

In your 11+ exam you may be asked to complete a writing task. You will usually be given a choice of questions and you will need to select only one question to answer. Within a time limit, you will need to plan your answer, before writing your essay and then checking it. The questions you are given will cover a range of styles and topics, so you can pick the one that best suits your skills and interests.

Preparation

In the run-up to your exam, the following activities might help you to prepare for the creative writing task.

- Read a wide range of fiction and non-fiction. This could include novels, newspaper articles, leaflets, magazines, short stories or poetry.
- Use a dictionary to look up the meaning of any words that you don't know. You could also keep a list of words that you find difficult to spell.
- Think of ideas that you could use during the exam. Although you will not be able to prepare a full answer in advance, you might be able to use a particular character or a setting that you have thought of before.
- Plan out some words and phrases that you could use to describe a range of different settings and characters in advance of the exam. You could set these out as mind maps. Use a thesaurus to help you find some interesting alternatives to commonly used words.
- Make sure you understand the different types of imagery, such as similes and metaphors, and include some examples of these in your character and setting descriptions.
- Make a list of interesting opening sentences that you might be able to use.
- Practise writing some opening and closing paragraphs.
- Practise a variety of creative writing tasks and familiarise yourself with the conventions of different types of writing, such as how to set out a letter or a newspaper article.
- Make sure you have plenty of practice of writing to a time limit. If you find this difficult, start by writing to a longer time limit than you will have in the exam and gradually reduce it the more you practise. You may also find it helpful to do short writing challenges, for example writing the opening paragraph to a story in 5 minutes or writing 200 words in 10 minutes.

General writing guidance

When deciding which question to answer, choose one that appeals to you and also plays to your strengths. If you prefer writing fiction to writing a letter, choose a story title. Whichever question you choose to answer, you should aim to follow the general creative writing guidelines below.

- Remember to plan: before you start writing, decide on a structure and make some notes that will guide you as you write. Your notes could include characters, events or the main points of your argument, and they should be short – try using bullet points or a spider diagram.
- Identify your purpose and audience: read the question carefully and make sure your writing addresses the question. Aim your writing at the audience. For example, if you are writing a letter to a friend you might use informal language, whereas a letter to your headteacher will be more formal.
- Structure your writing: make sure it has a clear beginning, middle and end.
- Don't over-complicate your writing: if you are writing a story, keep the plot fairly simple and aim to include only two to four characters.
- Include a conflict: plan a problem and resolution and think about how to work these into your story.

- Use a wide range of punctuation: show off your skills by including more advanced punctuation, such as semicolons and direct speech, and make sure you include paragraphs.
- Include varied vocabulary: think about the words you choose. Your writing will be more interesting if you use different adjectives, adverbs and verbs.
- Vary your sentences: use a range of sentence lengths to give your writing more impact and make sure you don't start all your sentences in the same way.
- Avoid clichés: don't end your story with 'It was all a dream.'
- Make your writing as descriptive as possible: for example, if you are setting the scene for a story, try to evoke different senses. What can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted or felt? You should also include at least a few examples of imagery, such as similes and metaphors.
- Write legibly and join your handwriting: the examiner will need to be able to read your writing, so make sure you write clearly and neatly even if you are under time pressure.
- Check your work: once you have finished, remember to read through what you have written. It is best to do this at the speed you would read aloud, rather than scanning your work.
- Look out for any spelling, grammar or punctuation mistakes: make sure you have kept tenses and person consistent (for example, if you start out writing in the first person, make sure you stick with that all the way through). If you need to make any changes, cross out the mistake neatly and write in the correction above. If there is not room to do this, put an asterisk (*) above the error and then write your correction at the end of your essay. If you have more than one amendment, number the asterisks to correspond with each correction.

Types of writing

Continuing a story

Some questions will provide you with a paragraph from a story and ask you to continue the story. For these questions, you should remember to:

- ensure the beginning of your writing follows on smoothly from the end of the passage you have been given
- use some of the same characters or the same setting as the original passage
- write in a similar style to the original passage (for example, if the story is told by a first-person narrator, you should write in the same way).

Writing a story

Some question titles will lend themselves to a short story. If you choose to write a story, make sure you include:

- a clear beginning, middle and ending
- interesting characters (limited to a maximum of four)
- a description of a setting.

Make sure you keep the story simple, as you will not have enough time to write complicated plots and sub-plots.

Writing a description

You may be asked to write a description of an experience you have had; an event that has happened; a place you have been to; or a person you know. While it is helpful to base your writing on personal experience, it is fine to add in extra details or invent it entirely, since the examiner will not know any different! Remember to:

- use a range of descriptive vocabulary, evoking the senses and emotions
- include imagery
- consider which person and tense to use (for example, it could be a third-person narrative written in the present tense or it could be in the first person in the past tense).

Writing a letter

If a question asks you to write a letter, you should remember to:

- set it out using the correct conventions, depending on whether it is a formal or informal letter
- use appropriate language (for example, if you are writing to a friend you will use more informal language than if you are writing to your local MP)
- identify the purpose of your letter. If it is a persuasive letter it will tend to be more factual than descriptive, with personal opinions conveyed in a formal manner; if it is a letter to a pen pal, it will usually be more narrative and may contain personal thoughts and ideas.

Writing to persuade

Some questions will ask you to write an argument to persuade someone of a particular point of view. For these questions, you should:

- consider both sides of the argument and decide which side you wish to support (if you are given the option)
- plan out your key points and think about how you are going to get these across
- think about the type of writing and make sure you set your writing out accordingly (for example, a formal letter to an organisation will be written differently to an article in a magazine)
- decide how to set out your writing (for example, using bullet points and headings or paragraphs)
- make sure you include and explain all your key points and then summarise them at the end.

Writing a play script

If you are asked to write a play script, you should remember to:

- set out your writing using the conventions of a play script
- set the scene and include stage directions
- convey the characters' personalities through their use of language and simple actions.

Writing a news article

When writing a news article, you should:

- usually write in the third person and the past tense
- use headings and sub-headings and make your headline attention-grabbing
- write an interesting opening sentence that summarises what is to come
- include some characters in the article and think about how you can get their personalities across in a few sentences
- include reported and direct speech – keep the speech fairly short and succinct
- use appropriate language to convey the type of writing (for example, consider using formal language when writing as the reporter and informal language in the direct quotes from witnesses)
- think about how to round up the article at the end.