Secondary Examples: Description and Narrative

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| **Learning Objective** | **Text Example** | **Commentary** |
| How choice of proper nouns can reveal character  | Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much...Mr Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*: J.K.Rowling)Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. (*Hard Times*: Charles Dickens)Zeljan Kurst was a large man with heavy, broad shoulders that formed a straight line on either side of an unnaturally thick neck....Many people had underestimated him and occasionally Kurst had found it necessary to correct them. This usually involved killing them. (From *Scorpia Rising:* Anthony Horowitz)Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire… (From *A Christmas Carol*: Charles Dickens) | You could carry out a classroom investigation into how authors name their characters, noting examples of choices that reveal something about the character, either through sound effects or connotations (J.K.Rowling and Roald Dahl would be a good starting point, and Dickens’ novels provide many good examples ). In their own fiction writing, students might want to experiment with choices of proper nouns e.g. to provide period authenticity as well as for characterisation. |
| How withholding proper nouns at the start of a story can create a narrative hook for the reader | She came out of the mist, and he was running, just as he had been for hours, days. It felt like he had been alone for weeks, his heart continually thundering inside his chest, his mind befogged with bitter betrayal. Sleep was unthinkable, rest a thing of the past.Nothing was clear now except that she had come out of the mist after he had been certain – for the thirteenth, or was it the fifteenth, time? – that he had eluded her. But here she was, coming for him like a mythical exterminating angel, indestructible and implacable. (From *The Bourne Ultimatum*: Robert Ludlum) | Discussion might bring out that the use of pronouns rather than proper nouns (Rebekah and Jason Bourne in this instance) contributes to a sense of mystery at the start of the story and invites speculation about the nature of the relationship between the central characters. Another good text example is the opening to *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (see below). |
| How choice of nouns provides authentic period detail  | “Stay close, Tommo,” Charlie whispers, and then we are climbing out over the top, crawling on our bellies through the wire. We snake our way forward. We slither into a shell hole and lie doggo there for a while in case we’ve been heard. We can hear Fritz talking now, and laughing. There’s the sound of a gramophone playing – I’ve heard all this before on lookout, but distantly. We’re close now, very close and I should be scared witless. Strangely, I find I’m not so much frightened as excited. Maybe it’s the rum...It takes an eternity to cross no-man’s land. I begin to wonder if we’ll ever find their trenches at all. (From *Private Peaceful*: Michael Morpurgo) | Authentic detail in a story can be achieved through choice of nouns which are pertinent to a specific period of history (in the example opposite, the First World War) or to a specific genre e.g. objects such as a ruined castle, secret passages, thunder and lightning, footsteps, flickering candles that are characteristic of Gothic horror. |
| How choice of noun phrase for description can create a distinctive mood and atmosphere | It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (From *Frankenstein:* Mary Shelley) | Noun phrase detail is important for creating patterns of imagery in description. Here, choices are linked by the semantic fields of darkness and light; death and life; stillness and motion; natural and man-made, to create an atmosphere of extreme foreboding: in a horrid parody of nature, the narrator ‘plays God’ to bring the hideous creature into the world.  |
| How lists of nouns and noun phrases can create a strong visual picture of a setting  | There were old chests of drawers and broken wash-basins and bags of cement, ancient doors leaning against the walls, deck-chairs with the cloth seats rotted away. Great rolls of rope and cable hung from nails. Heaps of water pipes and great boxes of rusty nails were scattered on the floor. Everything was covered in dust and spiders’ webs. There was mortar that had fallen from the walls. There was a little window in one of the walls but it was filthy and there were rolls of cracked lino standing in front of it. The place stank of rot and dust. (From Skellig: David Almond) | Choosing vocabulary from the same lexical field (here, ‘household debris’) is an important device for ensuring text cohesion and it can be a helpful planning strategy for students to gather linked nouns and noun phrases appropriate to the topic and writing intention. In the example opposite, note the deliberate ‘piling on’ of detail through lists of linked noun phrases, to emphasise the mess and muddle of objects in the garage. |
