching in 2015

Narrative

Version 2



Contents

Introduction	3
Section 1 An Introduction to Narrative	4
Section 2 Exploring Prose Style in Your Set Text	10
Section 3 Narrative – Writing as a Reader	11



Introduction

Component 2 in the OCR Language and Literature AS and Component 3 in the A Level cover the teaching of a complete narrative text. The focus is on exploring aspects of narrative such as voice, structure, the handling of time and prose style*.

This topic exploration pack provides practical classroom activities to introduce the teaching of narrative. These include an activity ranging across six texts to give students the bigger picture of what narrative is before focusing on their own set text; a focus on prose style and an activity which demonstrates one of the underlying principles of this specification: the relationship between analytical reading and creative writing. The activities also introduce students to short pieces of critical material and to ways of reading independently.

While it is only the A Level examination which will require students to complete the 'writing as a reader' task, activity 3 included here will also be helpful to students preparing for AS: it provides an opportunity to explore the nature of narrative through creative writing.

1. An Introduction to Narrative

This activity uses the openings of six narrative texts to introduce students to the study of narrative. It encourages them to explore the extracts in a very open way, identifying ways in which they are similar and different. Students are then asked to consider the nature of the extracts as the beginnings of novels. This is an opportunity to introduce students to key aspects of narrative, for example voice, structure, lexis, syntax and so on, at the same time as considering the impact of these choices on the reader. The activity uses extracts from critical writing by David Lodge and Blake Morrison to sharpen up and extend students' thinking about the function of the opening, the different ways in which writers may choose to begin their narrative and so begin to think more critically about narratives as constructs.

2. Exploring Prose Style in Your Set Text

This activity uses the students' set text, supporting them in developing the skills of analytical reading, learning how to balance close analysis with an ability to step back from the detail and range around the text. It develops students' abilities to talk (and write) effectively about both aspects of narrative such as narrative voice, the use of generic conventions and structural development and linguistic aspects such as lexical choices and figurative language.

*The draft Specification and Sample Assessment Materials will be available from OCR in June 2014. The specification has not yet been accredited by Ofqual.



The focus on the use of repetition and parallels, grammatical and linguistic choices will also support students in developing an understanding of stylistic approaches to texts and so prepare them for the poetry questions (AS and A Level) and drama (A Level).

3. Narrative – Writing as a Reader

This section of the A Level exam gives students the chance to demonstrate their knowledge of how narrative works by doing a piece of narrative writing of their own.

At the same time, preparation for original writing in the exam should involve lots of small experiments in creative writing which will feed into their reading, and enrich their understanding of narrative technique in the novel they're studying for Section A.

This is what is meant by 'reading as a writer and writing as a reader.'

These activities are designed to support students in both elements of the component.

Section 1

An Introduction to Narrative

Exploring extracts

The extracts on page 7-9 are all taken from narrative texts.

1. Read the extracts and in pairs talk about which of them appeals to you. Which would you want to continue reading – and why?
2. Go on to explore the extracts in any way you want. You could, for example, begin by pairing up extracts which seem to you similar in one way, then selecting a third which strikes you as very different, then starting again with a different pair of extracts.

Each extract is taken from the very beginning of the novel.

3. Now you know this, look again at the extracts and talk about the different ways in which the authors have chosen to begin their novel. You could use the prompts below to focus your discussion:
 - The type of narrative it seems to be from
 - The narrator and narrative voice
 - What, if anything, you can tell about the kind of narrative this is going to be
 - Structure: does it seem to begin at the start of the story? at the end? does it begin with a frame in which the story is introduced?



- The way it is written: style and narrative techniques such as word groups, imagery, syntax (sentence type and length), balance of description, narration, dialogue.
- Whether it draws you in and makes you want to read on?

