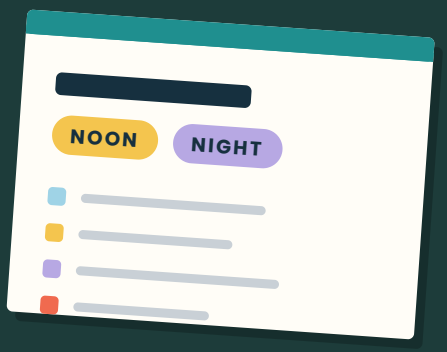


A WRITING GUIDE

SHOW, NOT TELL

FEELINGS · PLACES · SENSES · WEATHER

Lessons and phrase banks for stories, recounts and descriptions





TOM NG

Show, Not Tell

Lessons and phrase banks for stories, recounts and descriptions

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The people, schools, clubs and families in the examples are fictional. The public places are real places in Singapore.

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Set in Inter, Poppins and Barlow Condensed.

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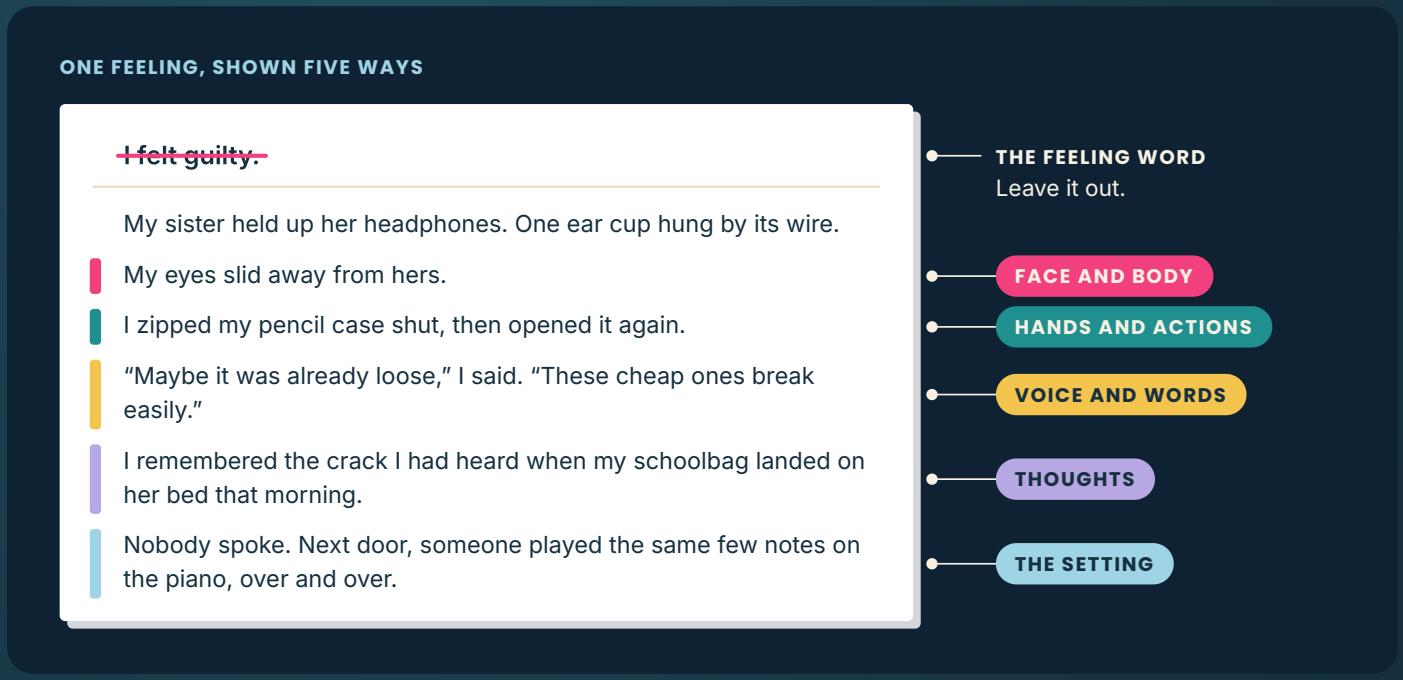
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1

Showing feelings

Show a feeling through details the reader can see and hear, instead of naming it. This part has four lessons and a page of details for each of 20 feelings.



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How showing works

Telling names a feeling, as in “I was angry.” Showing gives the details a reader would see and hear, and lets the reader work out the feeling.

Five ways to show a feeling

Every feeling page in this book uses these five ways, each in its own colour. All the examples here show one feeling: anger at a friend who told the class your secret.

WAY	WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT	EXAMPLE
Face and body	What your body does by itself: heat, breathing, the stomach, the jaw.	My breathing was fast and loud, as if I had just run up the stairs.
Hands and actions	What you do, or do too hard, too fast or not at all.	I shoved my books into my bag without zipping it.
Voice and words	What you say, how it sounds, and what you leave unsaid.	“Fine.” It was the only word I said to her all afternoon.
Thoughts	A question, a memory or a plan in your head.	I kept hearing her laugh as she told the others.
The setting	One detail of the place, the weather or the objects around you that matches the feeling or contrasts with it.	In the class photo on the wall, her arm was still round my shoulders.

For an important feeling, use two or three of these ways, not all five. For a small feeling, one detail is enough.

From telling to showing

STEP	SENTENCE	WHAT CHANGED
1. Telling	I was very disappointed when I was not chosen for the team.	The feeling is named, so the reader has nothing to see.
2. Showing	I read the list on the noticeboard twice. My name was not on it. I walked to the bus stop without waiting for my friends.	Three plain details: reading twice, the missing name and walking off alone.
3. Showing with exact words	I scanned the list a second time, as if my name might be hiding between two others. When Farid asked if I was coming for bubble tea, I mumbled something about tuition and left before he could ask again.	Exact verbs, a thought inside the action (“as if…”) and an excuse that hides the feeling, in longer sentences.

Aim for step 2 in most of your writing. Use step 3 at the most important moment, and check that the words and the grammar are correct.

When to tell instead

- **Time passing:** “We practised every afternoon for two weeks.”
- **Small feelings** that do not change the story: “I was tired after training, but I went anyway.”
- **Looking back** near the end: “Later, I realised that I had been angry with myself, not with her.” Then end on something the reader can see (page 7).

Do not show a feeling and then name it as well. After “My hands shook”, leave out “I was very nervous”.

Using the feeling pages

1. **Choose** one or two details that fit your moment and the person who feels it.
2. **Change** them to fit your story. In a piano exam, “My palms left damp prints on the folder.” from the Nervous page can become “My fingertips left damp smudges on the white keys.”
3. **Make each detail specific** with a name, a number or an object from your story.

Do not learn the pages by heart, because a memorised line rarely fits your story.

Slowing down the key moment

In a story, spend the most words on the key moment. Write it second by second, with what you see, hear, think and say.

How to slow it down

1. **Choose the few seconds that matter**, such as a name being read out, a ball leaving your hands or a door opening.
2. **Break one action into steps.** "I opened the envelope" becomes picking it up, tearing the flap and unfolding the letter.
3. **Mix four things.** Move between action, a sense, a thought and a line of speech. Five actions in a row read like a list.
4. **Vary sentence length.** Use longer sentences for the build-up and a very short one for the turning point.
5. **Speed up again.** After the turn, use one or two sentences to move on to the next part.

How many words

Make the key moment your longest paragraph, about a quarter of the whole story. It covers seconds or minutes, not hours.

THE SAME MOMENT, RUSHED

When it was my turn on the flying fox, I was very scared. In the end I jumped, and it was fun.

This version names the feeling and skips the seconds that matter. The paragraph below slows them down.

To show how a feeling changes across the whole story, see page 7.

A slow-motion paragraph

(1) The instructor clipped my harness to the cable and tugged it twice. "Whenever you're ready," he said. (2) I shuffled forward until the toes of my shoes hung over the edge of the platform. Far below, my classmates had become a row of upturned faces. (3) A gust pushed the cable sideways, and the boards creaked under my feet. (4) *One step,* I told myself. *That's all it is.* (5) But my fingers stayed locked round the rail. (6) Then, from the ground, Jun Wei started chanting my name, and the others joined in. (7) I let go and stepped off. (8) For one long second there was nothing beneath me at all; then the harness snapped tight, the pulley shrieked along the cable, and I was whooping before I reached the first tree.

What to look for: About ten seconds get a whole paragraph, and the word "scared" never appears.

1. Speech and a small action start the moment, with no lead-up.
2. The shoes over the edge and the classmates far below show the height.
3. Touch and sound: the wind and the creaking boards.
4. A thought, in the narrator's own words.
5. The hands show the fear.
6. A sound from below moves the action on.
7. A short sentence for the turning point.
8. A long sentence for the rush. The last detail shows that the fear has turned into fun.

RUSHED	SLOWED DOWN	WHAT CHANGED
When the results came out, I saw that I had passed Maths. I was so relieved.	Mr Tan placed my results slip face down on the desk. I turned it over with my palm pressed flat across the marks, then slid my hand down one line at a time, past English, past Chinese, to the row I had been dreading. Maths: 52. I folded my arms on the desk, put my head down on them and started to laugh.	One look becomes several small steps. The short line "Maths: 52." is the turning point, and the laugh shows the relief.

Showing a change of feeling

In most stories, the narrator's feeling changes, for example from dread to relief. Show the feeling at the start, at the turning point and at the end, so the reader sees it change.

Plan the feeling at three points

Note the feeling at each point and one detail that shows it. Choose one that can come back, changed, at the end. This plan is for "Write about a time when you had to do something you did not want to do."

POINT	FEELING	DETAIL THAT SHOWS IT
Start	annoyed	Ah Ma wanted me to teach her to video-call her sister in Ipoh. I sat on the arm of the sofa, ready to leave.
Turning point	moved	Her sister's face appeared. Ah Ma said her name twice and touched the screen with one finger. I slid down beside her.
End	glad	A week later, Ah Ma called me by herself, with her camera pointed at the ceiling. I sat down properly to help.

The way the narrator sits changes at each point, so the reader sees the change without being told.

Using the setting

- The setting means one detail of the place, the weather or the objects around the narrator that matches the feeling or contrasts with it. Use the weather only when it is part of what happens (page 55).
- Details that match: "The TV was on at full volume" before the turn, and "Ah Ma had copied out every step in pencil" after it.
- A detail that contrasts: "At the next table, a family sang a birthday song as I read the bad news."

The last line

- End on an action, a line of speech or a detail from the opening that has changed.
- Keep it short, and do not explain it afterwards.
- Leave out lines that could end any story, such as "It was a day I will never forget."
- If the task asks what you learnt, say it in a sentence or two before the last scene.

ENDING THAT EXPLAINS	ENDING THAT SHOWS	WHAT CHANGED
In the end, I was glad that I had helped Ah Ma. I realised that I should spend more time with my family.	A week later, my phone buzzed with a video call from Ah Ma, her camera pointed at the ceiling. This time I sat down properly, and we stayed on the call until her battery ran out.	The narrator moves from the arm of the sofa, ready to leave, to sitting down properly and staying. The feeling is never named.

Your turn

Plan a story for "Write about a time when you were afraid to try something new." Note the feeling and one detail at the start, the turning point and the end. Then write your last two sentences.

YOUR PLAN AND LAST TWO SENTENCES

Showing through speech

What people say, and how they say it, can show a feeling without naming it. Use a few short lines of speech at the moments that matter.

What to write

- **Let the words show the feeling.** A one-word answer, an excuse or a change of subject can show anger, hurt or worry.
- **Show what is not said.** A pause, a silence or an answer to a different question often shows more than the words.
- **Use "said" and "asked" most of the time.** Use *whispered*, *muttered* or *snapped* only when the way the words sound matters.
- **Use an action, not an adverb.** Instead of "she said angrily", write an action beat (an action next to the speech): She dropped her bag on the floor. "I said I'm fine."
- **Keep it short.** A few short lines of speech in the whole story are enough, most of them at the key moment. Leave out greetings and small talk. In a description, one overheard line is enough.

SPEECH THAT SHOWS

Pa read my report book at the dining table, turning each page slowly, then turning one back.

"Maths?"

"The paper was really hard this time," I said. "Everyone did badly."

He uncapped his pen, signed the page and slid the book back across the table without looking up. "Your dinner is getting cold."

Pa never says he is disappointed. His one-word question, his silence as he signs and the change of subject show it, and the excuse shows that the narrator knows it.

Punctuating speech

NOT LIKE THIS	LIKE THIS	RULE
"We're late", she said. "We're late." she said.	"We're late," she said.	Put the spoken words and their punctuation inside the quotation marks. Use a comma, not a full stop, before the speech tag ("she said").
"Are you coming?" He asked.	"Are you coming?" he asked.	Keep the question mark or exclamation mark, and start the tag with a small letter.
Mum said "wait for me."	Mum said, "Wait for me."	When the tag comes first, put a comma after it and a capital letter at the start of the speech.
"If you leave now," Mum said. "You'll catch the bus."	"If you leave now," Mum said, "you'll catch the bus."	When the tag splits one sentence, put a comma after the tag and carry on with a small letter.
She shrugged, "Whatever you want."	She shrugged. "Whatever you want."	Write an action beat as its own sentence, with a full stop.
"Is this yours?" Mum asked. "No," I said.	"Is this yours?" Mum asked. "No," I said.	Start a new paragraph, indented, each time the speaker changes.

TOO MUCH SPEECH	ENOUGH	WHAT CHANGED
"Hi, Jun Wei," I said. "Hi," he replied. "How are you?" I asked. "I'm fine, thank you," he answered. "Did you bring the ball?" I asked.	Jun Wei was already at the court, bouncing the ball between his legs. "You're late," he said, and passed it to me hard.	Five lines of small talk become one action and one line of speech. The hard pass shows that Jun Wei is annoyed.

The 20 feelings

The feelings are grouped in seven families. Find the feeling your character has, then turn to its page. If its words are not quite right, look at the other feelings in the same family.

