

Introduction to the Composition

- Choose your title carefully. Think which language genre suits you best.

Don't be attracted to a short story because the title sounds exciting or interesting; be sure you can write a well-structured piece that is not simply a re-write of a film.

- Plan your essay, jotting down ideas as they come to you. Then organise them into a paragraph plan. Sometimes you discover at this stage that a title which seemed appealing is more difficult than you had first imagined and you can't think of enough ideas to fill the required length. It is better to discover this at the planning stage, abandon the essay and start again than to find out when you have already written a full page.
- Look at your plan again under each of the following headings:

Clarity of purpose – are you certain your essay is to the point? Can every part of it be linked back to the title? Check all the points you plan to make and make sure you have not gone off the point at any stage. Are you writing in the correct language genre? Are you very clear on what your composition is trying to achieve? If it's a short story, have you avoided using a clichéd plot? (30%)

Coherence – Have you organised your essay well? Is there a logical order to your paragraphs? Is the register appropriate and is the same register maintained throughout the entire composition? (30%)

Keep your writing clear and refreshingly interesting. Do not rely on common modifiers such as 'pretty', 'little' 'a lot', 'really' and 'very'. One writer on style refers to these overused qualifiers as 'The leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words'.

Your essay should be approximately four pages in length.



Feature Article - Structure

There is no set structure for a feature article, but there are a few tips that can help you to plan your composition.

- ✓ Begin with an observation, a question, an anecdote or a mention of a recent news story.
- ✓ Comment on the broader implications of the observation, anecdote or story
- ✓ Give your analysis of the broader implications
- ✓ Provide an example or examples which support your analysis
- ✓ Consider the implications of the problem (if there is one) not being addressed
- ✓ Suggest ways in which the problem might be solved if applicable
- ✓ End with a short, powerful sentence

Strategies for writing good introductions to discursive essays

Sometimes more than one method can be used to start your essay.

1. The funnel method

In this method, the first sentence is broad and general. It introduces your thesis, and each following sentence is narrower and more focused. Finally, it narrows down to your thesis. The important thing in this approach is that your funnel should not be too large, because you never will be able to narrow down.

Example:

Animals have been used in medical research for a long time. In recent years, animal rights organisations have questioned whether it is ethical or not to use animals for the benefits of medical progress. They believe that animals are equal to humans and that they have equal rights with human beings. In my opinion, animals certainly have some rights, but humans with their more developed brains are superior to them, therefore if there is no other alternative, animals may be used in medical research.

2. Asking questions

Using questions to attract the attention of your readers is another useful strategy. Then, your essay proceeds to answer the questions you have posed in the introduction.

Do modern children's books shelter youngsters too much? There is a place for puppies and bunnies, for Bob the Builder and Thomas the Tank Engine, and maybe even for the Care Bears. After all, perseverance and kindness are important life lessons. But surely there's still a place for the gruesome fairytales with wicked witches and hungry wolves, as well as matter-of-fact children's books that pull no punches and don't water down life. Literarily speaking, have we gone too soft?

4. Using an anecdote

Using a short anecdote is another way to start your essay. If you have a relevant anecdote ready, using it in the introduction will make your essay more interesting and attract the attention of your reader.

The Conclusion – General Points

Using questions and quotations in the conclusion can be a good way to bring your essay to a close. If you can find a quotation that fits your position, the conclusion will sound interesting.

There are other ways of ending an essay, of course. Whichever method you use, make sure that you reach a conclusion at the end of your essay.

- ✓ Never bring up new ideas or start new discussions in the conclusion.
- ✓ Do not let your essay finish weakly with a weak conclusion section. A good essay deserves a good conclusion.
- ✓ Make sure that your conclusion is consistent with the arguments in your essay. Sometimes you may get carried away and end up concluding the opposite of your thesis, especially if you do not plan well. Do not let such inconsistency happen.

Past Titles - Articles

In Text 3, Penelope Lively remembers falling in love.