Thinking about beginnings

The novelists Blake Morrison and David Lodge have both written about the importance of getting the beginning right and the different ways in which a writer might choose to open his or her novel. Here's what Morrison said in an article in *The Independent on Sunday* in 1999:

Beginnings matter. They always have. Middles have no limits – they can scrunch up or they can sprawl. Endings may be left open, ambiguous, incomplete. But no novel has ever not begun. And if it doesn't begin right, the suspicion is that the rest of it won't be right either. Gabriel Garcia Marquez has said that he sometimes spends months on a first paragraph, since it's there that the theme, style and tone of a book are defined – solve that and the rest comes easily...

4. Read the following extracts from David Lodge and Blake Morrison's discussions of the ways novels begin.
5. As a class, talk about the different ways they categorise the openings. Can you apply their categories to novels you have read?
6. Now look again at the extracts. Which of Lodge and Morrison's categories best describe these openings? Or do you need to invent a new category?

David Lodge: *The Art of Fiction*, 1992

There are, of course, many ways of beginning a novel.

A novel may begin with a set-piece description of a landscape or townscape that is to be the primary setting of the story, the *mise-en-scène* as film criticism terms it.

A novel may begin in the middle of a conversation.

It may begin with an arresting self-introduction by the narrator.

A novelist may begin with a philosophical reflection – or pitch a character into extreme jeopardy with the very first sentence.

Many novels begin with a frame story which explains how the main story was discovered or describes it being told to a fictional audience.



The categories identified and discussed by Blake Morrison in his article

- a) The plunge – in which the reader is thrust straight into the middle of things – almost as though they knew the story already.
- b) The shocker – in which the attention of the reader is grabbed by a shocking, astonishing or outrageous event, idea or statement.
- c) The intriguing narrator – in which the reader is engaged through their interest in the person telling the story.
- d) The epigram – a concise, often witty, statement capturing an idea that the novel will explore or develop.
- e) The promise – in which the reader is told what they can look forward to (for example, that the story to follow will be the saddest, most horrific, funniest ever told).
- f) The omen – in which the reader is told from the beginning that something bad is going to happen.
- g) The particulars – in which the story is rooted in detail, as though the author were a reporter rather than a novelist.
- h) The self-referral – in which the narrator refers in some way to their telling of the story – or their difficulty in doing so.

Reading the first chapter

7. Now go on to read the first chapter of the novel you are studying. How does the rest of the chapter relate to its beginning? You could think about:
 - the way the plot is developed
 - the use of the narrative voice
 - the introduction and development of characters
 - the prose style

Pick out two or three points to share with the rest of the class.



The extracts

Ian McEwan: *Atonement*

The play – for which Briony had designed the posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper – was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. When the preparations were complete, she had nothing to do but contemplate her finished draft and wait for the appearance of her cousins from the distant north. There would be time for only one day of rehearsal before her brother arrived. At some moments chilling, at others desperately sad, the play told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed. The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash toward a seaside town with her intended. Deserted by him and nearly everybody else, bed-bound in a garret, she discovers in herself a sense of humour. Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor—in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on “a windy sunlit day in spring.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

‘Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.’

He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I’m inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought – frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing



something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

Charlotte Bronte: Jane Eyre

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question.

I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed.

Chinua Achebe: Things Fall Apart

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat. That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father.



Jhumpa Lahiri: The Namesake

1968

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. She stares blankly at the pegboard behind the countertop where her cooking utensils hang, all slightly coated with grease. She wipes sweat from her face with the free end of her sari. Her swollen feet ache against speckled gray linoleum. Her pelvis aches from the baby's weight. She opens a cupboard, the shelves lined with a grimy yellow-and-white-checkered paper she's been meaning to replace, and reaches for another onion, frowning again as she pulls at its crisp magenta skin. A curious warmth floods her abdomen, followed by a tightening so severe she doubles over, gasping without sound, dropping the onion with a thud on the floor.

Arundhati Roy: The God of Small Things

Paradise Pickles & Preserves

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

The nights are clear, but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

But by early June the southwest monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.



Section 2

Exploring Prose Style in Your Set Text

Open the text

1. Working in pairs, open your set text novel at random.
2. Together place the passage in context.
 - a) Where does it occur in the novel?
 - b) What is its function?
 - c) What type of passage does it seem to be?
3. Share your first impressions of the style of the passage.
4. Take it turns briefly to introduce your passages to the class.