WORRY AND FEAR

Nervous uneasy → panicking 11
before a performance, a test, a result, a hard conversation

Afraid wary → petrified 12
danger, the dark, an accident, being lost, someone threatening

JOY, RELIEF AND THANKS

Excited expectant → exhilarated 13
the night before a trip, a match about to start, the last day of term

Happy content → elated 14
a reunion dinner, a day out with friends, a festival visit, good news at home

Proud satisfied → exultant 15
a prize, a good result, a race finished, someone you helped doing well

Relieved soothed → liberated 16
an exam over, a result better than feared, a lost thing found, someone safe

Grateful appreciative → humbled 17
a teacher who stayed back, a loyal friend, a parent's sacrifice, a stranger's help

EMBARRASSMENT AND GUILT

Embarrassed self-conscious → mortified 18
a wrong answer in class, a fall in the canteen, a parent saying too much

Guilty troubled → remorseful 19
a lie, a promise you broke, someone else blamed, a harsh word to family

ANGER

Angry irritated → livid 20
being blamed unfairly, a secret passed on, a sibling taking your things

Frustrated impatient → defeated 21
a sum that will not come out, a group that will not listen, a slow queue

Jealous envious → spiteful 22
someone else's prize, a sibling's praise, a best friend's new friend

SADNESS

Sad downcast → grief-stricken 23
a death in the family, a pet dying, a friend moving away, a goodbye

Disappointed let down → devastated 24
results day, not being picked, a cancelled trip, a broken promise

Lonely left out → desolate 25
a new school, recess on your own, being left out, an empty flat

Nostalgic fond → yearning 26
a grandparent's old flat, your old school, a childhood playground, old photos

SURPRISE AND CONFUSION

Surprised startled → dumbfounded 27
a surprise party, a visitor, a better result than you hoped, sudden news

Confused unsure → bewildered 28
unclear instructions, a hard question, a new place, a friend acting oddly

CALM AND DETERMINATION

Determined motivated → relentless 29
training, revising after a poor result, a hard piece to learn, a long climb

Calm settled → serene 30
after an exam or a storm, an early walk, the minute before you go on stage

How to use a feeling page

Keep the page open while you plan and draft, and take only what fits your moment.

1. **Find the feeling** on page 9. The strip at the top of the page shows the rest of its family, in case another feeling fits better.
2. **Read the "when" line** to check that the feeling fits your moment.
3. **Choose a word from the ladder.** The words go from milder to stronger. Put the one that fits in your plan, and show it without naming it. All 20 ladders are on page 31.
4. **Choose details from the five ways:** one for a small feeling, and two or three from different ways for the key moment. Change each one to fit your story.
5. **Read "Swap the cliché"** to see which clichés to leave out. In "Put it together", the underlined words are details from the page, changed to fit a new story.
6. **Do "Try it".** "Often turns into" gives the pages for the feelings that often come next.

TELLING

I was very nervous before my class presentation.

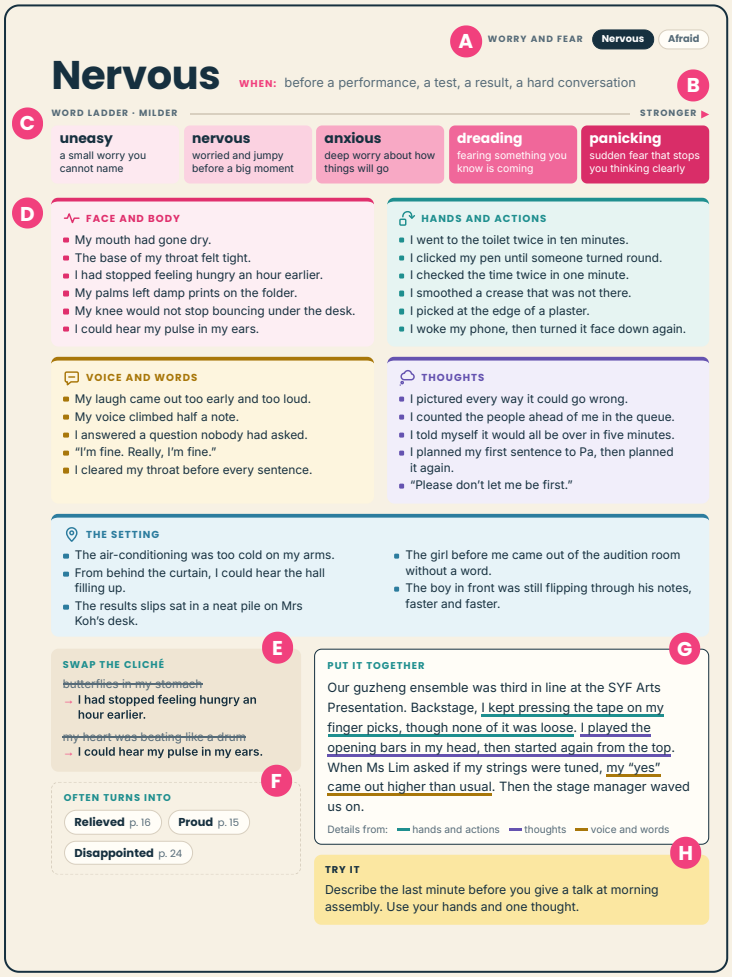
Ladder: the feeling grew as my turn came nearer, so I chose *dreading* for my plan.

From the Nervous page: "I checked the time twice in one minute." (hands and actions) and "My mouth had gone dry." (face and body).

SHOWING

I glanced at the clock above the whiteboard, then glanced again before the minute hand had moved. When Ms Ong called my name, I stood up and found that my mouth was too dry to say "Good morning".

The clock, the whiteboard and Ms Ong are new, and the word "nervous" has gone.



THE PARTS OF A FEELING PAGE

- **A Family strip** — the other feelings in the family
- **B When** — moments when people feel it
- **C Word ladder** — five words, milder to stronger, with meanings
- **D The five ways** — details, one colour for each way
- **E Swap the cliché** — a fresh detail for each cliché
- **F Often turns into** — feelings that often come next
- **G Put it together** — a short model; the underlined details come from the page
- **H Try it** — a task for your own writing

COLOUR KEY

- Face and body
- Hands and actions
- Voice and words
- Thoughts
- The setting

Nervous

WHEN: before a performance, a test, a result, a hard conversation

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

uneasy	nervous	anxious	dreading	panicking
a small worry you cannot name	worried and jumpy before a big moment	deep worry about how things will go	fearing something you know is coming	sudden fear that stops you thinking clearly

FACE AND BODY

- My mouth had gone dry.
- The base of my throat felt tight.
- I had stopped feeling hungry an hour earlier.
- My palms left damp prints on the folder.
- My knee would not stop bouncing under the desk.
- I could hear my pulse in my ears.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I went to the toilet twice in ten minutes.
- I clicked my pen until someone turned round.
- I checked the time twice in one minute.
- I smoothed a crease that was not there.
- I picked at the edge of a plaster.
- I woke my phone, then turned it face down again.

VOICE AND WORDS

- My laugh came out too early and too loud.
- My voice climbed half a note.
- I answered a question nobody had asked.
- "I'm fine. Really, I'm fine."
- I cleared my throat before every sentence.

THOUGHTS

- I pictured every way it could go wrong.
- I counted the people ahead of me in the queue.
- I told myself it would all be over in five minutes.
- I planned my first sentence to Pa, then planned it again.
- "Please don't let me be first."

THE SETTING

- The air-conditioning was too cold on my arms.
- From behind the curtain, I could hear the hall filling up.
- The results slips sat in a neat pile on Mrs Koh's desk.
- The girl before me came out of the audition room without a word.
- The boy in front was still flipping through his notes, faster and faster.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~butterflies in my stomach~~
→ **I had stopped feeling hungry an hour earlier.**

~~my heart was beating like a drum~~
→ **I could hear my pulse in my ears.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Relieved p. 16 · **Proud** p. 15 · **Disappointed** p. 24

PUT IT TOGETHER

Our guzheng ensemble was third in line at the SYF Arts Presentation. Backstage, I kept pressing the tape on my finger picks, though none of it was loose. I played the opening bars in my head, then started again from the top. When Ms Lim asked if my strings were tuned, my "yes" came out higher than usual. Then the stage manager waved us on.

Details from: hands and actions · thoughts · voice and words

TRY IT

Describe the last minute before you give a talk at morning assembly. Use your hands and one thought.

Afraid

WHEN: danger, the dark, an accident, being lost, someone threatening

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

wary	afraid	frightened	terrified	petrified
careful because something might be dangerous	fearing that something could hurt you	suddenly scared by something you saw or heard	so scared you want to scream or run	so scared you cannot move at all

FACE AND BODY

- The hair on my arms rose.
- My legs would not move.
- A cold weight dropped into my stomach.
- I held my breath without meaning to.
- My hands shook so much that the torch beam jumped.
- Sweat ran down my back in spite of the cold.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I backed away without taking my eyes off it.
- I gripped the railing until my knuckles ached.
- I froze with one foot on the step.
- I pressed myself flat against the wall.
- I fumbled the key twice before it went in.
- I crossed the road to keep away from the stray dog.
- I switched on every light between my room and the front door.

VOICE AND WORDS

- My voice came out as a whisper.
- "Who's there?" I called, and hated how thin it sounded.
- I could not get a word out.
- I called her name again, louder.
- I shouted for Dad, the way I used to when I was small.
- "Stay behind me," I said, and pulled my brother back.

THOUGHTS

- One thought filled my head: get out.
- I tried to remember what we had been told to do, but nothing came.
- I told myself it was only the wind, but I did not believe it.
- "Why did I take the short cut?"
- I thought of Mum, who did not know I had come this way.

THE SETTING

- The corridor light flickered and buzzed.
- Somewhere behind me, a door clicked shut.
- The branches moved when I did not.
- The rain drowned out every other sound.
- The path split in two, and neither way had a sign.
- Tyres screeched at the junction, and then came a bang.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I was scared to death~~
→ **My legs would not move.**

~~my blood ran cold~~
→ **A cold weight dropped into my stomach.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Relieved p. 16 · **Calm** p. 30 · **Embarrassed** p. 18

PUT IT TOGETHER

I was halfway along the park connector after tuition when a dog stepped out of the bushes, then two more. The biggest one lowered its head and growled. The skin on my arms prickled. I edged backwards, one slow step at a time, without looking away from its teeth. Why hadn't I gone the long way, past the coffee shop, as Ma had told me to?

Details from: face and body · hands and actions · thoughts

TRY IT

Write three sentences about footsteps behind you on an overhead bridge at night. Use a body detail and what you call out.

Excited

WHEN: the night before a trip, a match about to start, the last day of term

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

expectant	eager	excited	thrilled	exhilarated
waiting for something good to happen	wanting very much to start	so keen you cannot sit still	a sudden rush of great joy	bursting with joy and energy, often from speed

FACE AND BODY

- At six on a Saturday, I was wide awake before anyone else in the flat.
- My cheeks ached from grinning, and we had not even left the house.
- While we waited for the gates to open, I bounced on my toes.
- A fizzing in my chest would not settle.
- My feet were tapping before the music had properly started.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I was out of the door before Mum had found her keys.
- Every time a car pulled into the car park below, I ran to the window.
- I was first at the bus bay, twenty minutes early.
- I tore the parcel open without waiting for scissors.
- I had packed my bag three days early.
- I leaned so far forward that my seat belt locked.
- I put on my jersey two hours before the match.

VOICE AND WORDS

- I talked so fast that Mum had to ask me to start again.
- "How much longer?" I asked, before we had even reached the expressway.
- I squealed and hugged the phone to my chest.
- I told the canteen auntie we were flying to Japan on Friday.
- I shouted his name across the arrival hall.
- "Did you see that? Did you see?"

THOUGHTS

- I had planned the whole day down to the hour.
- The last lesson of the day felt a week long.
- I worked out how many hours were left, then how many minutes.
- "What if it's even better than last year?"
- I had already chosen the first three rides.
- Nothing else was on my mind, not even Monday's maths test.

THE SETTING

- The departure board flicked to "Boarding".
- The coach was loud with chatter and the rustle of snack packets.
- The bass from the hall shook the floor.
- The countdown on the big screen reached ten, and everyone around us joined in.
- The air smelt of sunscreen, and the coach doors hissed open.
- The field was freshly marked, and the white lines were still bright.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I could hardly contain my excitement~~
→ **I squealed and hugged the phone to my chest.**

~~I was counting down the days~~
→ **I had packed my bag three days early.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Disappointed p. 24 · **Happy** p. 14 · **Nervous** p. 11

PUT IT TOGETHER

My suitcase had stood zipped by the wardrobe since Tuesday. Mei had been asleep for hours. I checked the clock and did the sum again: nine hours until the taxi. "Mei, are you awake?" I whispered up to the top bunk. "What should we eat first in Taipei?" A soft toy landed on my face.

Details from: hands and actions · thoughts · voice and words

TRY IT

Picture the morning of your class chalet. Show the feeling with something you do and something you say.

Happy

WHEN: a reunion dinner, a day out with friends, a festival visit, good news at home

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

content	cheerful	happy	delighted	elated
quietly pleased with things as they are	in a good mood that others notice	enjoying the moment and feeling good	very pleased by something good	full of joy after great news or success

FACE AND BODY

- In the lift, I caught myself smiling at nothing.
- I laughed until I had to put my cup down.
- I sank into the sofa between my cousins, too full to move.
- I ran into the sea with my T-shirt still on.
- I fell asleep still in my Hari Raya clothes.
- I bounced my baby cousin on my knee until he shrieked with laughter.
- When our song came on, I danced in my seat.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I got off the bus a stop early to walk the rest.
- As we crossed the road, I linked arms with Grandma.
- I pushed my plate of fries into the middle for everyone.
- We took a group selfie with fourteen people squeezed into it.
- I spun my little sister round the kitchen.
- The ice melted before I remembered my drink.

VOICE AND WORDS

- I whistled as I hung out the laundry, and Mum asked what had got into me.
- I sang along to the radio, loudly and badly.
- We laughed at the same old joke as if it were new.
- I said good morning to the security guard, and he looked surprised.
- "Can we stay a bit longer?"
- "This is nice," I said, to no one in particular.

THOUGHTS

- I wanted the evening to slow down.
- Even the homework waiting at home did not bother me.
- I did not look at the time once.
- I looked at the four generations round the table and thought how lucky we were.
- "I want to remember this," I thought.
- Nothing anyone said could have annoyed me that day.
- "Why can't every day be like this?"

THE SETTING

- The whole flat smelt of pineapple tarts.
- Strings of lights blinked along our corridor for Deepavali.
- The breeze off the sea was cool after the hot day.
- The sky over the reservoir turned orange, then pink.
- The rice cooker clicked off, and someone called us to the table.
- The last bus home was almost empty, and we had the back seat to ourselves.
- Neighbours in festive clothes filled the void deck.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I was grinning from ear to ear~~
→ **In the lift, I caught myself smiling at nothing.**

~~I was on cloud nine~~
→ **I sang along to the radio, loudly and badly.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Sad p. 23 · **Nostalgic** p. 26 · **Grateful** p. 17

PUT IT TOGETHER

All nine of us cousins took our lanterns down to the playground behind Po Po's block. I held little Jia Hui by one hand and swung her round until the rabbit lantern in her other hand flew out sideways. Uncle Ben told his story about falling asleep at his own wedding dinner, and we laughed as hard as we had the first time. I hoped nobody would say it was time to go up.

