Close reading techniques: descriptive writing extracts

KS4 > GCSE > Media and non-fiction

How it works

A six-page resource with sections on people, setting and character. It’s oven-ready - each section has questions based on the extracts for the students to answer - so you could simply print it, photocopy it and hand it out.

Alternatively …

Try this!

Circuit training from The Full English by Julie Blake

1. Spend some time putting the seven extracts on different sheets of paper, preferably double spaced so that there’s plenty of room for writing.

2. Collect a huge box of pens, pencils and highlighters, and set the classroom up as a series of five stages, each with a different activity. Each station needs copies of the texts (one each or per pair or group or whatever you decide) and a copy of the task. If you laminate it first, you can use it over and over again. The first table has the people activity, the second has setting, then character and so on.

3. Set the students off. They’ll need a clear time limit for each activity - why don’t you use the Teachit Timer to keep them on track?

4. To make it even more exciting, add some other texts to the collection provided. More excitement still? Add another couple of stations to the circuit to really stretch their brains.

And then …

Now stretch them some more by asking them to write their own descriptive piece using the skills they’ve honed today. They’ll need a rest after this lot!

Maybe even …

If you’re teaching Of Mice and Men or Lord of the Flies, you could use the resources here to hone the students’ understanding of authorial intent, and their ability to write about it.

Or what about …

Try using bits of this resource as part of a starter activity. Put the extracts from Ruby in the Smoke and Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone on OHT or on your IWB, then when you’ve taught them about pronouns, they can have a go at finding them in the extracts. The other resources can easily be adapted in the same way.

Alison Smith
People

On a cold, fretful afternoon in early October 1872, a hansom cab drew up outside the offices of Lockhart and Selby, shipping agents in the financial heart of London, and a young girl got out and paid the driver.

She was a person of sixteen or so - alone, and uncommonly pretty. She was slender and pale, and dressed in mourning, with a black bonnet under which she tucked back a straying twist of blonde hair that the wind had teased loose. She had unusually dark brown eyes for one so fair. Her name was Sally Lockhart; and within fifteen minutes, she was going to kill a man.

From *The Ruby in the Smoke* by Phillip Pullman
copyright © Phillip Pullman

A man appeared on the corner the cat had been watching, appeared so suddenly and silently you’d have thought he’d just popped out of the ground. The cat’s tail twitched and its eyes narrowed.

Nothing like this man had ever been seen in Privet Drive. He was tall, thin and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak which swept the ground and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man’s name was Albus Dumbledore.

From *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by J. K. Rowling
copyright © J. K. Rowling

- Highlight pronouns that link together.
- How effective is the pronoun use in these passages?
• What would be the effect of using noun phrases instead of pronouns?

• Which extract do you prefer and why?

• Now write your own extract, using some of the ideas that you have come up with from reading these two pieces:
Setting

But an August afternoon, with blue hazes scarfing the harvest slopes, little winds whispering elfishly in the poplars, and a dancing splendour of red poppies outflaming against the dark coppice of young firs in a corner of the cherry orchard was fitter for dreams of dead languages. The Virgil soon slipped unheeded to the ground, and Anne, her chin propped on her clasped hands, and her eyes on the splendid mass of fluffy clouds that were heaping up just over Mr J. A. Harrison’s house like a great white mountain, was far away in a delicious world ...

From *Anne of Avonlea* by L. M. Montgomery
copyright © L. M. Montgomery

The shore was fledged with palm trees. These stood or leaned or reclined against the light and their green feathers were a hundred feet up in the air, The ground beneath them was a bank covered with coarse grass, torn everywhere by the upheavals of fallen trees, scattered with decaying coconuts and palm saplings. Behind this was the darkness of the forest proper and the open space of the scar.

He jumped down from the terrace. The sand was thick over his black shoes and the heat hit him. He became conscious of the weight of his clothes, kicked his shoes off fiercely and ripped off each stocking with its elastic garter in a single movement. Then he leapt back on the terrace, pulled off his shirt, and stood there among the skull-like coconuts with green shadows from the palms and the forest sliding over his skin. He undid the snake-clasp of his belt, lugged off his shorts and pants, and stood there naked, looking at the dazzling beach and the water.

From *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding
copyright © William Golding

- Underline in different colours the following in the extracts:
  - colours
  - adjectives
  - verbs
• Look at the atmosphere that is created by the effective use of language. Write a short paragraph describing the atmosphere in the two extracts. (Hint - think about connotations!)

Characters 1: *Of Mice and Men*

**Slim** - When he had finished combing his hair he moved into the room and he moved with a majesty only achieved by royalty and master craftsmen. He was a jerkline skinner, the prince of the ranch, capable of driving ten, sixteen, even twenty mules with a single line to the leaders. He was capable of killing a fly on the wheeler’s butt with a bullwhip without touching the mule. There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love.

**Curley** - His (Curley’s) eyes passed over the new men and he stopped. He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. His arms gradually bent at the elbows and his hands closed into fists. He stiffened and went into a slight crouch. His glance was at once calculating and pugnacious. Lennie squirmed under the look and shifted his feet nervously. Curley stepped gingerly close to him “You the new guys the old man was waitin’ for?”

From *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck copyright © John Steinbeck

Above are good examples of the use of narrative voice. The reader can clearly see Steinbeck’s attitude of admiration and respect for this “jerkline skinner” and his feelings of dislike towards Curley.
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- Suggest a reason why Steinbeck mentions the fact that Slim combs his hair.

- How do the words ‘majesty’, ‘royalty’ and ‘prince’ influence our attitude to Slim?

- What evidence is there in the passage to tell us that Slim did his best not to hurt the animals?

- How does Curley react to the presence of Lennie and George?

- The passage tells us: Curley stepped gingerly close to Lennie. ‘Gingerly’ means ‘guardedly’, ‘carefully’. What does this indicate about Curley?

- “You the new guys the old man was waitin’ for?” Is Curley being polite or not? How do we know?
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**Characters 2: Lord of the Flies**

Within the diamond haze of the beach something dark was fumbling along. Ralph saw it first, and watched till the intentness of his gaze drew all eyes that way. Then the creature stepped from mirage onto clear sand, and they saw that the darkness was not all shadow but mostly clothing. The creature was a party of boys, marching approximately in step in two parallel lines and dressed in strangely eccentric clothing. Shorts, shirts, and different garments they carried in their hands: but each boy wore a square black cap with a silver badge in it. Their bodies, from throat to ankle, were hidden by black cloaks which bore a long silver cross on the left breast and each neck was finished off with a hambone frill. The heat of the tropics, the descent, the search for food, and now this sweaty march along the blazing beach had given then the complexions of newly washed plums. The boy who controlled them was dressed in the same way though his cap badge was golden. When his party was about ten yards from the platform he shouted an order and they halted, gasping, sweating, swaying in the fierce light. The boy himself came forward, vaulted onto the platform with his cloak flying, and peered into what to him was almost complete darkness.

Inside the floating cloak he was tall, thin, and bony: and his hair was red beneath the black cap. His face was crumpled and freckled, and ugly without silliness. Out of this face stared two light blue eyes, frustrated now, and turning, or ready to turn, to anger. 

*From Lord of the Flies* by William Golding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique used by writer to build suspense, create mystery and introduce character</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of ‘empty’ words to create suspense</td>
<td>‘something’ ‘it’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connotations/associations of words</td>
<td>‘creature’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful verbs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pattern of three to emphasise physical nature of boy(s) or to focus on actions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Words associated with heat</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
• From this passage, particularly the last line, what has been revealed about the character?