Write a feature article for a magazine, about the importance of romance in our lives.

The article may be light-hearted or serious. (2015 Theme: Challenges)

‘How has the weather influenced your writing?’

Write a feature article for a magazine, which may be light-hearted or serious, about Irish people’s obsession with the weather. (2014 Theme: Influence)

‘...a more ordered idea of urban existence.’

Write a feature article for a popular magazine in which you discuss the competing attractions of both urban and rural lifestyles. (2013 Theme: Story-telling)

‘Memory is a ghost train too.’

Write a feature article for a newspaper or magazine on the role played by memory and the past in our lives. (2012 Theme: Memory)

‘... all the time in the world...’

Write a light-hearted and entertaining article, intended for publication in a magazine aimed at young people, in response to the phrase, ‘...all the time in the world’. (2012 Theme: Memory)

‘I don’t discriminate...’

Write an article for a serious newspaper or magazine on the twin issues of discrimination and tolerance. (2011 Theme: Mystery)

‘...a thin girl...flips the key-guard of her phone and scrolls her texts.’ Write an article for a popular magazine in which you outline your views about the impact of technology on the lives of young people. (2011 Theme: Mystery)

‘You’re a new neighbour, aren’t you?’

Write an article (serious or light-hearted) for a popular magazine on being a good neighbour. (2010 Theme: The Future)

‘...a living classroom...’

Write an article (serious or light-hearted) for a school magazine about your experience of education over the last number of years. (2009 Theme: Decisions)

Sample Article 1 - Realistic Kids' Books

by Beth Carswell (adapted for the purposes of these notes)

Do modern children's books shelter youngsters too much? There is a place for puppies and bunnies, for Bob the Builder and Thomas the Tank Engine, and maybe even for the Care Bears. After all, perseverance and kindness are important life lessons.

But surely there's still a place for the gruesome fairytales with wicked witches and hungry wolves, as well as matter-of-fact children's books that pull no punches and don't water down life. Literarily speaking, have we gone too soft?

Persuader or pressure phrase: 'But surely' used to good effect.

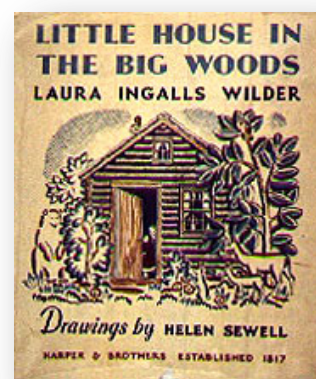
Rhetorical questions draw the reader in.

Personal memories used to illustrate the point.

I remember greatly enjoying 'Little House in the Big Wood' as a small child. I read with interest the story about Laura Ingalls Wilder and her sister Mary inflating a pig's bladder like a balloon on slaughter day, and having a grand time playing with it. I also

recall the graphic, frank descriptions of the pig being killed and drained, having its bristly whiskers scraped off, and then having its body rendered in an enormous cauldron of boiling water.

Even as a child who loved animals, I recognised there was no cruelty in this. The pig was killed quickly - for food, for fat, for life. I understood the connection between that pig and my dinner, and while it seemed a bit unfair and sad, the passages in the book were explained frankly, and to my young mind, were simple fact.



Look at books like William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies' and Barry Hines' 'A Kestrel For A Knave'. In 'Lord of the Flies', children are pitted against each other in the most horrific and violent of circumstances, and two are killed. And 'A Kestrel for a Knave' is basically one day in the life of a young, working-class boy whose life is so bleak, hopeless and relentless that it

Broader approach to the topic mixed with examples and another rhetorical question.

rises up and snuffs out the one spark of joy that accidentally flies into it, leaving him in abject misery once more. From the savage to the wretched, both books depict very adult, advanced concepts and situations, yet both were assigned as reading for secondary school classes for decades. Were children disturbed and haunted

as a result?