Details from: hands and actions · voice and words · thoughts

TRY IT

Show a family picnic at Changi Beach without naming the feeling. Choose one detail from the setting and one from your thoughts.

Proud

WHEN: a prize, a good result, a race finished, someone you helped doing well

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

satisfied	pleased	proud	triumphant	exultant
happy enough with how you did	glad about how something turned out	deep pleasure in your or a friend's success	showing great joy after a hard win	wildly joyful, wanting to shout it out

FACE AND BODY

- I walked back to my seat a little more slowly than I needed to.
- As I walked onto the stage, my chin came up.
- I felt my classmates watching me, and I did not mind at all.
- The medal bumped against my chest with every step.
- I tried, and failed, to keep my smile small.
- My legs ached, and I did not care.
- I sat up straighter through the whole assembly.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I held the certificate with both hands so that it would not crease.
- At recess, I went back to look at the results list again.
- I wore the medal on the MRT home and did not tuck it in.
- I propped the certificate on my desk where I could see it from my bed.
- I sent the photo to the family chat while the others were still clapping.
- When my brother's name was called, I clapped harder than anyone.
- I kept picking up the trophy to read the engraving.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "It was nothing," I said, though I had trained for months.
- I told Grandma the score, then told her again at dinner.
- I tried to sound casual when Dad asked how it went.
- I asked Mum to read the letter out again, just to hear it.
- "That's my sister," I told the stranger next to me.
- "We did it. We actually did it."

THOUGHTS

- Every early-morning session and every missed weekend had been worth it.
- The final shot replayed in my head, and it went in every time.
- "I did that," I thought. "That was me."
- I hoped Mr Tan had seen it from the stands.
- I wondered what my Primary 6 teacher would say if she could see me now.

THE SETTING

- The principal shook my hand while the camera flashed.
- Our school's corner of the stadium was on its feet.
- Our team photo went up in the glass case outside the general office.
- My name looked different in print.
- A banner at the school gate had our team's name on it.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~my chest swelled with pride~~
→ **I walked back to my seat a little more slowly than I needed to.**

~~I felt ten feet tall~~
→ **I wore the medal on the MRT home and did not tuck it in.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Grateful p. 17

Embarrassed p. 18

Determined p. 29

PUT IT TOGETHER

In lane four, my brother Kai was the smallest boy in the race. I remembered the June holidays, when he would not even put his face in the water. I was on my feet before he touched the wall, clapping with both arms over my head. He came second. "I taught him that kick," I told the mother beside me, though she had not asked.

Details from: thoughts — hands and actions — voice and words

TRY IT

Imagine your class has won the Sports Day cheer competition. Show it through an action and something you shout.

Relieved

WHEN: an exam over, a result better than feared, a lost thing found, someone safe

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

soothed	reassured	relieved	unburdened	liberated
gently calmed as worry or pain eases	less worried after kind words or good news	glad the worry or danger is over	free of a long, heavy worry	completely free to do as you like again

FACE AND BODY

- I sagged against the wall.
- My knees went soft for a second.
- My stomach unclenched.
- My hands started shaking only after it was over.
- I realised I had eaten nothing since breakfast.
- The tight band across my forehead eased.
- I suddenly noticed how tired I was.
- The cold sweat on my back began to dry.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- When I opened my hands, I found nail marks in my palms.
- On the way out, I dropped my revision notes into the recycling bin.
- I put my pen down and stretched until my back cracked.
- I opened the wallet and touched every card inside, one by one.
- I hugged my little brother so tightly that he complained.
- I closed my eyes and leaned back in the plastic chair.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "You're here. You're really here."
- I gave a shaky laugh that was half a sob.
- I said "It's okay" over and over, mostly to myself.
- "I thought I'd lost it," I kept saying, though it was right there in my hand.
- "Oh, thank goodness."

THOUGHTS

- "It's over," I thought. "Whatever happens now, it's over."
- I could not remember why I had been so worried.
- I promised myself I would never leave revision this late again.
- "What if we hadn't found him?" I pushed the thought away.
- Suddenly, the weekend was mine again.

THE SETTING

- The hall doors opened, and the noise of the corridor rushed in.
- Outside the hospital, even the heat felt good.
- Mum's message lit up my phone: "Found him. He's safe."
- The classroom fan, which I had not noticed all morning, whirred overhead.
- The ordinary sounds came back: the bus engine, a dog, someone's television.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I heaved a sigh of relief~~
→ **I gave a shaky laugh that was half a sob.**

~~a great weight was lifted off my shoulders~~
→ **The tight band across my forehead eased.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Grateful p. 17 · **Calm** p. 30 · **Happy** p. 14

PUT IT TOGETHER

At last Dad's surgeon pushed open the theatre doors and pulled her mask down. "The operation went well. He's waking up now." Only then did my knees start to shake, and I had to sit down. I let go of Mum's arm and saw red marks where my fingers had been. For the first time all morning, I noticed a lift chiming somewhere behind us and the squeak of a trolley.

Details from: face and body · hands and actions · the setting

TRY IT

Write the moment you find your lost house key in your PE shorts. Show your body relaxing, then your first words.

Grateful

WHEN: a teacher who stayed back, a loyal friend, a parent's sacrifice, a stranger's help

WORD LADDER · MILDER ——— STRONGER ▶

appreciative	thankful	grateful	indebted	humbled
noticing and valuing what someone did	glad that something went your way	glad of someone's kindness and wanting to say so	feeling you owe someone a great deal	feeling you did not deserve such kindness

FACE AND BODY

- I held her hand in both of mine.
- I hugged Pa for longer than I usually would.
- I took the envelope with both hands and bowed my head.
- She waved my thanks away, and my cheeks went warm.
- When I saw that the whole class had signed the card, my smile wobbled.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I wrote her a card and rewrote it three times.
- Before she arrived, I left a packet of kaya buns on her desk.
- On the way home, I bought Ma her favourite chee cheong fun.
- I kept the note he had tucked into my textbook.
- I stayed back to help her pack up the room.
- The next day, I gave up my MRT seat without being asked.
- At midnight, I messaged Wei Ling: "Thank you for today."

VOICE AND WORDS

- "You didn't have to do that."
- "Thank you" felt too small, so I said it twice.
- I thanked the bus captain as I got off, and meant it.
- "You stayed back for me? Every day?"
- I listed everything she had done, and she laughed and told me to stop.
- "I don't know how to thank you."

THOUGHTS

- I thought of all the evenings Ma had sat up with me.
- I realised how many Saturdays he had given up for us.
- I had never once asked how far she travelled to get here.
- I remembered every time I had complained about the extra lessons.
- She did not even know my name, and she stayed until the ambulance came.
- "How did she even know I needed help?"

THE SETTING

- Ma had left a bowl of porridge under a cover, still warm.
- The light in the staff room was still on when I left.
- The stranger's umbrella stood drying in our corridor.
- Pa's work shoes on the rack were worn through at the heel.
- The notes she had copied for me were neat and colour-coded.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~words cannot express how thankful I was~~
→ **"Thank you" felt too small, so I said it twice.**

~~my heart was filled with gratitude~~
→ **I hugged Pa for longer than I usually would.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Happy p. 14 · **Guilty** p. 19 · **Calm** p. 30

PUT IT TOGETHER

On the crowded train home, the carriage started to tilt and blur. A woman in office clothes gave me her seat and pressed a sweet into my hand. She got off with me at Toa Payoh. Twice I told her she could go, but she sat with me until my head cleared. The next morning, I gave my seat to a man with a walking stick.

Details from: — voice and words — hands and actions

TRY IT

Write about a neighbour who carries your grandmother's shopping up eight floors when the lift breaks down. Use words and an action.

Embarrassed

WHEN: a wrong answer in class, a fall in the canteen, a parent saying too much

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

self-conscious	sheepish	embarrassed	humiliated	mortified
too aware of people looking at you	a little silly after a small mistake	awkward and red-faced in front of others	made to look foolish, with your pride hurt	so ashamed you want to disappear

FACE AND BODY

- The tips of my ears went hot.
- I could feel the whole class looking at the back of my neck.
- I shrank down in my seat until my chin was level with the desk.
- I suddenly did not know what to do with my arms.
- My hand kept going to my hair.
- I kept my head down until the bell rang.
- I hunched my shoulders, trying to take up less space.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I pretended to look for something in my bag.
- I picked up my tray and walked off as if nothing had happened.
- I scrubbed at the curry stain on my shirt with a wet tissue.
- I brushed off my knees and laughed before anyone else could.
- I covered my face with the worksheet.
- The next day, I took the other staircase so that I would not pass the canteen.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "I meant to do that," I said, and nobody believed me.
- I tried to laugh it off, and it came out as a snort.
- My answer trailed off into a mumble.
- "Ma, stop," I hissed.
- I apologised to the chair I had walked into.
- I tried to explain and only made it worse.
- "Can we not talk about it?"

THOUGHTS

- That night, I saw it all again: the tray, the floor, the faces.
- "Of all the people to see it, why him?"
- I wondered how many people had filmed it.
- "Act normal. Just act normal."
- I hoped everyone would have forgotten by Monday.
- I seriously considered changing schools.

THE SETTING

- The silence after my answer seemed to go on and on.
- Someone at the back sniggered, and then the whole row joined in.
- The noise in the canteen stopped, then came back louder.
- The microphone squealed, and every head in the hall turned.
- The lift doors took an age to close.
- By evening, someone had turned the photo into a sticker.
- A passing teacher asked if I was all right, and three more people turned round.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I turned as red as a tomato~~
→ **The tips of my ears went hot.**

~~I wished the ground would swallow me up~~
→ **I shrank down in my seat until my chin was level with the desk.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Angry p. 20 · **Relieved** p. 16 · **Determined** p. 29

PUT IT TOGETHER

At the Meet-the-Parents session, Mum told Mr Rahman that I still slept with my baby pillow. Of all the families waiting by the open door, Darren's had to be next in line. Heat crept up my neck and into my ears. "Mum," I said under my breath, and nudged her foot. She patted my knee and went on to tell him about my nail-biting.

Details from: thoughts · face and body · voice and words

TRY IT

Write the ten seconds after your phone rings in a silent cinema. Show it through your body and one thought.

Guilty

WHEN: a lie, a promise you broke, someone else blamed, a harsh word to family

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

troubled	regretful	guilty	ashamed	remorseful
bothered, with something on your mind	wishing you had done things differently	knowing you did something wrong	thinking less of yourself for what you did	deeply sorry and wanting to make it right

FACE AND BODY

- I looked at Aisha's shoes instead of her face.
- I could not finish the kueh she had saved for me.
- I made sure I was never alone with her.
- When she thanked me, my stomach turned.
- Every time her name came up, I flinched.
- Mum called my name from the kitchen, and I jumped.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I cleared the table without being asked, hoping it would count for something.
- I typed "I'm sorry" and deleted it four times.
- I pushed the broken pieces to the back of the drawer.
- I turned the vase so that the crack faced the wall.
- I walked past her desk instead of stopping.
- I hovered outside Grandma's door, then went back to my room.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "It wasn't me," I said, too quickly.
- I joined in the laughter, then saw her face.
- I started to tell her, then asked about the homework instead.
- My "sorry" came out so softly that she asked me to repeat it.
- "Did anyone see who did it?" Mrs Lee asked, and I said nothing.
- "I'm just tired," I told Mum when she asked what was wrong.

THOUGHTS

- "She would never have done this to me."
- I kept seeing her face when she found the torn page.
- I had an answer ready in case she asked, and hoped she never would.
- Every kind word from her was harder to hear.
- I wished I could go back to the moment before I pressed send.
- I decided that telling her would only upset her, but I knew it was an excuse.

THE SETTING

- Her seat stood empty the next day.
- Grandma's door stayed shut all evening.
- The birthday card I had made her was still pinned above her desk.
- The message sat on my screen with two blue ticks and no reply.
- At dinner, everyone else talked and laughed, and nobody noticed I was quiet.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~my conscience was eating me up~~
→ **I typed "I'm sorry" and deleted it four times.**

~~I felt a pang of guilt~~
→ **When she thanked me, my stomach turned.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Relieved p. 16 · **Sad** p. 23 · **Determined** p. 29

PUT IT TOGETHER

Pa was forty minutes late to fetch me from training. "You always do this," I said, with one foot still on the pavement. Then I noticed the grease on his hands. He had come straight from the workshop. I spent the drive staring at the number plate of the car in front. I said "sorry" at the last traffic light, too softly for him to hear.

Details from: face and body · voice and words

TRY IT

Imagine your friend is blamed for the window you broke with a ball. Show that evening through your voice and your thoughts.

Angry

WHEN: being blamed unfairly, a secret passed on, a sibling taking your things

WORD LADDER · MILDER → STRONGER

irritated	cross	angry	furious	livid
mildly annoyed by small things	annoyed with someone, and showing it	strongly upset by something wrong or unfair	raging and ready to shout or slam	the strongest rage, often pale and shaking

FACE AND BODY

- I clenched my teeth until my jaw ached.
- My hands had curled into fists before I noticed.
- I breathed hard through my nose.
- My neck and shoulders went rigid.
- I was trembling, but not from fear.
- I glared at him until he looked away.
- My face went hard and still.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I slammed my locker so hard that it bounced open again.
- I shoved my chair back and stood up.
- I snatched my phone out of his hand.
- I walked out and let the door bang behind me.
- I jabbed at my phone, typing a reply I knew I should not send.
- I crumpled the note in my fist.
- I stamped up the stairs to our flat.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "That's not fair, and you know it."
- I spoke slowly, spacing out every word.
- I shouted, and the whole corridor turned to look.
- "Don't touch my things!"
- I kept my mouth shut, because anything I said would have come out as a shout.
- "Why is it always me?"

THOUGHTS

- I rehearsed everything I should have said.
- "How dare she?"
- I went over his words until I was angrier than before.
- I wanted him to feel as small as I had felt.
- "She promised. She promised."
- I did not want to calm down, not yet.
- "Mum always takes his side."

THE SETTING

- My name went up on the board with the noisy ones, though I had not said a word.
- Every small sound grated: someone chewing, a phone buzzing.
- My brother's music came through the wall, as loud as ever.
- She was still laughing with the others when I walked in.
- A car alarm whooped below, and I wanted to throw something at it.
- My last packet of instant noodles was gone, and the wrapper was on the table.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~my blood was boiling~~
→ **I clenched my teeth until my jaw ached.**

~~I saw red~~
→ **I slammed my locker so hard that it bounced open again.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Guilty p. 19 | **Calm** p. 30 | **Sad** p. 23

PUT IT TOGETHER

The night before my Maths exam, my calculator was missing. I grabbed Ethan's pencil case off his desk and shook everything out onto his bed. There it was, with a crack across the screen. "Who said you could take it?" I asked, leaving a gap after every word. He started to cry, and I knew Mum would come in and say he was only nine.