| How noun phrases create descriptions which help readers to infer character | Zeljan Kurst was a large man with heavy, broad shoulders that formed a straight line on either side of an unnaturally thick neck. He was bald by choice. His head had been shaved and there was a dark grey shadow beneath the skin. His eyes, a muddy brown, showed little intelligence and he had the thick lips and small, squashed nose of a wrestler, or perhaps a bouncer at a shady nightclub. Many people had underestimated him and occasionally Kurst had found it necessary to correct them. This usually involved killing them. (From *Scorpia Rising*: Anthony Horowitz)John Reed was a schoolboy of fourteen years old…large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities. He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. (From Jane Eyre: Charlotte Bronte) | Note the different ways in which noun phrases can be constructed, with detail positioned both before and after the head noun. You could explore the effects of different choices and patterns e.g. whether placing the adjectives after the noun (*eyes, a muddy brown)* is more emphatic than the more usual placement of adjectives before the noun *(muddy brown eyes)*, as well as the subtle shifts in meaning created by choice of determiner e.g. *many people* rather than *some people*. You could use extracts like these for play e.g. using word substitution to turn a sallow and sickly character into a rudely healthy one: *a rosy and gleaming skin; well-toned limbs*; *plump cheeks* etc. |
| How relative clauses are used to provide additional detail to descriptions of character | The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s mouth, which was wide, thin and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head... (From *Hard Times*: Charles Dickens)The lifeless thing **that** lay at my feet....(*Frankenstein*)A man **who** had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; **who** limped and shivered, and glared and growled; and **whose** teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.(*Great Expectations*) | An ‘embedded clause’ is a more familiar term than ‘relative clause’ for many students and they may need reminding that the latter starts with a relative pronoun that links directly to the noun being described, thus forming an expanded post-modified noun phrase e.g. *a forehead* ***which****…the lifeless thing* ***that****…a man* ***who****…a man* ***whose***… The examples have been chosen deliberately to emphasise that relative clauses are not necessarily ‘embedded’ within a sentence and demarcated with a pair of commas. The examples from *Frankenstein* and *Great Expectations* are restricted relative clauses that cannot be removed from the sentence and hence do not require a comma: consider the difference between ‘*the lifeless thing that lay at my feet’* and ‘*the lifeless thing, that lay at my feet, …’* |
| How subject-verb inversion can create distinctive textual rhythms that emphasise dramatic moments in a narrative  | Up from his lair and through the shadows came Grendel, this stalker of the night, while in Heorot the warriors lay turn-tossed in their sleep...Down from the forest came Grendel now... (From *Beowulf*: Michael Morpurgo) | This construction is more frequent in traditional tales, myths and legends but the technique of ‘delaying the subject’ is one that students can experiment with in their own descriptions and narratives. |
| How prepositional phrases can be used both to describe a setting and to place a character within a setting | Up from his lair and through the shadows came Grendel, this stalker of the night, while in Heorot the warriors lay turn-tossed in their sleep...Down from the forest came Grendel now... (From *Beowulf*: Michael Morpurgo)My seat, to which Bessie and the bitter Miss Abbot had left me riveted, was a low ottoman near the marble chimney-piece; the bed rose before me; to my right there was the high, dark wardrobe with subdued, broken reflections varying the gloss of its panels; to my left were the muffled windows; a great looking glass between them repeated the vacant majesty of the bed and room…no jail was ever more secure. (From *Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Bronte)The boy with fair hair lowered himself down the last few feet of rock and began to pick his way toward the lagoon. Though he had taken off his school sweater and trailed it now from one hand, his grey shirt stuck to him and his hair was plastered to his forehead. All round him the long scar smashed into the jungle was a bath of heat. He was clambering heavily among the creepers and broken trunks when a bird, a vision of red and yellow, flashed upwards with a witch-like cry; and this cry was echoed by another. (From *Lord of the Flies*: William Golding) | A prepositional phrase is