



PREFACE

The author wishes to express their gratitude to COALI from Facebook, and the COALI Revision platform. The efforts of COALI Revision are commendable.

The author of this guide is Umer Khan. Bagging a Distinction in OL English 1123 in 2019, he has somewhat of a reputation. Umer believes there is a dire need for candidates to systemically understand how good English needs to be written. This guide intends to make it easier for everyone to score better in their English exam. Years upon years of examiner reports have been studied in the process of making this guide, but none were harmed.

*The author suggests **this document should always be read under the supervision of a professional teacher** or someone who otherwise has a good understanding of the Cambridge O Level 1123 English Language Exam. Many parts of this document can be interpreted in unintended ways, but this is beyond the author's control at this point.*

While the syllabus tests language and expression skills, it also tests the ability to sequence facts, ideas, and opinions. This means that you need to be able to present ideas, stories, narratives, reports, or communications in text as appropriate. These skills are equally important. While reading books, novels, news, etc. are time tested ways of improving skills for this syllabus, watching TV shows, documentaries, gameplays, educational YouTube videos, etc. are all great ways to do the same in today's world.

Throughout your course of study, you need to work on the following key ideas. They are not mentioned in any order of importance. If you are reading this guide a night before your exam, this guide can still help you improve your score.



Task Fulfillment for Directed Writing

Directed Writing tasks are judged on two main principles, the fulfillment of the task/question requirements and the appropriate use of English Language.

a. Planning

- I. Before starting to write any writeup, be it a directed writing or a composition, it is important to make a brief plan of the entire writeup. This includes the points you will be writing in response to the rubrics, what the starting paragraph will contain and how the writing will come to a **meaningful and gradual end**.
- II. Premature ending, jumping to conclusions, skipping ideas, or not going into necessary details all show a lack of the ability to plan and communicate. Cliffhangers are difficult to deal with effectively and may show a lack of planning, they are best avoided.

b. Rubrics

- I. Examiners expect you to use the given rubrics as a general guidance for what content needs to be addressed in the letter, report, or article. You do not need to treat these as questions for which you have to provide answers in a systematic way. That approach will render your writeup unlinked and incoherent as the information you provide will not bind together well enough.
- II. It is expected that you will include detailed responses to each rubric and will develop these rubrics by providing new information from your own imagination. For example, if the rubric asks, "When and where the incident took place," the obvious answer would be to give a date and time, and a specific location. Development could include information like "close to where I live," "my usual path to school through Baker Street," or "when I was walking home back from office during late hours."
- III. Not all rubrics need to be dealt with in the same detail. Some rubrics demand more detail and development of ideas, spanning sometimes over multiple paragraphs. For example, the response to the rubric discussed above needs no more than a couple of lines. This can be dealt with in the opening paragraph. Plan accordingly for the other rubrics to include more detail to compensate for the first one.
- IV. Violence, negative ideas, immoral acts, and glorification of crime is generally disliked, and examiners have repeatedly penalized answers which refer to these. Positive stories with good moral lessons score better. However, cliché ideas will score poorly.

c. Register, Tone and Audience

Register and tone refer to the idea that how you communicate with different groups of people under different situations varies. You also need to be aware of the audience of your letter/report/article and include or exclude information based on who you are communicating to and what is of importance to them.

I. News Report, Report to Authority:

These are almost always written under serious circumstances. Your text and way of writing should reflect that the situation is one of importance and sinister consideration. Your choice of words and phrases, including the information you choose to convey and the level of detail you convey them in will be different in these cases than from, say, a letter to your friend. You should quote exact facts and remain closely stuck to the topic at hand rather than talking about irrelevant information. Your audience may be the police, your principal, your teacher, or a local council.



II. Letter to the Editor, Formal Letter:

These tend to be informative and persuasive at the same time as these may address pressing issues or circumstances where it is necessary for action to be taken. Your tone should still be polite while also extremely formal so as to not undermine the importance of what you intend to communicate. Your audience may be your principal, your teacher, a local council, or a newspaper editor.

III. Speech:

Speeches are generally formal. They will include language devices such as referring to the audience, greetings, rhetorical questions, words of common speech and would include an otherwise general tone which reflects the idea of the words being spoken directly to an audience rather than being read. Your audience may be your school assembly, your classmates, a general group of people.

IV. Informal Letter, Magazine Article:

These are generally very informal. You can include personal details, opinions, extra details of your personal life, etc. You can use phrases and words which are otherwise deemed too informal, and you can ask questions about the personal lives of the recipient. Magazine articles will still include facts and figures, but they can also mention extra details while staying relevant to the topic at hand. Your audience may be your friend, your parents, your roommate, your relative or for magazine article your entire school.