Details from: hands and actions | voice and words | thoughts

TRY IT

Write about being scolded for a mess your sister made. Show your reaction with your face, your voice and a thought.

Frustrated

WHEN: a sum that will not come out, a group that will not listen, a slow queue

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

impatient	fed up	frustrated	exasperated	defeated
unable to wait any longer	tired of something that keeps going on	upset because you cannot make it work	out of patience after trying again and again	giving up, sure it will never work

FACE AND BODY

- I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands.
- I pushed my hair back and held it there.
- I sat back and stared at the ceiling.
- My shoulders were stiff from bending over the same page for an hour.
- I blew out my cheeks.
- I pinched the bridge of my nose and shut my eyes.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I rubbed out the same answer so often that the paper tore.
- I tossed my pen on the desk and watched it roll off.
- At the gantry, I tapped my card three times before it let me through.
- I unplugged the laptop, plugged it in again and tried once more.
- I drummed my fingers on the counter.
- I fed the same crumpled note into the vending machine a fourth time.
- I pressed the remote harder each time, as if that would help.

VOICE AND WORDS

- I muttered at the screen as if it could hear me.
- "Why won't it just work?"
- I groaned, loudly enough for the boy next to me to look up.
- I explained it again, more slowly, and she still looked blank.
- "Can you just listen for one minute?"
- "I've tried that already!"
- "Forget it. I give up."

THOUGHTS

- I had done exactly what the video showed.
- "Why is this so easy for everyone else?"
- I had been stuck on question 4 for forty minutes.
- "One more try," I thought, for the fifth time.
- I knew what I wanted; I just could not make it happen.
- Every time I fixed one part, another came loose.

THE SETTING

- The queue at the counter had not moved in ten minutes.
- The loading circle spun and spun.
- The train stopped in the tunnel, and the announcement said nothing new.
- The printer blinked its orange light and did nothing.
- My bus pulled away just as I reached the stop.
- The glue would not hold, and the corner of the poster kept curling up.
- The fan kept blowing my worksheet off the desk.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I was tearing my hair out~~
→ **I pushed my hair back and held it there.**

~~it was like banging my head against a brick wall~~
→ **I rubbed out the same answer so often that the paper tore.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Determined p. 29 | **Angry** p. 20 | **Proud** p. 15

PUT IT TOGETHER

With two days to go, our project had one slide. At the fast-food restaurant near school, Aiman and Josh were watching football clips on one phone. I went through the plan a third time, more slowly, and Josh asked what our topic was. I leaned back in my chair and puffed out my cheeks. Neither of them looked up.

Details from: — voice and words — face and body

TRY IT

Write about a self-checkout machine that keeps rejecting your loaf of bread. Use what you do and what you mutter.

Jealous

WHEN: someone else's prize, a sibling's praise, a best friend's new friend

WORD LADDER · MILDER → STRONGER

envious	jealous	resentful	bitter	spiteful
wishing you had what someone else has	upset that someone else got what you wanted	angry about being treated unfairly	hurt and angry for a long time	wanting to hurt or upset the other person

FACE AND BODY

- My eyes kept going back to the trophy on her desk.
- When she held it up for the photo, I looked away.
- I sat with my arms folded through the whole speech.
- My mouth twisted, just for a second.
- I kept a smile fixed on my face while she told the story a third time.
- As soon as Pa stuck my sister's drawing on the fridge, I left the room.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- My clap was the last to start and the first to stop.
- I checked her score before I checked my own.
- I zoomed in on every photo of the two of them.
- I did not like her post, though I had seen it.
- Before she could show me the medal, I walked off.
- I stopped waiting for her after school.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "Well done," I said, a little too brightly.
- "She only won because her mum helped her."
- "Must be nice," I muttered.
- I changed the subject as soon as she mentioned the prize.
- "You two seem very close now."
- I pointed out the one smudge on her painting.
- I asked, too casually, who else was going.

THOUGHTS

- "Why her and not me?"
- I wanted to be happy for her, and I could not.
- I compared her marks with mine, subject by subject.
- For one mean second, I hoped she would trip on the stage steps.
- I noticed every recess she spent at the other table.
- I listed every advantage she had that I did not.

THE SETTING

- A crowd formed round her desk, and nobody came near mine.
- Her phone buzzed all evening with congratulations.
- Her essay was pinned on the noticeboard, right beside my seat.
- At the reunion dinner, every auntie asked about my cousin's results.
- The new girl's friendship bracelet matched the one on her wrist.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I was green with envy~~
→ **My clap was the last to start and the first to stop.**

~~I was eaten up with jealousy~~
→ **I checked her score before I checked my own.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Guilty p. 19 | **Lonely** p. 25 | **Happy** p. 14

PUT IT TOGETHER

By evening, Paati had told every Deepavali guest about my sister Priya's scholarship. Each auntie who came in asked to see the letter. I was still smiling the fourth time Paati told the story, but when they wanted Priya and me to pose together, I went to refill the murukku tin. In the kitchen, I ate three pieces standing up.

Details from: the setting | face and body | hands and actions

TRY IT

Suppose your younger brother gets a new phone before you do. Show it with what you say and a detail you notice.

Sad

WHEN: a death in the family, a pet dying, a friend moving away, a goodbye

WORD LADDER · MILDER ——— STRONGER ▶

downcast	sad	sorrowful	heartbroken	grief-stricken
a little low, with your head down	unhappy because of a loss or hurt	deeply unhappy in a quiet, lasting way	crushed by losing someone or something loved	the deepest pain of loss, after someone dies

FACE AND BODY

- My eyes stung, and I turned my face to the window.
- I tasted salt at the corner of my mouth.
- My throat ached from holding the tears in.
- My breath kept catching halfway in.
- My shoulders shook, though I made no sound.
- The next morning, my eyes were still swollen.
- My nose was so blocked that I had to breathe through my mouth.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I held Ah Ma's spectacle case and could not put it down.
- I lay on my bed in my uniform until the room went dark.
- I pressed my face into Ah Kong's old shirt, which still smelt of his medicated oil.
- I scrolled through old photos of us until two in the morning.
- I left my plate of rice almost untouched.
- I splashed my face twice so that no one would see I had been crying.
- When Ma knocked, I pulled the blanket over my head.

VOICE AND WORDS

- My voice cracked on her name.
- I could only nod.
- "I'm okay," I said, and my voice gave me away.
- I let Ma do all the talking at the wake.
- The words came out in pieces, between breaths.
- "Do you think she knew we were there?"

THOUGHTS

- I kept going over the last thing I had said to her.
- I reached for my phone to message him, then remembered.
- For a second, I expected her to be in her chair when I came in.
- I thought of how he used to wait at the gate for me every afternoon.
- I wished I had visited her the Sunday before.
- "Is it morning in London yet?"

THE SETTING

- Her slippers were still lined up at the door.
- Nobody had moved the dog's water bowl.
- Her radio was still tuned to the station she liked.
- Rows of plastic chairs stood under the tent at the void deck.
- In the ward, a machine beeped on and on behind the curtain.
- The departure hall was bright and cheerful, and I hated it for that.
- His name was on the seating plan, but his desk had been cleared.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~tears streamed down my face~~
→ **I tasted salt at the corner of my mouth.**

~~a wave of sadness washed over me~~
→ **I lay on my bed in my uniform until the room went dark.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Lonely p. 25 · **Grateful** p. 17 · **Calm** p. 30

PUT IT TOGETHER

We came home from the vet without Lucky. I unlocked the gate and caught myself listening for his claws on the tiles. His lead was still hanging on the hook by the shoe rack. I took it down and sat on the floor with it in my lap. My chin kept wobbling, and I pressed my lips together so that Mum would not hear me.

Details from: thoughts · the setting · face and body

TRY IT

Write about your last afternoon with a friend who is moving to Australia. Pick details from two different ways.

SADNESS: Sad | **Disappointed** | Lonely | Nostalgic

Disappointed

WHEN: results day, not being picked, a cancelled trip, a broken promise

WORD LADDER · MILDER → STRONGER

let down	disappointed	deflated	crestfallen	devastated
hurt that someone did not keep their word	unhappy because things did not go as hoped	suddenly flat after feeling hopeful	hope gone, and it shows on your face	completely crushed by a huge loss

FACE AND BODY

- My smile slipped halfway through his sentence.
- As soon as I saw the list, my shoulders dropped.
- I was quiet for the whole car ride home.
- I stared at the screen until it dimmed.
- I sank onto the nearest bench.
- I walked back to the bus behind everyone else.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- After Pa's call, I put the cake back in the fridge, uncut.
- I folded the results slip in half and pushed it into my pocket.
- I unpacked the bag I had packed the night before.
- I peeled off my competition number and folded it small.
- I deleted the message I had typed to tell everyone.
- I took the countdown calendar off my wall.
- The second-place medal stayed in its plastic bag.

VOICE AND WORDS

- I said "Never mind" before Ma could say anything.
- "Oh. Okay."
- "It's fine. There's always next year."
- "But you promised," I said, more quietly than I meant to.
- "We lost" was all I said before I went to my room.
- "I was so sure," I kept saying.

THOUGHTS

- I had already planned what I would say to Ma when I got home.
- "All those Saturday training sessions, for this."
- I tried to work out where I had lost the marks.
- "Two marks. Just two marks."
- I had been looking forward to it since March.
- I wondered whether Coach had ever really considered me.

THE SETTING

- The other team's cheering carried across the field.
- The seat I had saved for Pa stayed empty all through the concert.
- The sky cleared an hour after Sports Day was called off.
- The scoreboard still showed the final score after everyone had gone.
- Around me, people were taking photos with their results slips.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~my heart sank~~
→ **As soon as I saw the list, my shoulders dropped.**

~~all my hopes were dashed~~
→ **I unpacked the bag I had packed the night before.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Determined p. 29 | **Sad** p. 23 | **Jealous** p. 22

PUT IT TOGETHER

My PSLE score was five points worse than in the prelims. A few rows away, a boy was holding up his slip for his father to film. I folded mine into a small square and closed my fist round it. I asked to go home straight away, so that Ma would not have to find something kind to say.

Details from: the setting | hands and actions | voice and words

TRY IT

Describe finding out that you are not in your school's NDP contingent. Let your hands and thoughts show it.

Lonely

WHEN: a new school, recess on your own, being left out, an empty flat

WORD LADDER · MILDER ——— STRONGER ▶

left out	lonely	isolated	forlorn	desolate
not asked to join in	wanting company and not having it	cut off from other people	alone, sad and looking a little lost	completely alone and empty inside

FACE AND BODY

- I smiled back at someone, then saw she was smiling at the girl behind me.
- From behind my book, I watched the group by the window.
- I sat at the very end of the bench with my bag on my lap.
- I stood a little apart from every group, close enough to hear.
- I caught my reflection in the canteen window: one person at a table for six.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I kept my earphones in, with nothing playing.
- I ate my sandwich on the stairs behind the hall.
- At recess, I walked up and down the corridor so that I would look busy.
- I checked my phone again: no new messages.
- I switched on the TV just to hear voices.
- I spent recess in the library, tidying shelves no one had asked me to tidy.
- I waited to be put into whichever group was short of one.

VOICE AND WORDS

- My "hi" came out croaky because I had not spoken all morning.
- "Can I sit here?" They nodded without looking up.
- I laughed along at a joke I had not heard.
- When someone finally asked me a question, I talked too much.
- The canteen auntie was the only person I spoke to all day.
- I said "I'm home" to an empty flat.
- I practised an opening line, then let the moment pass.

THOUGHTS

- "Would anyone notice if I went home now?"
- What were they laughing about?
- I thought of my old class, still sitting together at our corner table.
- I kept hoping someone would wave me over.
- Was it something I had said?
- I looked forward to Monday, because at least there would be people.

THE SETTING

- At the bus stop, everyone else stood in twos and threes.
- The MRT carriage was packed, and nobody looked up.
- A note on the table said, "Working late. Buy dinner downstairs."
- The class chat filled with photos from an outing I had not known about.
- In the block opposite, every lit window had a family round a table.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I felt all alone in the world~~
→ **I said "I'm home" to an empty flat.**

~~I was like a fish out of water~~
→ **I stood a little apart from every group, close enough to hear.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Happy p. 14 · **Grateful** p. 17 · **Sad** p. 23

PUT IT TOGETHER

The flat was dark when I got back from badminton at a quarter to eight. "I'm back," I called anyway. A ten-dollar note was tucked under the sugar jar, for dinner. I went down for chicken rice and carried it back up in a plastic bag. I ate it with the radio on, just to have someone talking.

Details from: voice and words · the setting · hands and actions

TRY IT

Describe your first night at a camp where you know nobody. Include a sound around you and something you do.

Nostalgic

WHEN: a grandparent's old flat, your old school, a childhood playground, old photos

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

fond	sentimental	nostalgic	wistful	yearning
warm towards a person, place or memory	attached to old things because of memories	missing happy times that are gone	a quiet, sad wish for something lost	a deep ache to have the past back

FACE AND BODY

- On the old swing, my knees came up to my chin.
- I had to crouch to fit into the playground tunnel I used to run through.
- I breathed in deeply, trying to keep the smell.
- I laughed and blinked hard at the same time.
- As we passed the old school gate, my steps slowed.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I turned the old photos over to read Ah Ma's handwriting on the back.
- I tossed the old five stones once and caught only two.
- I bought a wafer ice cream from the uncle's cart, the way we always had.
- I traced the initials we had scratched into the desk.
- I ran my thumb over the pencil lines on the doorframe, each with my age beside it.
- I opened Ah Ma's biscuit tin, which still held her sewing threads.
- I took a photo of the block before it came down.

VOICE AND WORDS

- I told the story of the lost slipper again, and everyone still laughed.
- "This used to be the provision shop," I told my brother.
- "Do you remember when...?"
- "It was bigger, wasn't it?"
- Pa and I talked over each other, remembering.

THOUGHTS

- I could almost hear Ah Ma calling us in for dinner.
- One bite of the ang ku kueh, and I was seven, kneeling on her kitchen stool.
- I had never thought to ask her where the photos were taken.
- It bothered me that I could not remember what the shop used to be called.
- Would the next family know about the loose tile in the kitchen?