Another story that didn't make me bat an eyelash was 'Little Red Riding Hood' These days, there are countless versions. The best known the Brothers Grimm version, in which a little girl is accosted in the woods by a wolf on the way to bring food to her sick grandmother. Upon learning Red's destination, the wolf races ahead, consumes Grandma in one swallow, disguises himself in her clothes, and waits for Red. When Red arrives, the wolf swallows her, as well. However, there is a happy ending (not for the wolf) when a passing woodsman chops open the wolf, releasing both Little Red and Grandma unharmed.

'Little Red Riding Hood' is hundreds and hundreds of years old. Variants of the story have been traced back as early as the 15th century. To a modern child like myself, the idea of walking alone through a forest, let alone a dark, dangerous forest teeming with wolves, was positively thrilling. More importantly, it was completely foreign and fictional.



The stories also held real value. 'Little Red Riding Hood' cautions against trusting strangers with personal information. 'The Red Shoes', a gruesome tale by Hans Christian Andersen, sees a little girl trick her adoptive mother into buying her expensive red shoes. She is punished for her vanity when the shoes turn out to be cursed, and won't allow her to stop dancing or remove the shoes. She eventually begs an

executioner to chop her feet off, and he complies. Grim, but it teaches the lesson of valuing loved ones over possessions.

Children, I believe, are brighter, more observant, and more intuitive than many adults give them credit for. Children who are loved, taught, and read to, who are encouraged to be inquisitive, understand the difference between right and wrong, between reality from make-believe. They perceive lessons and symbols. They comprehend that while two nasty old biddies being squashed flat in a story book (as in Roald Dahl's James and the Giant Peach) is a funny example of just desserts, death in reality is a very big deal, and permanent.

Analysis of the points raised.

Acknowledging and refuting other side of the argument.

The difference between reality and stories isn't lost on children. While I might have been on the edge of my seat (bed) while reading Little Red Riding Hood, the story neither gave me a phobia of wolves nor a mistaken belief in the regurgitation of animals unharmed. My brain, even at age five or six, knew real from pretend.

I understand the desire to protect innocence and keep a child from

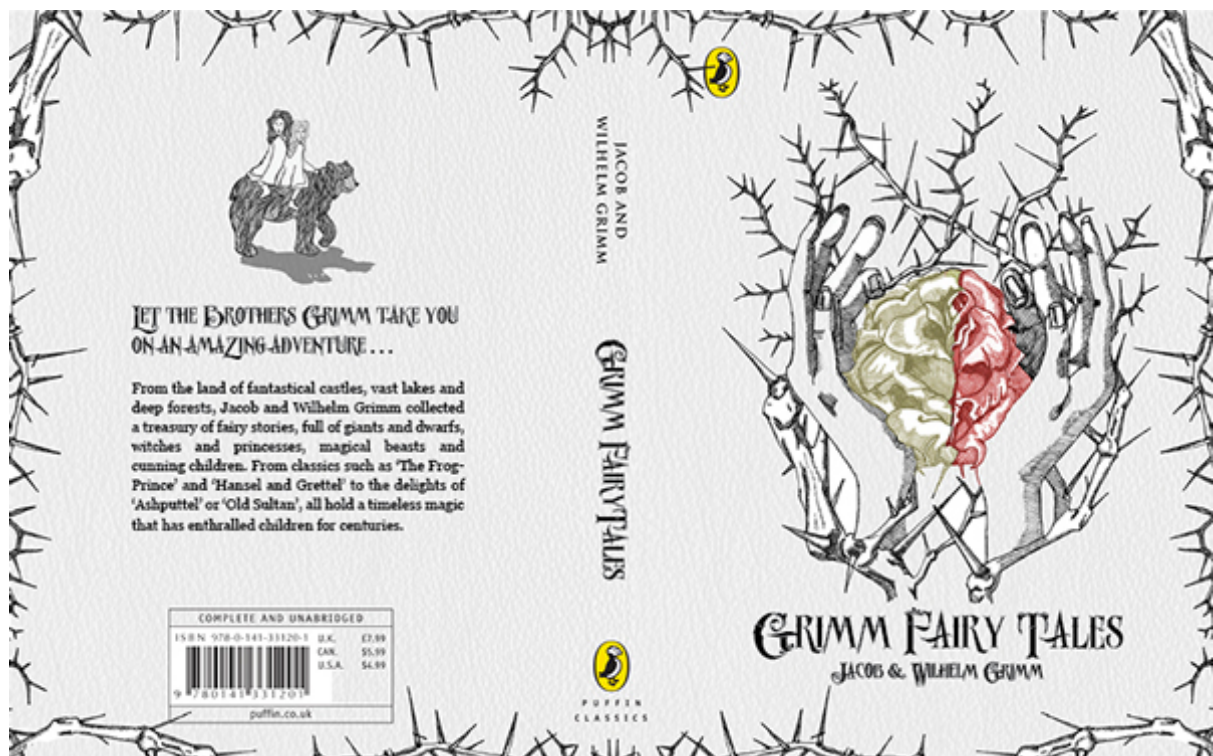
unpleasantness. But is leading a child to believe that all is lovely and fluffy and safe and friendly fair? Does it give them an adequate picture of the world, or is it setting them up for a rude awakening when they get out on their own? It seems to me the best policy is to be honest and frank.