V. Audience:

You should consider the fact that you communicate with all groups of people in different ways; you should adjust your tone and style of writing accordingly. Certain pieces of information may be relevant to certain individuals and irrelevant for others. The police will want to know, for example, the exact description of a car or a person but this would be irrelevant in a magazine article, a speech, or a letter to the editor. Examiners check your ability to understand the difference between types of audiences.

d. Purpose

- I. In **all formal** writings you must always make the purpose of your writing abundantly clear. Whether you explicitly state the purpose or not, the reader should still be able to discern and understand why you are writing your speech, letter, or article. Excluding informal letters, the starting and last paragraphs should directly refer to what you intend to achieve by your writing or what you expect the reader to be doing.
- II. When you understand your intention behind your writing (which is almost always made clear in the question), you should include only the details that forward your goal and are helpful for the reader. The systematic planning of your paragraphs should ascertain that your purpose is clearly understood and communicated. It is not just a matter of stating it explicitly that, for example, you "need the police to investigate a crime," you will also have to provide useful information and make your writing persuasive enough.
- III. In **informal writings**, your purpose should still be clear throughout the content of the paragraphs. However, there is some room to go astray and make the writing look realistic and talk about, say, the weather. Again, the syllabus judges your ability to communicate accurately in English Language.



e. Text Type

You must follow one of the many acceptable patterns of writing each type of directed writing. Ones I have found most appropriate are included in this booklet.

f. Opinions

The question provides detailed information about the hypothetical circumstances that examinations put you in. You must use this information fully in your response. Derive new information based on what you are told about the situation, for example the time of day or the nature of an incident. If your response ignores any information provided in the question or contradicts it, you will score poorly.



Content for Narrative Compositions

Compositions allow you to express your ability to write in a much more open way than is possible with directed writings.

a. Planning & Appropriateness

While there are many ways to write stories, I have found it most effective to think of narrations in terms of a conflict and subsequent attempt(s) to resolve it.

Before you begin

I. Character:

Decide whether you are going to write a first-person or a third-person narrative.

Give your protagonist (the main character in your story) some traits and a history. This will help you stay consistent throughout your story. This will also show the examiner that you planned your story well. Add necessary characters as needed. Irrelevant characters or characters that are only mentioned in passing do not need to be vividly introduced. Only develop characters that play a vital role in the next two parts of the story.

II. Conflict:

Brainstorm ideas about how your character may find a challenge or difficulty which closely relates to the prompt provided. Jot down a few ideas and see which one you will be able to fully develop, and which one will be the most interesting. Do not try to be very ambitious, you will have to introduce characters, set your scene, explain the conflict, and fully develop the character's attempt to solve it.

III. Resolution:

Now, you must decide how your character will attempt to solve the problem at hand, and how or whether he will eventually succeed. Cliffhangers need to be avoided so this part is very important. The resolution of the story should lead naturally from the ideas you have already developed. How your character succeeds is a good place to include plot twists and create further conflicts as hurdles in their way. This makes the story interesting. However, remember that you only have 500 words to fully develop all parts of the story.



Now start writing

I. Starting in the middle of action:

This is a great way to arouse the reader. You can introduce the conflict right at the beginning by showing the protagonist of your story trying to solve it.

Everything could come crumbling down. This was not a pleasant moment in Ahad's life. He had worked long hours over the past few days to come up with a strategy to boost sales. It had all worked out until his closest associate surprisingly decided to abandon the project.

You may also choose to begin with a quote and take your narration onwards from here.

"On your mark! Get set!"

I crouched in the starting position, hands poised on the track and back coiled like a spring. The starting gun boomed as the host commanded, "Go!" I launched myself forward, trying to spring ahead of the pack...

Beginning your story like this sets a much more interesting environment than to systematically set a scene and introduce characters, and to then get into the action in the story.

II. Setting the scene, introducing characters:

Language plays a vital role in the scene you plan on setting.

Techniques explained below ("References to literature" and the "Show. Do not tell" techniques) are excellent ways to introduce your characters (the protagonist and all key players in the story) without sounding too boring. Let us imagine the character Ahad from above to be prone to succumb to anxiety and stress.

Ahad was scheduled to present his ideas in a meeting less than two hours after his partner's betrayal. It was not easy for Ahad to deal with situations like this and he was prone to succumb to anxiety; this could cause a lasting blow to his career.

Now let us use flashbacks and vivid descriptions.

Ahad was scheduled to present his ideas in a meeting. His partner's betrayal came less than two hours before said meeting and Ahad was not excellent at dealing with situations of this sort. Sara, his associate with whom he had closely worked, could notice him visibly sweat. The vibrant expression of confidence that Ahad had been wearing all day vanished into thin air. She remembered how Ahad had almost had a panic attack the previous year when the company suffered losses owing to a mistake he had made. She feared...