THE SETTING

- The dragon playground's tiles had faded in the sun.
- The provision shop was now a bubble tea shop.
- Blue hoarding stood round the old block, ready for it to come down.
- The same auntie still ran the drinks stall, though her hair had gone white.
- The afternoon sun came through the window grilles in the same pattern on the floor.
- The old school field had become a car park.
- The lift still stopped only on every third floor.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~a trip down memory lane~~
→ **I turned the old photos over to read Ah Ma's handwriting on the back.**

~~memories came flooding back~~
→ **One bite of the ang ku kueh, and I was seven, kneeling on her kitchen stool.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Grateful p. 17 · **Sad** p. 23 · **Happy** p. 14

PUT IT TOGETHER

Jun Hao and I went back to our old primary school after the Teachers' Day concert. The canteen benches were so low that my knees knocked the table. "We used to hide behind that pillar during PE," I said. Jun Hao shook his head and pointed at the next one. The drinks uncle looked at me for a while, then made my Milo without asking.

Details from: face and body · voice and words · the setting

TRY IT

Write about finding your kindergarten water bottle in a box under your bed. Show the feeling through a memory and your voice.

Surprised

WHEN: a surprise party, a visitor, a better result than you hoped, sudden news

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

startled	surprised	amazed	astonished	dumbfounded
a sudden jump at something unexpected	not expecting what just happened	full of wonder at something great	hardly able to believe it is real	so shocked you cannot speak

FACE AND BODY

- My eyebrows went up before I could stop them.
- I stood in the doorway with one shoe still on.
- My spoon stopped halfway to my mouth.
- When the lights came on, I jumped.
- A laugh burst out of me.
- I clapped a hand over my mouth.
- My bag slid off my shoulder onto the floor.
- Both hands went up to my cheeks.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I looked away, then looked back to check.
- I held my phone out to my sister without a word.
- I pulled out my earphones to hear the announcement again.
- I grabbed my friend's arm.
- I dropped my keys on the doormat.
- I scrolled up to check that the message was really from her.
- I checked the name at the top of the slip, in case it was someone else's.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "No way."
- "Wait, what?"
- "Me?" I asked, pointing at myself.
- "You're here? Since when?"
- "How did you...?" I never finished the question.
- I laughed and said, "You're joking."
- "Is this for me?"

THOUGHTS

- I was sure there had been a mistake.
- I went back over the past week for clues I had missed.
- How long had they been planning it?
- My first thought, stupidly, was that I was still in my PE shirt.
- "Did I hear that right?"
- A minute earlier, it had been an ordinary Tuesday.

THE SETTING

- My best friend, who had said she was sick, was holding the cake.
- A banner reading "Happy 15th!" hung across the window.
- My name came over the PA system, twice.
- Party poppers went off, and streamers landed in my hair.
- The flat, which should have been empty, smelt of curry.
- My cousin, who was meant to be in Perth, was sitting on our sofa.
- The class chat, quiet for weeks, suddenly had ninety new messages.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~my jaw dropped~~
→ **My spoon stopped halfway to my mouth.**

~~I could not believe my eyes~~
→ **I looked away, then looked back to check.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Excited p. 13 · **Afraid** p. 12 · **Confused** p. 28

PUT IT TOGETHER

After school, Mum was waiting by the guardhouse, which she never did. Beside her, in a flowered blouse, stood Ah Ma, who lived in Penang. I took off my glasses, wiped them on my shirt and looked again. "Ah Ma? When did you get here?" So that was why Mum had cleared out the spare room on Sunday.

Details from: hands and actions · voice and words · thoughts

TRY IT

Imagine finding a puppy in a box in your living room. Start with what your face does, then write what you say.

Confused

WHEN: unclear instructions, a hard question, a new place, a friend acting oddly

WORD LADDER · MILDER → STRONGER

unsure	puzzled	confused	perplexed	bewildered
not certain what is right	trying to work out a small mystery	mixed up and not able to understand	stuck on something that makes no sense	completely lost, with no idea what is happening

FACE AND BODY

- I frowned at the page.
- My head tilted to one side.
- At the bus stop, I squinted at the route map.
- I looked from the question to the diagram and back again.
- My mouth opened to ask, then closed again.
- I must have looked lost, because an auntie asked if I needed help.
- I turned slowly on the spot, looking for a block number.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I turned the map round, then round again.
- I traced the question with my finger, word by word.
- I flipped back to the instructions on the first page.
- I watched the girl beside me to see what she was doing.
- I followed the crowd out of the MRT station, hoping they knew the way.
- I wrote a big question mark in the margin.
- I stood where two corridors met, looking down each in turn.

VOICE AND WORDS

- I asked the same question twice, in different words.
- "Sorry, which page?"
- "Wait, are we meant to...?"
- "But you said..." I began, and then was not sure what she had said.
- I said "Okay" and nodded, though I had not understood.
- "Did I miss something?"
- "Hang on. Let me read it again."

THOUGHTS

- "Did she say Block 5 or Block 9?"
- I wondered if I had come on the wrong day.
- I could not see why she was suddenly ignoring me.
- The more he explained, the less I understood.
- I went over the steps in my head and got stuck at the same one each time.
- Nothing on the paper looked like anything we had done in class.

THE SETTING

- Every corridor in the new block looked the same.
- The block numbers went 401, 403, 407, and none of them was mine.
- The room on my timetable turned out to be a storeroom.
- The board was covered in arrows that pointed at more arrows.
- The signs at the interchange listed six exits, and none named the road I wanted.
- Everyone else had already turned the page.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~it was all Greek to me~~
→ **I wrote a big question mark in the margin.**

~~my head was spinning~~
→ **I turned the map round, then round again.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Frustrated p. 21 · **Relieved** p. 16 · **Embarrassed** p. 18

PUT IT TOGETHER

Hui Ling walked straight past me to the other end of the bus shelter. At recess, we had shared a plate of mee goreng. "Did something happen?" I asked. She only shrugged. I went back through the day in my head: the mee goreng, the joke about Mr Ng's tie, the last lesson. Our bus came, and she stayed where she was.

Details from: voice and words · thoughts

TRY IT

Imagine a relief teacher whose instructions make no sense. Use a question in your head and a detail of the room.

CALM AND DETERMINATION **Determined** Calm

Determined

WHEN: training, revising after a poor result, a hard piece to learn, a long climb

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

motivated	determined	resolute	dogged	relentless
given a reason to work hard	firmly decided to reach a goal	firm in your decision, whatever others say	stubbornly keeping on, step by step	never slowing down or stopping

FACE AND BODY

- I picked out the next lamp post and ran for it.
- My legs burned on the last lap, and I lengthened my stride.
- Sweat stung my eyes, and I did not stop to wipe it.
- The guitar strings had hardened my fingertips.
- My arms shook on the last push-up, but I held it.
- My breathing settled into a steady rhythm.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I stuck the results slip on the wall above my desk.
- I set my alarm for 5.30 and was up before it rang.
- I did the corrections, then the whole paper again.
- I tore out the page and started again.
- I played the same eight bars until they were clean.
- I wrote the formulas on cards and read them on the MRT.
- I climbed all twelve storeys of my block every evening.

VOICE AND WORDS

- "Again," I said, before Coach could.
- I asked Mr Lim for the extra worksheets.
- I said no to the movie for the third weekend running.
- "Not yet," I said whenever Ma told me to sleep.
- I asked the Sec 4s how they had trained.
- "Give me ten more minutes."

THOUGHTS

- "One more lap, then one more."
- I thought of the D7 on my last report book and kept going.
- "Not this time."
- I pictured Coach writing my name on the team list.
- I knew exactly which three topics had cost me marks.

THE SETTING

- Rain spotted the track, and I kept running.
- My desk lamp was the only light in the flat at midnight.
- The stadium floodlights were on by the time I finished my last lap.
- The cleaner was still mopping the stairwell when I set off at six.
- The music room clock showed 6.40, and I was still playing.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I gave it my all~~
→ **I did the corrections, then the whole paper again.**

~~nothing could stop me now~~
→ **I set my alarm for 5.30 and was up before it rang.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Proud p. 15 · **Frustrated** p. 21 · **Disappointed** p. 24

PUT IT TOGETHER

The last stretch of road up Bukit Timah Hill was the steepest. Just to the next bend, I told myself, then the one after that. Sweat dripped into my eyes, but I only blinked and kept climbing. "Rest?" Ms Rao asked. "At the top," I said. Ten minutes later, I was standing beside the summit marker.

Details from: thoughts · face and body · voice and words

TRY IT

Write about your first training session after failing the NAPFA run. Use your aching legs and what you tell yourself.

Calm

WHEN: after an exam or a storm, an early walk, the minute before you go on stage

WORD LADDER · MILDER — STRONGER ▶

settled	calm	at ease	peaceful	serene
steady again after a busy time	quiet inside, not upset or worried	relaxed and comfortable with people or a place	free from noise, trouble and worry	so still inside that nothing bothers you

FACE AND BODY

- My shoulders came down from round my ears.
- I breathed out slowly, all the way.
- My hands lay still in my lap.
- I tilted my face up into the breeze.
- The floor tiles were cool under my bare feet.
- A sparrow hopped right up to my shoe, and I did not move.

HANDS AND ACTIONS

- I sat on the jetty with my legs over the water.
- I watered Ah Ma's plants along the corridor, one pot at a time.
- I walked slowly, with nowhere I had to be.
- I wrote without crossing anything out.
- I tuned my violin slowly, string by string.
- At Marina Barrage, I lay on the grass and watched the kites dip and climb.

VOICE AND WORDS

- My voice stayed steady all the way through.
- I answered without hurrying.
- We sat for a long time without needing to say anything.
- "We'll be fine," I told her, and found that I believed it.
- I hummed under my breath.

THOUGHTS

- For once, I was not thinking about the next thing.
- "I've done everything I can," I thought.
- I had left my phone in my bag and forgotten about it.
- I noticed small things: an ant crossing the bench, the light moving on the water.
- There was nothing I had to do until dinner.

THE SETTING

- The surface of the pond at the Botanic Gardens hardly moved.
- After the storm, the air smelt of wet grass.
- The waves at East Coast washed in and out, slow and even.
- A bird called once, somewhere in the rain trees.
- The corridor was quiet except for a wind chime two doors down.

SWAP THE CLICHÉ

~~I was as cool as a cucumber~~
→ **My voice stayed steady all the way through.**

~~all my worries melted away~~
→ **My shoulders came down from round my ears.**

OFTEN TURNS INTO

Surprised p. 27 · **Happy** p. 14 · **Afraid** p. 12

PUT IT TOGETHER

The thunder had finally stopped, so I took my book out to the corridor. Apart from a gutter dripping somewhere, everything was silent. I let my breath out slowly, right to the end. On the ledge, a snail was making its way from one flowerpot to another, and I watched it until it got there. I never turned a page.

Details from: the setting · face and body · thoughts

TRY IT

Describe the minute after you hand in your last paper of the year. Use your breathing and the setting.

Every feeling word, milder to stronger

Choose the word that matches how strong the feeling is at that moment. The meanings are on each feeling's page.

	MILDER				STRONGER	PAGE
WORRY AND FEAR						
Nervous	uneasy	nervous	anxious	dreading	panicking	11
Afraid	wary	afraid	frightened	terrified	petrified	12
JOY, RELIEF AND THANKS						
Excited	expectant	eager	excited	thrilled	exhilarated	13
Happy	content	cheerful	happy	delighted	elated	14
Proud	satisfied	pleased	proud	triumphant	exultant	15
Relieved	soothed	reassured	relieved	unburdened	liberated	16
Grateful	appreciative	thankful	grateful	indebted	humbled	17
EMBARRASSMENT AND GUILT						
Embarrassed	self-conscious	sheepish	embarrassed	humiliated	mortified	18
Guilty	troubled	regretful	guilty	ashamed	remorseful	19
ANGER						
Angry	irritated	cross	angry	furious	livid	20
Frustrated	impatient	fed up	frustrated	exasperated	defeated	21
Jealous	envious	jealous	resentful	bitter	spiteful	22
SADNESS						
Sad	downcast	sad	sorrowful	heartbroken	grief-stricken	23
Disappointed	let down	disappointed	deflated	crestfallen	devastated	24
Lonely	left out	lonely	isolated	forlorn	desolate	25
Nostalgic	fond	sentimental	nostalgic	wistful	yearning	26
SURPRISE AND CONFUSION						
Surprised	startled	surprised	amazed	astonished	dumbfounded	27
Confused	unsure	puzzled	confused	perplexed	bewildered	28
CALM AND DETERMINATION						
Determined	motivated	determined	resolute	dogged	relentless	29
Calm	settled	calm	at ease	peaceful	serene	30

2

Showing places

Describe a place so that the reader can see, hear, smell and feel it. This part has a lesson, a page for each of 16 places in Singapore, and words for the senses, the weather and the time of day.

ONE PLACE, FROM WIDE TO CLOSE — **HAWKER CENTRE**

1. WIDE the whole place



SIGHT

"Bright stall signs lined the hall under the orange roof."

2. CLOSER one table



MOVEMENT

"The queue for curry rice shuffled forward past our table."

3. CLOSE one small thing



TOUCH AND HEAT

"The table was still sticky from the last diner."

Photo: David Berkowitz (CC BY 2.0)

IN THIS PART

Describing a place 33
The places index 34
How to use a place page 35
The 16 places 36–51
Words for any place 52–54

Describing a place

A description of a place does not need a story. Move through the place in a clear order, and choose details that build one mood. Use the same skills to set the scene in a story.

Choose a route

- **Wide to close.** Start with the whole place, then one corner, then one person or object.
- **One walk through.** Go in, move through the middle and stop somewhere. Give each stop a paragraph.
- **Two times.** Show the same place at two times, and bring back two or three of the same things. Each place page gives details for a second time, and there are more pairs on page 54.

Mark each move in a few words, such as “Nearer the stage…” or “By six o’clock…”.

Details

- Start with the thing, not with “I could see” or “I could hear”: “A drill whined somewhere above the void deck.”
- Use exact nouns: a mynah, not a bird; a provision shop, not a shop.
- Use a strong verb instead of an adjective and an adverb: “the queue inched forward”, not “the long queue moved slowly”.
- Put in people and movement: someone doing a job, something dripping, swinging or flickering.
- Write in the past tense, as you do in a story. Do not switch to the present tense halfway.

Not a story

If you are asked to describe a place, do not add a problem, such as a lost wallet or an accident. The writing turns into a story, and the description stops.

A description still needs a structure. Give it a route, a mood that builds or changes, and an ending that returns to a detail from the opening.

Mood through detail

Choose details that all point to one mood. Name the mood once, after the details, or not at all. Here is the same canteen in two moods.