a group of words that begins with a preposition and ends with a pronoun (*before me; between them; to which*), a noun (*in Heorot*) or noun phrase (*to my right; down the last few feet of rock*). They are an important way of providing descriptive detail since they function both adjectivally to modify a noun (*the boy* ***with*** *fair hair*; *the wardrobe* ***with*** *subdued, broken reflections; a low ottoman* ***near*** *the marble chimney-piece*) and adverbially to modify an adverb or verb (*all* ***round*** *him*; *the bed rose* ***before*** *me*; *clambering heavily* ***among*** *the creepers*. You can build students’ repertoire by encouraging them to use a range of prepositions and to experiment with sparer or more detailed prepositional phrases e.g. *the bed rose before me/the bed rose up in front of my very eyes.* Tie choices to writer’s intention e.g. in *Jane Eyre*, how the prepositional phrases contribute to the sense of entrapment. |
| How well-chosen lexical verbs can create vivid description  | Smoke was rising here and there among the creepers that festooned the dead or dying trees. As they watched, a flash of fire appeared at the root of one wisp, and then the smoke thickened. Small flames stirred at the trunk of a tree and crawled away through leaves and brushwood, dividing and increasing. One patch touched a tree trunk and scrambled up like a bright squirrel. The smoke increased, sifted, rolled outwards. The squirrel leapt on the wings of the wind and clung to another standing tree, eating downwards. Beneath the dark canopy of leaves and smoke the fire laid hold on the forest and began to gnaw. Acres of black and yellow smoke rolled steadily toward the sea. (From *Lord of the Flies*: William Golding) | Lexical verbs are those that carry the weight of meaning – the verbs that students are likely to refer to as ‘doing words’. Students may think that ‘adding adverbs’ will make their writing more descriptive, when often the descriptive work is provided by the verb alone. Verb choices that are lexically linked (e.g. *eating, gnaw*) or deliberately repeated (*increasing/increased*; *rolled outwards/rolled steadily*) also contribute to text cohesion. |
| How verbs can establish character by showing what characters do | The boy with fair hair lowered himself down the last few feet of rock and began to pick his way toward the lagoon. Though he had taken off his school sweater and trailed it now from one hand, his grey shirt stuck to him and his hair was plastered to his forehead. All round him the long scar smashed into the jungle was a bath of heat. He was clambering heavily among the creepers and broken trunks when a bird, a vision of red and yellow, flashed upwards with a witch-like cry; and this cry was echoed by another……“Wait a minute,” the voice said. “I got caught up.”The owner of the voice came backing out of the undergrowth so that twigs scratched on a greasy wind-breaker. The naked crooks of his knees were plump, caught and scratched by thorns. He bent down, removed the thorns carefully, and turned around. He was shorter than the fair boy and very fat. (From *Lord of the Flies*: William Golding) | One text extract is likely to have a number of different grammatical features that are worth explicit attention, as is the case with the opening to *Lord of the Flies*. In terms of using text models for students’ own writing, to make a direct link between reading and writing, it can be better to focus on one feature at a time; here, the inferences that can be drawn from the character’s actions, as shown through verb choices. Teaching might bring out the cautious, awkward, pained movements of both characters, for whom island life will not turn out to be a schoolboy paradise, and the early identification of a victim.  |
| How minor sentences (all noun phrases) create a frozen moment in time and focus attention on the description | “Hold your noise!” cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. “Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat.”A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.(From *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens) | A minor sentence has no finite verb but is a recognisable unit of sense. It may be as short as one word (see the opening to *The Tell-Tale Heart*) or, as here, a series of noun phrases, expanded with prepositional phrases or subordinate clauses. There are many contexts for deliberate use of minor sentences, for example to achieve a familiar, ‘chatty’ or humorous tone e.g.: *‘I do bake my own bread as it happens. At least once a year.’* (Nigel Slater), or, as in the example opposite, to create a series of impressions that add up to a complex view of the convict as both pitiless and pitiful.  |