Suggested solution

And what about the relish of a good gruesome read? When I was little I positively delighted in the dark and macabre, loved the squishy, dark, scary places, provided I knew when I closed the book I was tucked in and safe. And I always knew when I was being condescended to, and appreciated when I wasn't. Part of the fun of childhood, as well as reading, is in using our imagination - and not just one side of it.

Persuasive and catchy final sentence. There is no need for a long, repetitive conclusion.

Here's to the children's books that pull no punches, that tell it like it is, that realise gruesome guts and growing up are part of being a kid.



Cyberbullying

Adapted from an article by India Knight

Say you're at a party. You're introduced to someone for the first time. In the course of conversation this complete stranger says something you don't agree with. What do you do – keep quiet? Roll your eyes and move the conversation on? Find someone else to talk to? Do you try to convey your point of view? Stamp your foot a bit? Leave the room?

Or do you tell them they're a mentally retarded freak and cast wild aspersions on their personal life, sexual quirks, domestic set-up, the physical attractiveness of their children, meanness to animals and so on? Do you tell them they're so sexually undesirable they could crack a mirror at 20 paces? That they're such a repulsive wreck you wouldn't be surprised if their wife/husband had zillions of affairs? And then do you crank it up a notch, just to make sure?

No, you're thinking. Of course not. I'd never do that. To which I say, not so fast. What if you were anonymous? Invisible? Would you alter your behaviour? Remember, nothing terrible has happened. You haven't just witnessed someone beat up somebody else or hurt a child. All that's happened is that someone has said something you don't agree with. It has annoyed you, but it is completely irrelevant to your well-being. Still no? Well, you clearly have never posted a comment on any website, then.

I read a story in a newspaper last week which reported what happened when a 13-year-old girl went to school wearing a skirt that was too short. Her teacher told her she looked like a 'slut' and said that skirt 'does nothing for your cellulite'. The newspaper that reported this story identified the child and named the school she attends. Like all newspapers, it encouraged readers to comment on articles. They did so in their dozens. Many agreed with the teacher: the girl did look 'like a slut' ('and dumpy too') and what was the world coming to?

So now you have a load of anonymous adults, fuelled by moral outrage and what they see as their own impeccable rectitude, hiding behind pseudonyms, calling a named child a slut. The child had been reduced to tears by the teacher's initial outburst. Let's just hope she didn't check to see what the marvellous great British public had to say. I wrote to the Press Complaints Commission, quoting clause 6 of its code of conduct, namely that 'young people should be free to complete their time at school without unnecessary intrusion'. It brushed me off because a child being called a slut by a load of adult strangers didn't personally affect me.