LIVELY

Trays clattered onto the counter. Two Secondary 1 boys raced each other to the drinks stall, and the loser paid.

LONELY

One table was still wet from the cleaner’s cloth. A single fan turned above the empty benches.

A model description

1 At half past seven, the platform at Tampines was three people deep. 2 Nobody talked. A man in a pressed shirt read the news on his phone with his elbows tucked in, and a girl in a school pinafore mouthed the words on her flashcards. 3 Above the platform, a screen counted down the minutes to the next train. 4 When it slid in, the whole crowd shuffled forward at once. 5 Someone’s umbrella dripped onto my shoe. 6 The doors chimed, closed on a backpack, opened again and closed. 7 As the train pulled away, the platform outside was already filling up again.

What to look for: The paragraph moves from the whole platform to one shoe, and nothing goes wrong.

1. The time and the place come first, then the wide view.
2. Two people, each doing one thing, show the crowd and the silence.
3. A detail that belongs only to this place. The MRT page has more.
4. Two strong verbs, “slid” and “shuffled”.
5. A close-up the reader can feel.
6. A sound and a small event, not a story.
7. The platform filling again shows that the rush goes on. The mood is never named.

The 16 places

The places are grouped by where you find them. Each page shows the place at two times, so you can set your scene at the right moment.

AT SCHOOL

Classroom 36
The last lesson · After dismissal

School hall 37
Assembly or an exam · Prize-giving day

School field and running track 38
Sports day at noon · Evening training

HOME AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

Home at night 39
Dinner with everyone home · After midnight

HDB void deck and corridor 40
A weekday afternoon · Late at night

Clinic or hospital ward 41
Afternoon visiting hours · The ward at night

FOOD, SHOPPING AND FESTIVALS

Hawker centre 42
The lunch rush · Near closing time

Wet market 43
The early-morning crush · As the stalls close

Shopping mall 44
A weekend sale · As the shops close

Festival street at night 45
Nights before the festival · Closing time

GETTING AROUND

MRT train and station 46
The morning rush · The last train home

Bus interchange and bus ride 47
The morning rush · The last bus

Changi Airport 48
Departure day · In the arrival hall

OUTDOORS

Beach or East Coast Park 49
A Sunday afternoon · The shore at night

Nature park or reserve 50
An early reservoir walk · In a downpour

Outward Bound camp 51
A day on expedition · The campsite at night

ALSO IN THIS PART

Words for the senses 52
sound, smell, touch and temperature

Light, movement and time of day 53
light, colour, movement, dawn to night

Weather 54
heat, rain, haze, wind, and one place at two times

How to use a place page

Choose a few exact details from the page, then change them to fit the place you are writing about.

1. **Find the place** on page 34. The strip at the top of the page shows the other places in its group.
2. **Choose the time.** Each place page shows the place at two times, named beside the heading. The coloured panels show the first time, and the dark panel shows the second.
3. **Plan a route** from the wide view to one close detail (page 33).
4. **Choose details from at least two senses**, and one from Movement. Change each one to fit your place.
5. **Choose one of the mood words** on the page, and pick details that build it. Name the mood once at most.
6. **Read "Put it together"**, then do "Try it". For more words, see the three pages that start on page 52.

TELLING

The hawker centre was crowded and noisy.

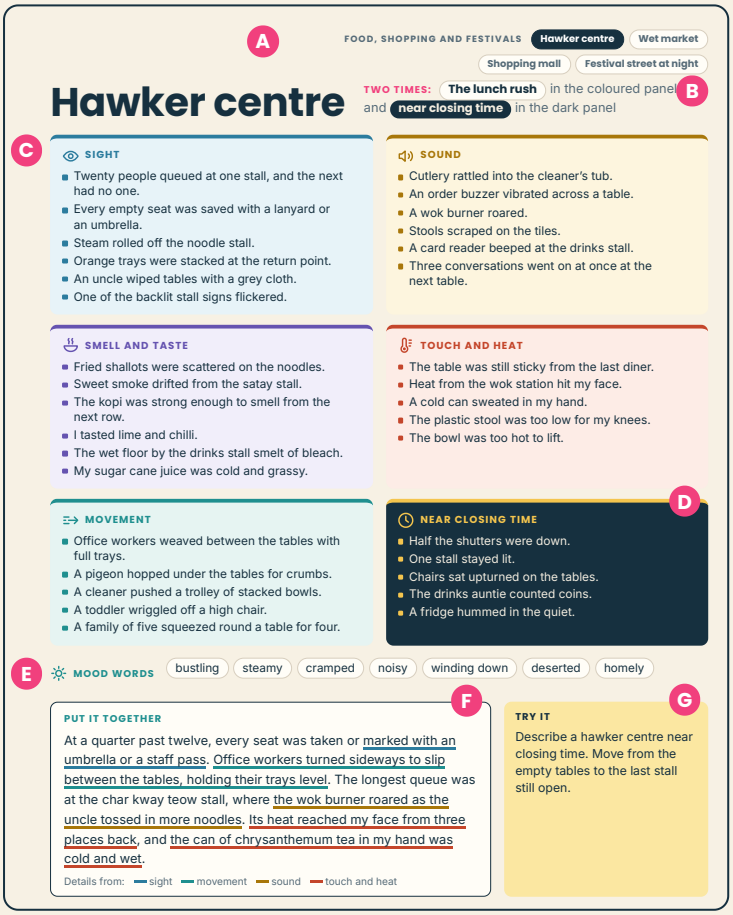
Time and mood: the lunch rush; *bustling*.

From the Hawker centre page: "Twenty people queued at one stall, and the next had no one." (sight), "A family of five squeezed round a table for four." (movement) and "An order buzzer vibrated across a table." (sound).

SHOWING

At one o'clock, the chicken rice queue was twenty people long, and the fishball noodle stall beside it had no one at all. A family of six edged round a table meant for four. On our table, the order buzzer went off and crept towards my cup.

The details go from the whole hall to one table, and "crowded" and "noisy" have gone.



THE PARTS OF A PLACE PAGE

- **A Group strip** — the other places in the group
- **B Two times** — the two times this page describes
- **C The senses and movement** — the place at the first time, one colour for each group
- **D The dark panel** — the place at the second time
- **E Mood words** — choose one and build it
- **F Put it together** — a short model that moves from the wide view to one close detail
- **G Try it** — a task for your own writing

COLOUR KEY

- Sight
- Sound
- Smell and taste
- Touch and heat
- Movement

Classroom

TWO TIMES: **The last lesson** in the coloured panels, and **after dismissal** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Faint grey traces of yesterday's notes remained on the whiteboard.
- The timetable was taped beside the door.
- A name was scratched into the corner of a desk.
- A blind hung crooked on one broken cord.
- PE shirts were slung over the backs of chairs.
- The projector beam was full of floating dust.
- Louvred windows stood open to the corridor.

SOUND

- A marker squeaked on the whiteboard.
- The PA crackled before an announcement.
- Chair legs screeched on the floor.
- A pen tapped against a ruler.
- "What did you get for number three?" someone whispered.
- Laughter came from the class next door.
- Shouts rose from a PE lesson on the field below.
- The bell rang, and the whole class unzipped their bags at once.

SMELL

- A new marker gave off a chemical smell.
- The smell of fried food drifted in from the canteen.
- Deodorant spray filled the air after PE.
- Worksheets fresh from the photocopier smelt of toner.
- The room smelt of wet mop after class cleaning.
- Damp air came through the louvres when it rained.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The desk felt tacky under my forearms.
- The wall fan's breeze reached me for one second in every ten.
- The plastic chair was damp under my thighs.
- Graphite shone on the side of my hand.
- Holding a pen too long left a dent in my finger.
- The sun through the window warmed one side of my face.
- I pressed my cold water bottle against my neck.

MOVEMENT

- Heads turned when the door opened.
- The teacher paced the aisles, reading over our shoulders.
- Hands went up one by one.
- A worksheet was passed back along the row.
- Someone's head drooped, then jerked up.
- The monitor wiped the board with long sweeps.
- A classmate tipped back on his chair.
- Everyone drifted to the windows when the rain started.

AFTER DISMISSAL

- A forgotten water bottle sat on the window ledge.
- The fans were switched off, and the air went still.
- Tomorrow's date was already written in the corner of the board.
- A crumpled worksheet lay under the last desk.
- With the corridor lights off, the room was dim.
- The band was practising somewhere below.
- Late sun slanted across the empty rows of desks.

MOOD WORDS

drowsy | stuffy | restless | studious | tense | chattering | emptied | still

PUT IT TOGETHER

By the last period, the sun had moved round to our side of the block. Damp PE shirts hung over half the chairs, and a whistle and faint shouts drifted up from the field. Mr Rajan walked between the rows, stopping every few desks to read someone's working. Each time the wall fan turned my way, I got a second of cool air. My pencil had left a shiny grey smear along the edge of my palm.

Details from: sight · sound · movement · touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe your classroom during a hot afternoon lesson. Begin with the whole room and finish at your own desk.

School hall

TWO TIMES: **Assembly or an exam** in the coloured panels, and **prize-giving day** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Single desks stood in rows, each with an index number taped on.
- The start and end times were written up at the front.
- The school crest hung above the stage.
- Badminton court lines marked the floor.
- A banner from last week's event was still hanging.
- Students sat cross-legged in class lines.
- Every head kept turning to the wall clock.
- Spare answer booklets were stacked on the invigilator's table.

SOUND

- Hundreds of voices recited the pledge, a little out of time.
- A teacher's heels clicked across the stage.
- A pencil clattered to the floor.
- "You have fifteen minutes left."
- A whole row turned a page at the same time.
- Coughs and sniffs bounced off the high ceiling.
- The big wall fans droned.
- Shoes shuffled as the whole school stood.

SMELL

- The floor smelt of polish.
- The stage curtains smelt dusty.
- The air smelt of pencil shavings and erasers.
- The hall smelt stale and warm after being shut all weekend.
- A whiff of curry puffs came from the canteen.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The hard floor numbed my legs during a long assembly.
- My desk rocked every time I wrote.
- The folding chair was cold to sit on.
- The air-con was so cold during the exam that I kept my jacket on.
- Looking down for two hours left my neck stiff.
- My collar stuck to the back of my neck.

MOVEMENT

- The invigilator walked the rows in soft shoes.
- A teacher moved down the line, checking hair and nails.
- A latecomer crept in along the side wall.
- A hand went up for more paper.
- Prefects led each class in to its place.
- Scripts were collected and counted down each row.
- Heads lifted all at once at the words "Stop writing."

ON PRIZE-GIVING DAY

- Potted orchids lined the front of the stage.
- Parents held up their phones.
- Name after name was read out.
- A photographer crouched at the foot of the stage.
- Trophies were set out on a white cloth.
- Polite clapping grew loud for a popular name.
- The band struck up as the guests walked in.
- A row of winners waited at the side of the stage.

MOOD WORDS solemn | formal | cavernous | expectant | silent | ceremonial | proud | stifling

PUT IT TOGETHER

Single desks filled the hall in straight rows, each with its own index number taped to one corner. Nobody spoke. When Mrs Chua told us to begin, the whole hall turned over its papers at once, and the rustle carried to the back. She paced the rows so quietly that I only noticed her when her shadow crossed my paper. I had zipped my jacket to the top because of the air-con, and my desk wobbled on one short leg whenever I wrote.

Details from: sight — sound — movement — touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe your school hall during prize-giving in about 80 words. Begin on the stage and end in the row where you sit.

School field and running track

TWO TIMES: **Sports day at noon** in the coloured panels, and **evening training** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- White lane numbers ran along the red track.
- House tents in four colours lined the straight.
- Two teachers held the finishing tape.
- Bare brown patches lay in front of each goal.
- The faded high-jump mat was patched with tape.
- The results board was half filled in.
- Parents packed into the shade of the pavilion.

SOUND

- "On your marks…" Then the clapper cracked.
- Cheers swelled as the runners came off the bend.
- A house cheer was led through a loudhailer.
- A runner rasped for breath at the line.
- A long jumper thudded into the sand pit.
- A grass-cutter whined beyond the school fence.
- "Next heat to the start line!"

SMELL AND TASTE

- Grass clippings were drying in the sun.
- The track smelt of hot rubber.
- The muscle rub had a sharp menthol smell.
- The field smelt of mud after rain.
- Sweat soaked into our house T-shirts.
- The warm isotonic drink was far too sweet.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The sun burned the parting in my hair.
- The track's heat came up through my thin soles.
- The grass prickled my bare legs.
- My thighs burned over the last hundred metres.
- Wet grass from the morning's rain soaked my socks.
- I draped a damp towel over my head in the shade.
- Grit from the track stuck to my palms after a fall.

MOVEMENT

- Runners crouched at the start, fingers just behind the line.
- The pack bunched at the bend.
- A house leader waved a flag twice her height.
- A teacher held a stopwatch, thumb ready.
- Everyone ran for shelter when the lightning alert came on.
- A runner limped off between two friends.
- A ball rolled into the drain.

AT EVENING TRAINING

- The goalposts cast long shadows across the grass.
- The canteen vending machine was still lit.
- Small birds darted low after insects.
- Crickets started up along the fence.
- A coach's whistle carried across the empty field.
- The last runners jogged a cool-down lap.
- Mosquitoes found my ankles.
- The track was still warm as I stretched.

MOOD WORDS sun-baked | shadeless | roaring | breathless | competitive | golden | calm

PUT IT TOGETHER

At noon, the only shade on the field was under the four house tents, lined up along the straight. Outside the yellow one, our house captain swung a flag twice as tall as she was. The cheering grew louder as the runners in each race rounded the bend. Beside the track, the hot rubber gave off a smell like new tyres, and its heat came through the thin soles of my canvas shoes.

Details from: sight | movement | sound | smell and taste | touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe your school field at evening training, just before dark. Use one sound, and close on something you can feel.

Home at night

TWO TIMES: **Dinner with everyone home** in the coloured panels, and **after midnight** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- The dining table was covered in homework and unopened letters.
- The altar lamp glowed red.
- Bowls piled up in the dish rack.
- Tomorrow's uniform was ironed and hanging on the door.
- Grandpa dozed in front of the drama he said he was watching.
- School bags lay dumped by the front door.
- Family photos crowded the top of the TV cabinet.
- Steam misted the kitchen window.

SOUND

- Bowls knocked together in the sink.
- The cooker hood droned over the stove.
- A football match was turned up too loud.
- The washing machine thudded through its spin.
- "Wash your hands first!"
- Mahjong tiles clattered at the neighbour's.
- The gate rattled as Dad came home.
- My sister's keyboard clicked behind her door.