| How minor sentences draw attention to noun and noun phrase choices | A squat grey building of only thirty-four storeys. Over the main entrance the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND CONDITIONING CENTRE, and, in a shield, the World State's motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY. (From *Brave New World: Aldous Huxley* | The fact that there are no verbs in the opening two sentences to Huxley’s futuristic novel draws attention to his use of other word classes, especially the nouns in capital letters, a mix of concrete and abstract nouns that emphasise both the physical landscape and the founding values of the ‘brave new world’. |
| How a succession of short sentences can speed pace in a narrative | I was just pushing the lower half of the ladder back up when I heard it. There was someone at the front door. I held my breath. It was OK. They couldn’t get in. I slid my hand into my pocket to make sure the key was still there. It wasn’t. I’d left it in the front door. I could hear it turning in the lock now. I raced back up the ladder and hauled it after me. When I reached down to pull the hatch back up, I could hear someone coming up the stairs. I quickly pulled the hatch back into place and scrabbled over to the water tank, holding my breath. (From *Millions*: Frank Cottrell Boyce) | Students will often say that short sentences ‘create tension’ and that writing can be made more exciting by using more of them! You could investigate in a variety of texts what use writers do make of short sentences at key moments in the plot, and where these are placed in relation to longer sentences, encouraging students to experiment with this in their own writing. |
| How punctuation can be used to shape narrative voice in a monologue | True! – nervous, - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am! But why will you say that I am mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily – how calmly – I can tell you the whole story.It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture – a pale, blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (From *The Tell-tale Heart*: Edgar Allan Poe) | Texts like this demand to be read aloud to see how the punctuation is used to shape meaning and to create the narrator’s distinctive voice. Students can think that using ‘the full range’ of punctuation (like using a variety of sentence types) is an aim in itself, but rhetorical use of punctuation is You could investigate in a range of texts  |
| How coordination of words, phrases and sentences can be used to provide rich description of setting or character | She was dressed in rich materials – satins, and lace, and silks – all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe on – the other was on the table near her hand – her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets, and with her handkerchief, and gloves, and some flowers, and a prayer-book, all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass. (From *Great Expectations*: Charles Dickens) | An example such as this underscores the difference between uncontrolled chaining of events and deliberate use of co-ordination; in Pip’s first view of Miss Havisham, the repetition of ‘and’ suggests the child’s naïve viewpoint as well as highlighting the confused profusion of objects in the room, while the change from ‘and’ to ‘but her hair was white’ draws attention to the vital detail of her age. Co-ordinating conjunctions join words, phrases or clauses that are grammatically equal or similar. It is helpful to teach this function rather than relying on acronyms (e.g. FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). |
| How co-ordinated clauses are used to link and balance ideas | It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. (From *Nineteen Eighty Four*: George Orwell)It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. ..They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realised that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at that moment, as I stood there with my rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man’s dominion in the East. (From *Shooting and Elephant*: George Orwell) | Orwell’s opening sentence works so well because of the deliberate juxtaposition of the normal and the unexpected. Grammatically, it is common to use a comma before the co-ordinating conjunction that joins two main clauses. Rhetorically, it draws attention to the juxtaposition of ideas. Students who have been taught grammar through rules may well say that ‘you shouldn’t’ start a sentence with ‘and’ or ‘but’. Of course many writers do just that, as in the extract from *Shooting an Elephant*, where Orwell draws attention to the dilemma he faces, and what it signifies, by deliberately placing the conjunction at the start of a sentence. |