Anonymous online commenting means that the public's disinhibition is out of control in some quarters. It takes effort to write a cross letter: you have to get the paper, the pen,

compose the letter, find a stamp and then a postbox – by which time you’ve calmed down and can’t necessarily be bothered. Online, your bile can be shared in seconds and you can say all the things you’d never dare to say ‘in real life’. Except it is real life. One ‘quality’ newspaper’s website is filled with strange people calling other people names and deriding their opinions with a nastiness that verges on psychosis. Amusingly, the newspaper prides itself on its liberal credentials. All I can say is that it has some spectacularly foul readers.

All this became evident during the weeks following the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, where her mother’s character was demolished online: she was too pretty, she was not sad enough, she was weird and behaving weirdly, she killed Madeleine herself – she’d know how, being a doctor. The poisonous posters were, of course, anonymous.

None, I imagine, would have dreamt of saying any of these things to McCann face to face. I doubt they’d even be comfortable expressing them if doing so involved posting a real address and having it published for all to see. Equally, the people calling such and such a celebrity ‘fat’ or ‘skanky’ or ‘diseased’ might be less likely to do so if their comment involved being photographed themselves, looking gorgeous in their gorgeous homes.

Anonymity online has its uses: people who helpfully leak material in the public interest that would otherwise be suppressed obviously can’t sign their entries. But the people I’m talking about neither run websites nor act in the public interest. They just delight in the ease with which they can be unspeakably vile.

They do it because no one’s going to catch them doing it and also because there is a strange perception that if you are in any way in the public eye – if you’re good at acting, say, or can carry a tune – then you somehow deserve to be abused. You can ‘take it’. You’ve put yourself ‘out there’ ergo you are fair game: you have no feelings or insecurities. If the commentators are properly stupid, they will tell themselves that being financially secure and having a nice life means some hapless celeb can ‘take it’ even more. Do these people go and abuse their bosses because they live in bigger houses and drive flashier cars? Of course not.

I know a lot of female newspaper columnists; none can bear to look at the readers’ comments below her articles online. It’s a shame, because it would be nice to enter into debate with the non-loony element, or to have one’s views broadened, or even to have a bit of human interaction. But life’s too short to have a beautiful day ruined by the demented rantings of complete strangers – and we’re cynical hacks, not teenage schoolgirls.

People should think twice before pressing the send button. They might also bear in mind that anonymous commenting’s days are numbered, according to my more technologically knowledgeable friends: ‘Open identity is the future and it’s on its way.’ This means no more adults calling children sluts and that’s okay by me.

Misery Lit

The public's appetite for gruesome, heave-making detail always disconcerts me. I consider myself to be robust rather than squeamish; matter-of-fact rather than wet. My eyes don't well with tears of joy at the sight of kittens playing. I understand that not everything is lovely, but I don't trawl for trauma, either. If I see a particularly upsetting headline, I skim what comes below and stop reading the second I've got the gist. I stupidly assume that most people feel the same way, when quite clearly the opposite is true.

The idea, for example, that there would be a hungry readership for a mass-market paperback about Baby P – 300 pages of minute detail, say – strikes me as revolting and morally gross. It is dubious, to say the least, to get your kicks from devouring pages of grim detail about someone else's stomach-churning misery – details that offer no insight, that shine no light, but that merely confirm what you already knew: that some people are monstrous and that some people's lives are desperate.

This would appear to be a minority view. No such book exists – yet – although I've no doubt that some enterprising soul is putting one together as we speak. Would it be a bestseller? Probably. People come up with all sorts of excuses to feed their quasi-pornographic appetite for other people's misery: it's 'important' to understand the evil that ordinary-seeming people are capable of; it's 'fascinating' to read about people's depravity; it's 'necessary' to be fully informed before forming an opinion (that last is especially disingenuous, given that the opinion is usually formed within 30 seconds of the first news report).