SMELL AND TASTE

- The herbal soup had simmered all afternoon.
- Mum reheated the curry from lunch.
- Fish was frying.
- My little brother smelt of talcum powder after his bath.
- Ironing gave off a warm smell.
- A mosquito coil smouldered by the window.
- Mum made me finish the bitter gourd.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The sofa stuck to my bare legs.
- The laptop was warm on my knees.
- Steam from my rice warmed my face.
- My wet hair dripped down my back after a shower.
- Mum felt my forehead.
- The bedroom was stuffy before the air-con kicked in.
- I pulled a blanket up against the air-con.

MOVEMENT

- Mum moved between the stove and the table.
- Chopsticks reached for the same piece of fish.
- Dad scrolled through his phone, his glasses pushed up.
- Grandma folded laundry into neat squares.
- My brother slid along the floor in his socks.
- The stand fan swung slowly left and right.
- A plate of cut fruit went round after dinner.

AFTER MIDNIGHT

- A gecko clicked on the kitchen wall.
- The router's green lights blinked in the dark living room.
- My phone glowed under the blanket.
- A motorbike passed far below.
- Dad's snoring came through the wall.
- A neighbour's flush rushed down the pipe in the wall.
- A strip of corridor light showed under the front door.

MOOD WORDS

cosy · cluttered · lamplit · familiar · settled · safe · quiet · unhurried

PUT IT TOGETHER

By half past seven, all five of us were home at last. The cooker hood was humming, and the kitchen window had misted over from the herbal soup, which had been bubbling since lunch. Mum was still bringing dishes over from the stove, one at a time, and she told us to start without her. When I lifted my bowl, warm steam rose from the rice into my face.

Details from: sound · sight · smell and taste · movement · touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe your home after midnight, when you are the only one awake. Move from the living room to your own bed.

HDB void deck and corridor

TWO TIMES: **A weekday afternoon** in the coloured panels, and **late at night** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- The block number was painted metres high on the wall.
- A few grey letter boxes were stuffed with flyers.
- A chessboard on a stone table was half rubbed away.
- A town council notice was taped up inside the lift.
- Shoe racks and potted plants stood outside every door.
- Laundry hung on bamboo poles outside the windows above.
- The blue recycling bin's lid was jammed open by a carton.

SOUND

- A songbird sang in a cage outside a neighbour's door.
- A ball smacked against a pillar.
- Chinese chess pieces clicked down on the board.
- A TV drama in Malay came through an open door.
- A bag of rubbish rattled down the chute.
- A mother on the fifth floor called her son home to do his homework.
- Footsteps echoed up the staircase.
- A toddler's shoes squeaked along the corridor.

SMELL

- A neighbour was frying sambal, and it made me cough.
- Smoke rose from joss paper in a metal bin during the seventh month.
- Laundry drying in the corridor smelt of detergent.
- Curry leaves crackled in someone's kitchen.
- Mosquito fogging gave off an oily smoke.
- Someone opened a durian two doors down.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- A stone stool felt cool through my shorts.
- A breeze funnelled through the void deck.
- The corridor wall was warm from the afternoon sun.
- Warm air puffed from an air-conditioner ledge.
- Stale, trapped heat filled the lift.
- Rain blew in sideways and wet the corridor floor.
- The staircase railing was gritty with dust.

MOVEMENT

- Children on scooters circled the pillars.
- A delivery rider jogged to the lift with a thermal bag.
- An old man walked slow laps with his hands behind his back.
- A helper wheeled an old woman to the lift.
- The lift's red numbers counted down.
- An auntie stretched at the fitness corner.

LATE AT NIGHT

- Moths circled the lamp outside the lift.
- One window still flickered blue with a TV.
- Frogs croaked in the drain after rain.
- The void deck was brightly lit for nobody.
- The lift hummed up the shaft as someone came home late.
- A cat's eyes shone under a bench.
- Every floor had locked gates and dark windows.

MOOD WORDS

neighbourly · breezy · lived-in · echoing · sheltered · sleepy · dim · watchful

PUT IT TOGETHER

After school on Wednesday, the void deck was the coolest place in the estate. A breeze blew straight through it, and two small boys rode their scooters in loops round the pillars. At the stone table, an uncle in a singlet was playing Chinese chess, setting each piece down with a sharp click. I sat beside him. The stone stool felt cool under my legs, and the board painted on the table had almost worn away.

Details from: touch and heat · movement · sound · sight

TRY IT

Think of a void deck or corridor near your home on a quiet afternoon. Describe it through one person moving slowly.

Clinic or hospital ward

TWO TIMES: **Afternoon visiting hours** in the coloured panels, and **the ward at night** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Red queue numbers changed on a screen.
- A pale green curtain was drawn round the next bed.
- A bag of clear fluid dripped slowly into a tube.
- A name band circled Grandma's wrist.
- Every doorway had a hand-sanitiser pump.
- A meal tray sat under a plastic cover, barely touched.
- The monitor showed a green zigzag.
- Oranges and biscuits sat on the bedside locker.

SOUND

- A chime sounded before each new queue number.
- A phone rang and rang at the nurses' station.
- Rubber soles squeaked on the polished floor.
- A medicine trolley rattled from bed to bed.
- "Auntie, how are you feeling today?"
- A call bell buzzed for a nurse.
- A TV played the news to nobody in the waiting area.
- In the next bay, a patient coughed.

SMELL AND TASTE

- The corridors smelt of antiseptic.
- My hands smelt of alcohol rub.
- The meal trolley smelt of porridge and steamed fish.
- Grandma's temples smelt of eucalyptus oil.
- We sipped kopi from the lobby food court.
- The tablet tasted chalky and would not go down.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The paper sheet on the doctor's couch crinkled under me.
- The plastic waiting-room chairs were hard.
- Grandma's hand lay thin and cool in mine.
- The sheets felt stiff and rough.
- The doctor's stethoscope was cold on my back.
- The bed rail was cold under my elbows.
- As the automatic doors opened, the heat outside hit me.

MOVEMENT

- A nurse checked the drip, then typed up her notes.
- A porter wheeled a bed down the corridor.
- A doctor and her juniors stopped at each bed.
- My father peeled an orange for Grandma.
- Grandma's chest rose and fell under the blanket.
- A mop swished round the legs of our chairs.
- Visitors scanned their ICs at the gantry to the wards.

THE WARD AT NIGHT

- The main lights were dimmed, with one lamp on at the nurses' station.
- The monitor's numbers glowed in the dark.
- A nurse's torch checked each bed in turn.
- Someone called out in his sleep.
- Slippers shuffled towards the toilet.
- The car park lights glowed through the blinds.
- Mum slept on the reclining chair beside the bed.

MOOD WORDS

sterile · clinical · hushed · anxious · sombre · wakeful · subdued · comforting

PUT IT TOGETHER

The ward was crowded with visitors that afternoon. Pale green curtains hung round two of the beds, and a call bell buzzed somewhere down the row. Beside Grandma's bed, Dad peeled her an orange in one long curl, and the smell of the peel mixed with the antiseptic. He passed her the pieces one by one. Whenever she reached out, the plastic band on her wrist slid down towards her knuckles.

Details from: sight · sound · movement · smell and taste

TRY IT

Describe a clinic waiting room or a hospital ward you have visited. Use no feeling words at all.

Hawker centre

TWO TIMES: **The lunch rush** in the coloured panels, and **near closing time** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Twenty people queued at one stall, and the next had no one.
- Every empty seat was saved with a lanyard or an umbrella.
- Steam rolled off the noodle stall.
- Orange trays were stacked at the return point.
- An uncle wiped tables with a grey cloth.
- One of the backlit stall signs flickered.

SOUND

- Cutlery rattled into the cleaner's tub.
- An order buzzer vibrated across a table.
- A wok burner roared.
- Stools scraped on the tiles.
- A card reader beeped at the drinks stall.
- Three conversations went on at once at the next table.

SMELL AND TASTE

- Fried shallots were scattered on the noodles.
- Sweet smoke drifted from the satay stall.
- The kopi was strong enough to smell from the next row.
- I tasted lime and chilli.
- The wet floor by the drinks stall smelt of bleach.
- My sugar cane juice was cold and grassy.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The table was still sticky from the last diner.
- Heat from the wok station hit my face.
- A cold can sweated in my hand.
- The plastic stool was too low for my knees.
- The bowl was too hot to lift.

MOVEMENT

- Office workers weaved between the tables with full trays.
- A pigeon hopped under the tables for crumbs.
- A cleaner pushed a trolley of stacked bowls.
- A toddler wriggled off a high chair.
- A family of five squeezed round a table for four.

NEAR CLOSING TIME

- Half the shutters were down.
- One stall stayed lit.
- Chairs sat upturned on the tables.
- The drinks auntie counted coins.
- A fridge hummed in the quiet.

MOOD WORDS bustling · steamy · cramped · noisy · winding down · deserted · homely

PUT IT TOGETHER

At a quarter past twelve, every seat was taken or marked with an umbrella or a staff pass. Office workers turned sideways to slip between the tables, holding their trays level. The longest queue was at the char kway teow stall, where the wok burner roared as the uncle tossed in more noodles. Its heat reached my face from three places back, and the can of chrysanthemum tea in my hand was cold and wet.

Details from: sight · movement · sound · touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe a hawker centre near closing time. Move from the empty tables to the last stall still open.

Wet market

TWO TIMES: **The early-morning crush** in the coloured panels, and **as the stalls close** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Fish were laid out in rows on crushed ice.
- Red lamps hung low over the meat counter.
- Crabs lay bound with raffia string, their legs still twitching.
- Kangkong was stacked in wet green heaps.
- White blocks of tofu sat in trays of water.
- A wad of red plastic bags was hooked on a nail.
- Prices were written in marker on scraps of cardboard.
- A PayNow code was taped to the glass.

SOUND

- A cleaver thudded into a round wooden block.
- Ice crunched as it was shovelled over the fish.
- Prices were shouted across the aisle in two languages.
- A bag snapped open with one flick.
- Air bubbled through the tanks of live fish.
- Water drummed into a plastic basin.
- The coconut-grating machine whined.
- An auntie asked for free spring onions with her vegetables.

SMELL

- The sea smell of the fish stalls grew stronger near the drain.
- Raw meat gave off a faint iron smell.
- Pandan leaves lay in a heap.
- The dry-goods stall smelt of dried shrimp and salted fish.
- Freshly grated coconut smelt sweet and oily.
- The spice stall smelt of lemongrass and turmeric.
- A joss stick burned at a stall's small altar.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The floor was slick under my slippers.
- Cold air rose off the ice.
- The handles of a heavy bag cut into my fingers.
- A fish felt firm and cold when I pressed its side.
- The air was already warm and damp at seven in the morning.
- Trolley wheels bumped my ankles in the queue.
- The loose change was damp from the stallholder's hand.

MOVEMENT

- Aunties steered trolley bags through the narrow aisles.
- A fishmonger scraped off scales in quick strokes.
- A fish thrashed in the net as it came out of the tank.
- A helper ticked items off a list on her phone.
- A worker dragged a crate of ice across the floor.
- Fingers pointed past me at the biggest prawns.
- A cat waited under the fish stall.
- The needle of a weighing scale swung, then settled.

AS THE STALLS CLOSE

- A chopping block was scrubbed and propped up to dry.
- Someone hosed the floor, and the water ran pink past the pork stall.
- A squeegee pushed the last puddles towards the drain.
- Empty polystyrene boxes were stacked by the bins.
- Mynahs pecked at scraps under the counters.
- A stallholder ate her lunch from a paper packet.
- One last fish lay on the melting ice.

MOOD WORDS

raucous · brisk · jostling · pungent · damp · businesslike · rinsed clean · sleepy by noon

PUT IT TOGETHER

By seven o'clock, the aisles were packed. Aunties pulled trolley bags behind them and stopped at every second stall, and stallholders shouted prices in Hokkien and English. At the fish stall, pomfret and mackerel lay in neat rows on the ice, and the drain under the counter smelt strongly of the sea. The fishmonger scraped a red snapper with short, fast strokes of his knife. A few silver scales flew off and stuck to my wrist.

Details from: movement · sound · sight · smell

TRY IT

Choose a wet market or supermarket soon after it opens. Describe it, ending on one worker's hands.

Shopping mall

TWO TIMES: **A weekend sale** in the coloured panels, and **as the shops close** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Banners reading “Up to 70% off” were draped down the atrium.
- A lucky-draw car was parked in the atrium.
- Escalators criss-crossed up through five floors.
- I found the red “You are here” dot on the mall directory.
- The car park sign at the entrance showed “FULL”.
- A glass lift slid up past every floor.
- A bubble tea queue reached past the next shop.
- A child’s balloon was stuck against the skylight.

SOUND

- A promoter’s microphone boomed from a roadshow in the atrium.
- Three shops played three different songs at once.
- The escalator clanked steadily.
- A lost-child announcement came over the PA.
- An alarm shrieked at the door because a tag had not been removed.
- A milk frother screamed in the café.
- “Excuse me, excuse me!” called someone pushing a pram.

SMELL AND TASTE

- The mall pumped its own scent through the air-con.
- A kiosk by the entrance was baking waffles.
- The food court smelt of fried rice and soy sauce.
- The shoe shop smelt of new leather.
- I sprayed a perfume tester on my wrist.
- A supermarket promoter offered me a cube of cheese on a toothpick.
- We ate salted egg crisps straight from the bag.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The air-con felt icy after ten minutes in the sun outside.
- The escalator handrail moved slightly faster than the steps.
- Paper bags banged against my knees.
- A two-dollar massage chair kneaded my back.
- The glass of a display case felt cold under my fingertips.
- My feet ached by the third floor.

MOVEMENT

- A group in school uniform wandered from shop to shop.
- A shop assistant refolded T-shirts as fast as people unfolded them.
- A toddler pressed both hands to the pet shop window.
- A cleaner wiped fingerprints off the glass railing.
- Prams queued three deep for the lift.
- A security guard led a lost child to the service counter.

AS THE SHOPS CLOSE

- A grille was half down, and a shop assistant ducked under it.
- The music stopped, and half the lights went off.
- We climbed a stopped escalator like stairs.
- A floor scrubber circled the empty atrium.
- The lucky-draw car stood alone under the dimmed lights.
- A guard locked the glass doors one by one.
- The taxi queue was longer than the bubble tea queue.

MOOD WORDS

glossy · air-conditioned · overcrowded · aimless · tempting · hectic · artificial · spotless

PUT IT TOGETHER

On the first Saturday of the sale, long red banners hung down the atrium from the top floor, and a promoter’s voice echoed up from a roadshow below. After the walk from the bus stop, the air-con felt icy. In the clothes shop on Level 2, an assistant folded T-shirts back into neat piles as fast as shoppers pulled them out. Behind her, the pile she had just finished already had one sleeve hanging over the edge.