| How parallel sentence structures can be used for balancing and emphasising ideas | The room was chill, because it seldom had a fire; it was silent, because remote from the nursery and kitchen; solemn, because it was known to be so seldom entered.Mr Reed had been dead nine years : it was in this chamber he breathed his last; here he lay in state; hence his coffin was borne by the undertaker’s men; and, since that day, a sense of dreary consecration had guarded it from frequent intrusion. Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, forever condemned? (From *Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Bronte) | Parallel structure (or parallelism) is the repetition of a chosen grammatical form within a sentence. There are many examples from older literature, which is part of the reason for greater sentence length and wealth of detail in texts such as Jane Eyre, where colons and semi-colons often introduce and join the parallelisms. Patterns of three constructions are very common, contributing to textual rhythms that lay stress on key words, phrases or clauses. |
| How subordinate clauses can build layers of detail and suggest simultaneous actions | Years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the colour of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and all day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlours, and we chased, with the jawbones of deacons, the English and the bears, before the motor car, before the wheel, before the duchess-faced horse, when we rode the daft and happy hills bareback, **it snowed and snowed**. (From *A Child’s Christmas in Wales:* Dylan Thomas)Like a wave that has been building its strength over a thousand miles of ocean, and which makes little stir in the deep water, but which when it reaches the shallows rears itself up high into the sky, terrifying the shore-dwellers, before crashing down on the land with irresistible power – so **Iorek Byrnison rose up** against Iofur, exploding upwards from his firm footing on the dry rock and slashing with a ferocious left hand at the exposed jaw of Iofur Raknison. (From *Northern Lights*: Philip Pullman) | In both examples, the main clauses are shown in bold. Students might need to be reminded of the different ways in which subordinate clauses can be formed. In these examples they are:Subordinating conjunction + finite verb (e.g. *when we sang, when we rode; that smelt; that has been building; which makes; when it reaches*)Non-finite verb (e.g. *terrifying, crashing, exploding, slashing*)Thomas’s repetition of clauses starting with ‘when’ suit his theme of recapturing childhood memories; Pullman’s choice of present participles in a succession of non-finite clauses emphasises continuous action as the bears fight. |
| How direct speech can be used to reveal character | “Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!”The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker’s square forefinger emphasised his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster’s sleeve. (From *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens) | Students can struggle to make effective use of dialogue when writing narrative, and it is worth paying attention to the content of a characters’ speech and what that reveals about them, rather than trying to find synonyms for ‘said’ or heavy use of adverbs! Here, what Gradgrind says is reinforced by the way he says it: note the number of imperative verbs and single-clause sentences used to underscore his points.  |
| How the use of first person combined with present tense can give an immediacy to description of events | He closes his eyes and as he waits he sings softly. “*Oranges and Lemons, say the bells of St. Clements.”* Under my breath I sing it with him. I hear the echoing volley. It is done. It is over. With that volley a part of me has died with him. I turn back to go to the solitude of my hay barn, and I find I am far from alone in my grieving. All over the camp I see them standing to attention outside their tents. And the birds are singing. (From *Private Peaceful*: Michael Morpurgo) | Students often confuse ‘person’ and ‘tense’ and it is worth checking their understanding that it is the verb in a sentence that determines tense, e.g. by highlighting which words change in the move from past to present. Use of first person does not automatically ‘involve the reader’, just as the use of present tense does not necessarily ‘make you feel as though you are there’. You can investigate with students in a variety of texts the consequences of a writer’s decisions about voice and tense, e.g. by asking what is gained and what is lost and through experiments with substitution. |
| How diary writing uses the present tense for diary comment and the past tense to narrate things that have happened | It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.At three o’clock, the doorbell rang. I didn’t hear it, since I was out in the balcony, lazily reading in the sun. A little while later Margot appeared in the kitchen doorway looking very agitated. “Father has received a call-up notice from the SS,” she whispered. “Mother has gone to see Mr van Daan.” I was stunned. Visions of concentration camps and lonely cells raced through my head. (From *The Diary of Anne Frank*) |