A close focus on aspects of narrative and style

5. As a class, choose one of your passages to work on together. You are going to analyse the style of this passage in more detail.
6. In pairs, take responsibility for one of the aspects of narrative listed below. Your teacher will guide you on which of these aspects it might be most interesting to explore in relation to your narrative text.
7. Annotate the passage with your comments on the narrative aspect you have been allocated, perhaps using stickies to record your points. In your pair, look over your annotations and choose one or two to share with the rest of the class.

Key aspects of narrative and style

- a) Narrative voice
- b) Structural development of passage
- c) Use of repetition, parallels, oppositions, contrasts
- d) Use of tenses
- e) Tone and register (poetic, conversational, informal, formal etc)
- f) Sentence types, structure and length
- g) Balance of dialogue, plot narration, reflection and description
- h) Lexical choices (groups, contrasts, kinds)
- i) Figurative language, symbols and motifs
- j) Use of generic conventions



Ranging across the text

8. To help you explore the style of your narrative text more widely, do one or more of the following activities.
- Flick through the text and choose another passage where the style seems to you to be very different. Make a note of the key ways in which the passage differs stylistically and your ideas about the reasons for the difference in style (for example, one passage might be action-packed and the other reflective). Share your passages as a class. Is the novel stylistically similar all the way through or are there very different styles?
 - Compare your passage with the opening and ending of the novel.
 - Choose one of the aspects of narrative and style (above) and pursue it through the text, selecting four or five short extracts which allow you to say something interesting. Sum up your discoveries as bullet points to share with the rest of the class.

Section 3

Narrative – Writing as a Reader

1. Transformational writing experiments on your set text

Choose one key moment in your set text. Take one or two paragraphs and re-write them, experimenting with **one** of the following:

- Change the narrative voice (e.g. from 1st to 3rd person).
- Introduce dialogue, where there is none, or remove dialogue to tell more of it in the narrative voice.
- Make a significant change to the prose style from what you find in the original (e.g. more or less poetic, more or less pared back, more or less complex syntax, more or less literary lexis).
- Re-order the material in the paragraphs, to bring some things forward and put others later (experimenting to see what happens if you foreground certain things, or tell things in a different order).

Think about the impact of these changes and what it tells you about the narrative style of your text.



2. Writing story outlines for each other

In pairs come up with a story outline, of the kind that you are likely to be presented with in the exam.

They will usually consist of 6 – 8 numbered points and give only the bare bones of the story, in chronological order, without any narrative shaping, or decisions about voice, point of view, chronology, prose style or other aspects of narrative technique.

You could make up a storyline from scratch, or use a legend, myth, bible story, fairy tale, film storyline or other well-known story. Your storyline could have elements of a genre, such as thriller (for instance involving a chase, or a murder), or it could be quite unclear from what happens what genre it could be.

Here are two from the Sample Assessment Material to give you an idea of what the exam Story Outlines look like*.

Story Outline 1

1. A student sets off to walk to his or her new sixth form college on his/her first day
2. A car nearly runs him/her over on a zebra crossing and drives on.
3. Further on, the car is held at traffic lights.
4. A row erupts between the student and the driver.
5. The student continues on to college and sees the same car parked outside the college.
6. The student walks into the first lesson to find that his/her English teacher is the driver of the car.

OR

Story Outline 2

1. A powerful king wanted to be the richest man in the world.
2. A god decided to grant the King one wish.
3. The King wished for everything he touched to be turned to gold.
4. The wish came true and he tried out his new powers.
5. His food and drink, and even his daughter, turned to gold.
6. He prayed to the god, begging him to reverse the wish.



Pass the storyline you have created on to another pair, so that they can have a go at turning it into a proper narrative, rather than a storyline, writing the opening paragraph. This will involve making choices of narrative technique, such as around voice, point of view, use of description, dialogue, where to start, whether to tell the story chronologically and so on.