III. Developing the conflict and resolving it

Your story has picked up pace at this point. It is vital that you maintain this interest in your story by using devices such as flashbacks and plot twists. You need to fully explain how the hurdles in your story arise, and then go on to show how your character tries to overcome them. Narrations are about experiences. It is not enough to only relay the course of events as a third party, you will need to express emotions and serenity (or lack thereof) of situations using descriptions. Descriptions will make use of all of the five human senses.

It is important to conclude the story gradually. If you have too much to write but you fear you will exceed your word limit, stop writing as early in the story as possible. Rethink the conclusion of your story and remove parts of the story that may be uninteresting or not



important for the conclusion. It is much better to fully develop the aspects and events you include, than to include many events at the cost of being able to develop them; no matter how interesting the longer story is.

b. Quality of Content

You must make sure that your narrative stays **consistently relevant** to the prompt provided. Rote learnt stories in which you forcefully insert the given prompt will not score well.

- I. Sometimes the **prompt asks for an item to play an important part**, and you need to build a story from scratch revolving around that item or such that the key turning point in the story is brought about due to that item. It will not be enough to only mention the item in passing or in an insignificant context.
- II. The **prompt may provide you a sentence that needs to be included in the story**. Again, the story you imagine needs to revolve around the context provided by the sentence. From the very beginning you must lead up to the situation in the provided sentence, and then you must resolve it as you conclude your story. Merely quoting the sentence will not be regarded as relevant.
- III. **Prompts may ask you to write about a time when a certain incident occurred**. Again, the scene you present, the conflict that arises and the conclusion of the story all need to stay relevant to the prompt.

Narratives give you a great deal of freedom and you need to capitalize on this. Make them **interesting and tense** by using one or more of the following devices. You must maintain the reader's interest throughout your story.

I. Plot twists

Plot twists are incredibly useful. They need to be executed well though so as to not seem like you did not plan the story well. There must be some hint already present in the beginning of the text to justify a sudden turn of events in the story. This creates an interesting atmosphere, and the reader is intrigued to read the entire story. Make sure to use appropriate language to amplify the effect created.

II. Flashbacks

Flashbacks are when you refer to an incident that occurred in the past. This may be because something in the present reminded your character of the past which they can vividly recall. You can also use this to justify how a certain character behaves, for example they may be afraid to take a certain action because of something that might have happened in the past. Flashbacks are also used to give the reader a sense of the human nature of the character; instead of telling the reader that the character has a bad memory, for example, you could mention a moment in time when they exhibited this trait.

III. References to literature

You can draw parallels to famous stories in literature to describe certain scenarios. For example, you can relate the actions of your character to how Sherlock Holmes was a good detective or to the story of Romeo and Juliet. This develops the imagination of your reader in ways that would otherwise be very hard to achieve.



IV. **Show. Do not tell**

Narratives can be made remarkably interesting by allowing the writer to go through and imagine the same experience your character goes through. This makes it important for the writer to describe effectively what is happening and where it is happening. Vivid descriptions of the scene, of the characters or of the intensity of say a tense situation can help paint a picture that can never be achieved by simply telling the reader that for example the scene was tense. For example, you can mention the sound of a ticking clock or the dropping of a pin to show silence instead of simply saying the room was silent.



Language

a. Paragraphs

Directed Writing

- I. You should always make **sensible paragraphs**. Paragraphs need to show unity such that the information conveyed in them is progressive and well linked. While different paragraphs usually convey new ideas, they should continue to adopt the same theme and should follow on from each other.
- II. Paragraphing should NOT be arbitrary; it should not depend on length nor should paragraphing be too rare or too occasional. You must use your conscience to decide when a new paragraph is needed. It is helpful to divide a directed writing into a short starting and ending paragraph, with three paragraphs in between addressing each respective bullet.