And, of course – unspoken, but at the core of all this – reading this stuff makes you feel better about your own life's shortcomings, because at least your dad didn't rape you. But then a tub of ice-cream or a glass of wine or whatever harmless vice keeps you going makes you feel better, too.

I don't think misery lit is a harmless vice. I don't think people should be cheered by the fact that they weren't victims of incest. And I don't think reading about victims of incest ought to pass for entertainment. I think people who read these books should hang their heads in shame.

Misery lit, once the province of tiny American publishing houses that no one had ever heard of, is now enormous business; in Britain the sector is worth about £24m. Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It* (1995) is widely credited with bringing the genre to the mass market. That

book, and its sequels, have spent a combined total of 448 weeks on The New York Times's bestseller list, despite the chorus of doubts about its veracity (doubts come with the territory).

Frank McCourt's classmates have raised many a quizzical eyebrow over his *Angela's Ashes*. A *Memoir of the Holocaust Years (1997)* by 'Misha Defonseca' was a European bestseller, translated into 18 languages – and then shown to be nonsense: the author was not Jewish; her parents were not deported; she did not roam Europe killing Germans and bonding with wolves. Sometimes, people just make it up.

What is especially astounding about misery lit is that its readership is estimated to be 80% to 90% female, with the bulk of sales taking place in supermarkets. Presumably, during the weekly shop, the typical customer picks up a volume about a child who spent his infancy being punched to go with the Pringles. Are these the same women who are expressing their grief and anger about Baby P all over the internet: the ones setting up online shrines, or grotesque social networking groups that enable one to become a 'fan' of Baby P?

If they're not in the supermarket or online, perhaps they're in Waterstone's at its section called *Painful Lives*, browsing through titles such as the hugely popular *Please, Daddy, No*, which is about a child raped by his father before becoming a plaything for paedophiles – just the thing to curl up with on a rainy Sunday. Torey Hayden, the American author who produces titles such as *Ghost Girl* – about a child so chronically abused that she seemed half-dead – has sold 25m books worldwide.

I hold the possibly old-fashioned, or maybe just hippyish, or maybe just sane, view that you can't dictate what lodges itself in your head. That's why I'm not keen on young children watching horror films or reading horror books – not when a close friend has had recurring nightmares for more than a decade as a result of a childhood devotion to James Herbert. Years ago I tried to explain this to my eldest son, then 10, when he announced that everyone in his class was reading *A Child Called It* and why couldn't he and did I know that the mother in the book stabbed her son in the stomach and made him drink bleach?

I checked with other parents and, sure enough, these children, who five years ago had been in nursery, really were lapping up abuse memoirs. One mother said, 'Well, at least he's reading', which makes you wonder: what's wrong with Harry Potter?

Forget James Herbert: this is in another league altogether. It doesn't take a child psychologist, surely, to point out the harm that such soul-polluting material might cause. Do we really want a world where some piece of horrific abuse prompts our children to say, 'Oh

yes, that's just like the bit in *Don't Tell Mummy*, only to have the parent argue that no, actually, it's more like the scenario in *Damaged*, or was it *Daddy's Little Girl*? Many people already do and see nothing wrong with it. I think they should have their heads examined.

Still, there may be no need. It is possible that the libel suit being brought against Constance Briscoe - author of the bestselling abuse memoir *Ugly* – may coincide with a decrease in the public appetite for mis-lit, a genre at its most popular during our period of greatest prosperity. In these financially constrained times perhaps we'll develop an appetite for books that make us happy. Failing which, there's always *My Godawful Life: Abandoned. Betrayed. Stuck to the Window*, by Michael Kelly, the first mis-lit spoof featuring, among other things, living in a bird coop and being bullied by pigeons, as well as prostitution, Tourette's, necrophilia, anorexia and autism. Bad taste? Hardly: there's such an embarrassment of it elsewhere. But the beginning of the end, perhaps.