Do this two or three more times. Give the narratives to the original pair. Each pair should now have three or four narrative openings for their storyline. Read your openings and talk about how differently people have approached the narrative. What kinds of techniques have they used? Choose a favourite one to share, either with the whole class or with another pair and explain what aspects of the narrative you particularly liked.

3. Writing for Section B of the Exam

These examples are designed to show the kind of narrative developments students might create in response to a storyline in the exam. They are based on one of the storylines in the Sample Assessment Material (reprinted above).

The examples are not written by students, so they don't indicate anything about the expected 'standard' of writing but they do give a flavour of the different narrative choices that might be possible. There are many other valid choices that could be made but these help to signal how rich and varied the responses to the tasks might be.

In each case, the examples give just the first 100-150 words of what would be a 500 word exam answer.

They are followed by a sample commentary for Example 1 – just the first 125 words of the 250 word commentary that is required, commenting on the whole narrative opening written for Task 1.

1. Read the three narrative openings. Talk about what different choices have been made in each of the openings, drawing on your understanding of narrative technique from across this unit.
2. If you were going to write a commentary on the first example, what kinds of things might you want to draw attention to? Write the first 100 or so words of a commentary on this storyline, then look at the example commentary opening. Talk about what approach is taken in the commentary and what that suggests about what makes a good commentary.
3. Write a fresh narrative of your own in response to the Story Outline, taking your own decisions about narrative technique. Feel free to make quite different choices from those of the three you have read, for instance telling it from the point of view of another outside observer, or using mainly dialogue, or doing a highly detailed description of the scene, or using more experimental narrative approaches. Write it as a full 500 word piece. Then go on to write a full 250 word commentary, exploring the narrative decisions you have taken.



Story Outline 1

Writing Example 1

I'm nursing a great big fat purple bruise, my cheek's swelling up to the size of a pumpkin and I'm cursing the fact that I'm going to turn up on my first day at college looking like an extra from *Casualty*, rather than the suave new A Level student of my imagination. Should I just turn back and go home? No. I don't want to miss my first English lesson and I'd be letting my old mate Danny down. I can't do that. And anyway, there's a good story to be told, with me as hero, and the driver of the black Skoda who tried to knock me over as the poor puny little creep who got the worst of it all and wouldn't be trying it on with anyone else for a long time to come, after the thorough-going pasting I'd given him. etc

Writing Example 2

Mr Morris walked down the corridor and towards his teaching room. He was looking agitated and a little dishevelled. His hands trembled and he could feel a little fluttering in the corner of his eye, the return of a nervous tic that he thought he'd long put past him. This wasn't the kind of start to the term that he had been hoping for, nor the kind of impression he hoped to create with his new class.

It was hard to concentrate on the tasks ahead, his thoughts returning again and again to that moment when he'd wound down his window and started yelling his head off at the tall, gangly youth standing on the zebra crossing etc

Writing Example 3

That episode at the beginning of my period at Hulveston Sixth Form College was, I see now, a prophetic sign of what was to come. Over the years that have elapsed, I have often found myself wishing that I'd been slower to rush to judgment that day, more willing to look below the surface of things and see things from the perspective of others. Had I been more aware of the dangers of making instant decisions about people, their inner experiences and motivations, and the strange and unexpected ways in which two people's lives can become interwoven, a lot of suffering might have been avoided.

It all started on an ordinary day, at the start of a brand new phase of my life, my first steps towards adulthood.



Example commentary

Example 1

I've chosen to write my narrative using a first person narrative voice, from the perspective of the student. Rather than setting the scene, I've launched straight in, in media res, at a point after the incident with the car driver. I wanted to create suspense, so that the reader wonders why the narrator has all the signs of having been beaten up. I've used language features that suggest a conversational voice, such as minor sentences, rhetorical questions, starting sentences with 'And' and colloquial lexis, such as 'big fat purple bruise', 'mate', 'creep', 'pasting', to give a flavour of the narrator's spoken voice. However the voice remains quite a conventional one, rather than trying to create an experimental or edgy, contemporary style of narrator etc...





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