Composition

(See Compositions)

b. Sentence Structure

- I. A very important key in communicating information is the **variation of sentence structures** for particular effects. It is imperative to make use of **active and passive sentences** throughout your response depending on the situation.
- II. *If you want to draw attention to the doer, use the passive voice; if your intent is to put the focus on the action, then you should go for the active voice. In any essay, it is always beneficial to convey information using an appropriate mixture of both type of sentences.*
- III. **Sentences should never be too long**; I have often seen students write paragraph long sentences which become too long to follow, and the information often becomes either ambiguous or redundant. Always break your paragraphs into meaningful lengths of sentences. It is also often necessary to use shorter sentences.
- IV. **Short sentences** are usually used to show sudden events, summarize main ideas, or grab the attention of the reader to the detail. On the other hand, **long sentences** may have good effect when we develop the tension, provide lively descriptions or thorough investigation.
- V. Simple and repetitive forms of sentences produce a monotonous effect. Forceful variation of sentence structures without particular purpose confuses the reader and is a sign of bad communication skills.

c. Tenses

- I. While above mentioned devices are recommended, the use of **appropriate tenses** is necessary. Inability to use proper tense formation and verb forms count as errors and significantly lower the quality of your response.
- II. It is important to remember and practice all key rules with respect to tenses and verb forms. There is no shortcut to this, you must include significant practice in your study to reduce errors as much as possible. The syllabus is highly competitive and there is very little room for errors.
- III. More importantly, you will need to **stay consistent** with the tenses. Decide whether you are going to narrate your story in the past or the present and then stick to this tense. If you speculate about the future or 'hope' something in your text, use the future tense. You can use different tenses for different parts of your writing provided that you use



them correctly for the situation and keep them consistent throughout this part of your writing.

d. Vocabulary

- I. The **repetition of similar words** should best be avoided. For example, using adjectives like “complicated” or “huge” multiple times in your essay produces a monotonous effect and the examiner is forced to think you are unable to use a wide range of vocabulary.

The situation was really complicated. It was really important to find a solution to the complicated situation.
- II. Instead of repeating words (“really”) or using synonyms, it is almost always better to use a new word and to **convey new information**. This is especially important when using adjectives. There is tendency to repeat the words of the question as if it increases relevancy, it does not. Use your own ideas based on information from the question.
- III. When using common words, it is advised to use **synonyms**. However, it is important to use synonyms that reflect appropriate ideas. (“Actually” would not be appropriate as a synonym to “really” in the above example) This should not sway away from the intended meaning. Childish vocabulary ruins your ability to communicate ideas as those words have often lost their meaning and effects.
- IV. Very, bad, good, big, etc. are all words often considered to be childish. However, there are situations where using these words creates the opposite effect in that it amplifies the effect of other words, often in phrases, without sounding childish.
- V. There is tendency to try and impress the examiner by **unnecessarily using new or uncommon words** just for the sake of it. This should be avoided because you are very likely to end up using the word in a place where it does not belong. Unless the exact use cases of a complex or new word are clear to you, avoid using it.
- VI. It is equally important to **avoid lifting of phrases and entire passages** without ensuring that the words fit the situation and style of your writing. Lifts of sentences or phrases is often distinguishable from your own writing and memorizing phrases to reuse is not advised. It is however a good habit to reuse expressions where appropriate, for example if you saw it get used elsewhere in a book or a show. Care should be taken to ensure the words fit your writing and ways of expression.
- VII. **Awkward phrases** are produced when you try to force a new word or phrase into an inappropriate context. Many adjectives may be appropriate to describe certain nouns, but they are not always interchangeable. Again, until you understand the use of a new word, avoid it because awkward phrases are errors.
- VIII. **Use of the word “the”** is often not given much attention to. It is either omitted from where it is necessary or is used in places where it is not appropriate. “The” is used with a noun that is specific i.e., it specifically refers to something there is only one of. If the noun referred to is uncertain, “the” is not used.

I could see a person (this could be any person) walk by the street. (Now the person has been specified and you refer to a specific noun) The person seemed to act worryingly cautious despite the time of day.

e. Punctuation

- I. **Commas** are very, very important. Wherever there is a pause in the reading, the reader expects to see a comma. If that is missing, they may not be able to follow the logical sequence of the information you are communicating. The use of commas throughout this document should be noted and adopted.



English Language (O Level 1123)

Paper 1 Writing

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EXAM GUIDE

- II. **Semi colons** provide a useful alternative to commas and full stops; they also help the reader. If two sentences are very well linked or are linked by causation, and using a comma will be inappropriate, it is advised to use semicolons. (Notice the use of the word “very” in this context, it is entirely appropriate and produces a neat effect.)
- III. **Quotes** need to be punctuated well and only included where there is an absolute need to do so. Excessive use of quotations is not advised as it sways away from expression and development of ideas.

“This is how my teacher taught me to punctuate quotes, by terminating the paragraph and using a dedicated line,” claimed the student.

The rest of the story continues in a new paragraph.

f. Spelling

- I. Do not make **errors in spellings**. Always proofread your writing to look for spelling and verb form errors.
- II. Do not use words for which you are unsure of the spelling.
- III. Do not write in a way that makes it difficult for the examiner to read your word, they are unlikely to give you the benefit of doubt if your spelling seems to be incorrect. Your writing should be clearly **legible**.

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