Details from: sight · sound · touch and heat · movement

TRY IT

Describe a shopping centre on a crowded weekend. Pick one worker, and end on a small detail beside them.

Festival street at night

TWO TIMES: **Nights before the festival** in the coloured panels, and **closing time** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Red lanterns were strung across Chinatown's streets.
- Light-up arches spanned Serangoon Road.
- Bare bulbs lit the bazaar tents at Geylang Serai.
- Stalls sold pussy willow and kumquat plants.
- Bangles in every colour glinted on racks.
- A kolam of coloured rice powder lay at a shop doorway.
- Woven ketupat casings hung as decorations.
- A giant lantern of the year's zodiac animal glowed.

SOUND

- Chinese New Year songs played on a loop.
- "Three for ten dollars!"
- Drums and cymbals crashed for a lion dance.
- A shop's speakers played Tamil film songs.
- Meat sizzled on a grill.
- The bazaar went quieter at sunset as people broke their fast.
- Shopping bags rustled in every hand.

SMELL AND TASTE

- Bak kwa was grilling over charcoal.
- Garlands smelt of jasmine and marigold.
- An incense shop smelt of sandalwood.
- Murtabak was frying in ghee.
- My bandung was pink and sickly sweet.
- Trays of kueh lapis smelt rich with butter and spice.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- Strangers' elbows pressed in from all sides.
- Heat from the grills hit my arms as I squeezed past.
- My new festival shoes were already pinching.
- Cool henna dried tight on my palm.
- My top lip was sweaty even at ten at night.
- Syrup left a sticky drip on my wrist.

MOVEMENT

- The crowd inched along, all in one direction.
- The lion's head blinked and shook at the crowd.
- Families posed for photos under the arches.
- A stallholder snipped bak kwa into squares.
- A girl held out both hands while an artist piped on the henna.
- A child rode on her father's shoulders.
- A cook flipped and folded a murtabak on the griddle.
- People streamed down into the MRT station.

AT CLOSING TIME

- Stallholders folded tables, and lights went off stall by stall.
- Marigold petals were trampled into the road.
- Decorations stayed lit over an empty street.
- Paper cups and skewers piled up round the overflowing bins.
- Grease and smoke hung in the air.
- The last shoppers bargained for leftovers at half price.
- A generator thudded behind the tents.

MOOD WORDS festive · dazzling · boisterous · fragrant · heaving · clamorous · joyful · littered

PUT IT TOGETHER

Two nights before Deepavali, arches of coloured lights stretched across Serangoon Road, and the crowd on the five-foot way moved a few steps at a time. Tamil film songs blared from the speakers outside a sari shop, and the garland stall next door smelt of jasmine. Beside the garlands, a girl about my age sat with her palms turned up while a woman piped henna onto them. Each thin brown line shone wet under the shop lights.

Details from: sight · movement · sound · smell and taste

TRY IT

Picture a festival bazaar or street at night, and describe it. Include one smell found only at that festival.

MRT train and station

TWO TIMES: **The morning rush** in the coloured panels, and **the last train home** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- A sign by the door showed a crossed-out durian.
- The next station blinked on the map above the door.
- Arrows painted on the platform showed where to queue.
- A stranger's hand gripped the pole just above mine.
- I saw my own face in the black window between stations.
- School uniforms and office lanyards shared one carriage.

SOUND

- Warning beeps sounded before the doors slid shut.
- "Please mind the platform gap."
- Motors whined as we picked up speed.
- The tunnel rumbled before the headlights appeared.
- Tinny music leaked from someone's earphones.
- Wheels squealed on a tight curve.
- One loud phone call filled a silent carriage.

SMELL

- Stale cigarette smoke clung to the shirt beside me.
- The carriage smelt of damp umbrellas.
- Someone's perfume was too strong for eight in the morning.
- The wet hair in front of my face smelt of shampoo.
- The bakery by the exit smelt of fresh bread.
- Someone's gym bag smelt of yesterday's sweat.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- A blast of cold air hit me as I stepped into the carriage.
- Someone's shoulder was pressed against mine for six stops.
- A backpack pressed into my ribs.
- The brakes tipped me into the person beside me.
- The floor hummed through my shoes.
- A platform bench was already warm from the sun.
- My seat was still warm from the last person.

MOVEMENT

- Commuters squeezed in as the doors closed.
- A man ran down the escalator, his bag bouncing.
- Bodies leaned together on a bend.
- Half the carriage poured out at the interchange.
- A toddler swung round the pole.
- People stepped back for a wheelchair.
- A girl gave up her seat to an uncle with a stick.

ON THE LAST TRAIN

- Empty seats ran from one end of the carriage to the other.
- A nurse in uniform sat with her eyes shut, her bag on her lap.
- The carriage lights were too bright for the hour.
- My footsteps rang loud in the empty concourse.
- The bakery by the exit was dark, its shelves empty.
- Station staff waited by the gantries to close up.
- A couple shared a pair of earbuds, one each.

MOOD WORDS

crammed · rushed · orderly · chilly · anonymous · weary · half-empty · lonely

PUT IT TOGETHER

At ten past seven, the train into town was packed long before Bishan. Almost everyone wore a school uniform or an office lanyard, and whenever the train took a bend, we all swayed together. The floor hummed under my shoes. I held the pole, and a woman's hand gripped it just above mine. Her hair was wet from her morning shower, and it smelt of apple shampoo.

Details from: sight · movement · touch and heat · smell

TRY IT

Describe a train journey late at night. Start with the rows of empty seats, and end on one passenger.

Bus interchange and bus ride

TWO TIMES: **The morning rush** in the coloured panels, and **the last bus** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Berth numbers hung above each queue.
- A queue folded back on itself between the railings.
- Orange destination signs shone at every berth.
- A screen listed the next three stops.
- The red "Bus Stopping" sign lit up above the windscreen.
- Treetops brushed the front window of the upper deck.
- School bags and a walking stick crowded the aisle.

SOUND

- The reader chirped as each of us tapped in.
- A recorded voice read out the next stop.
- Two people pressed the bell at once.
- Engines idled in every berth.
- The doors thudded shut.
- "Move to the back, please!"
- The indicator ticked as we waited to pull out.
- A window frame rattled against my head as I dozed.

SMELL

- Exhaust fumes were trapped under the interchange roof.
- The berth smelt of hot tyres and brake dust.
- A takeaway packet of fried bee hoon sat on someone's lap.
- One of the older buses had musty air-con.
- Everyone's clothes smelt damp from the rain.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The seat shuddered with the engine at every red light.
- The strap swung out of reach on a sharp turn.
- The back seat was warm from the engine underneath.
- Cold air from the vent blew straight onto my head.
- My knees pressed against the seat in front.
- A stranger's bag swung into my shoulder as he passed.

MOVEMENT

- The whole queue stepped forward as a bus nosed into the berth.
- A boy sprinted for a bus that was already pulling out.
- Two bus captains swapped over at the end of the route.
- An uncle edged down the aisle to the rear door, a hand on every seat.
- The ramp folded out for a wheelchair at the rear door.
- A girl did homework on her knees, her pen jumping at every bump.

ON THE LAST BUS

- The bus skipped stop after stop with nobody waiting.
- We got green lights all the way down an empty road.
- Nobody else pressed the bell all the way home.
- The next-stop voice seemed louder with only me on board.
- A cleaner walked the length of the bus, picking up tissues.
- The interchange was dark, with buses parked nose to tail for the night.
- The sign flipped to "Not in service" behind me.

MOOD WORDS

packed · stop-start · jolting · humdrum · rumbling · routine · solitary · fume-filled

PUT IT TOGETHER

At twenty to seven, the interchange smelt of exhaust, and the queue for our bus folded back and forth between the railings. When it pulled in, the whole line edged forward. On the upper deck, the vent above my seat blew cold air onto my hair. Across the aisle, a Primary 4 girl was doing a worksheet on her lap, and her pen jumped at every bump. Her last answer ended in a wobbly line.

Details from: smell · sight · movement · touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe your journey to school by bus. Move from the stop or interchange to one passenger sitting near you.

Changi Airport

TWO TIMES: **Departure day** in the coloured panels, and **in the arrival hall** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- A check-in queue zigzagged between the tapes.
- Self check-in kiosks glowed in a row.
- Suitcases were wrapped in plastic film.
- A trolley was piled with cardboard boxes tied with string.
- The Rain Vortex poured through the glass roof of Jewel.
- Planes sat nosed up to the gates beyond the glass.
- A feedback screen outside the toilets offered smiley faces.
- The bag-drop screen showed “22.6 kg”.

SOUND

- Suitcase wheels rumbled over the tiles, then went silent on the carpet.
- We heard no final boarding calls, only the odd gate-change announcement.
- The Rain Vortex roared steadily.
- Packing tape shrieked as an uncle sealed a box.
- “Message us the moment you land.”
- A jet whined faintly through the glass.

SMELL AND TASTE

- The walkway to the plane smelt faintly of jet fuel.
- A cloud of perfume hung outside the duty-free shop.
- We ate kaya toast and soft-boiled eggs, our last local breakfast for months.
- My winter jacket still smelt of the shop.
- Lemony soap scented the airport toilets.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- The trolley was so heavy it took both arms to turn.
- Plastic film felt slippery under my fingers.
- My boarding pass went soft from being held too long.
- Grandma hugged me longer than usual.
- The glass felt cold against my forehead as I watched the planes.
- My shoes sank into the thick carpet.

MOVEMENT

- An uncle repacked a suitcase on the floor to lose two kilos.
- Travellers stepped into the automated lanes one by one, looking into the camera.
- A buggy beeped past with an elderly passenger.
- The Skytrain glided between terminals.
- Children rode on top of the suitcases.
- My sister turned to wave once more before she went through.

IN THE ARRIVAL HALL

- “Landed” appeared next to the flight number.
- A crowd pressed against the barrier.
- Every head turned each time the doors slid open on strangers.
- Drivers held up names on tablets.
- A girl waved a home-made “Welcome home!” sign.
- Roses in cellophane wilted as we waited.
- A familiar cap appeared behind a trolley.
- We took a family photo before anyone had let go.

MOOD WORDS

spacious · gleaming · efficient · bittersweet · tearful · hopeful · transient

PUT IT TOGETHER

Before dawn, the departure hall at Terminal 3 was already busy. Long queues zigzagged between the tapes at every check-in row, and suitcase wheels rumbled across the floor. Near the bag drop, an uncle knelt over an open suitcase, moving tins of biscuits into his backpack to get under the weight limit. My sister had checked in an hour before, and her boarding pass had gone soft at the corners in her hand.

Details from: sight · sound · movement · touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe an airport, ferry terminal or checkpoint on a busy morning. Show one goodbye through a small object.

Beach or East Coast Park

TWO TIMES: **A Sunday afternoon** in the coloured panels, and **the shore at night** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Cargo ships waited at anchor on the horizon.
- Planes came in low towards Changi.
- The blocks of Marine Parade rose behind the trees.
- Casuarina trees leaned over the sand.
- Piled grey rocks formed a breakwater.
- Tents were pitched in the shade.
- Grey-green water left a line of seaweed at the tide mark.
- Families crowded round the barbecue pits.

SOUND

- Small waves slapped against the rocks.
- Bicycle bells rang on the cycling path.
- A jet roared overhead.
- Sausages spat on a barbecue.
- A speaker played pop songs at the next picnic mat.
- Children shrieked at the edge of the water.
- A canopy flapped in the wind.
- Tyres crunched over sand blown onto the path.

SMELL AND TASTE

- Charcoal smoke drifted from the barbecue pits.
- Low tide brought a muddy, salty smell.
- A bin of barbecue scraps went sour in the heat.
- We ate honey-glazed chicken wings.
- Firelighters gave off a chemical tang.
- My lips were salty after a swim.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- Hot sand burned my soles.
- A steady wind cooled my sunburnt shoulders.
- Salt dried stiff on my skin.
- The sea was warmer than I expected.
- Sand stuck to my wet legs.
- Barnacles felt rough under my feet on the rocks.
- My rented bicycle pulled to one side.

MOVEMENT

- Rollerbladers weaved between walkers.
- A dog strained at its lead towards the water.
- A family hauled a cooler box from the car park.
- Children dug while the tide crept closer.
- Cyclists slowed and rang their bells to pass a pram.
- An uncle cast a fishing line from the jetty.
- A toddler ran away from each small wave.
- The casuarinas tossed in the wind.

AT NIGHT

- The ships out at sea were lit up from end to end.
- Glowing coals lit our faces orange.
- I could hear small waves but not see them.
- Planes lined up to land, their lights blinking.
- Laughter came from a group in the pavilion.
- The breeze grew cooler and stronger.
- The sand was cool under my feet.
- A cyclist's light flickered through the trees.

MOOD WORDS windswept · sun-bleached · lazy · sprawling · salty · smoky · carefree · balmy

PUT IT TOGETHER

On Sunday afternoon, tents filled every patch of shade under the casuarinas, and charcoal smoke drifted over from the barbecue pits. Now and then, a plane passed low overhead on its way to Changi, and nobody could hear anything else until it had gone. Near the water, a toddler in a sun hat ran back up the beach each time a wave slid in. When I stepped in, the sea round my ankles was almost warm.

Details from: sight · smell and taste · sound · movement · touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe a park or beach on a busy Sunday. Use at least three senses, and end with one child at play.

Nature park or reserve

TWO TIMES: **An early reservoir walk** in the coloured panels, and **in a downpour** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- A wooden boardwalk ran out over dark water.
- Buttress roots rose above my head.
- Bird's nest ferns grew high on the trunks.
- The reservoir water was tea-coloured.
- Signs warned us not to feed the monkeys.
- Distance markers stood every few hundred metres.
- Creepers looped from trunk to trunk.
- Red clay showed through the worn path.

SOUND

- Cicadas drilled in the trees.
- A koel called the same two notes, higher each time.
- Macaques screeched in the branches.
- Footsteps thudded on the boardwalk.
- A monkey landed hard on the shelter roof.
- Turtles plopped off a log.
- A runner's watch beeped at each kilometre.
- The road noise faded behind the trees.

SMELL

- The air smelt of damp earth and rotting leaves.
- Crushed leaves gave off a sharp green smell.
- My arms smelt of insect repellent.
- The water's edge smelt of mud.
- Fallen fruit was going sour under a tree.
- An old shelter smelt of musty wood.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- It was so humid my shirt never dried.
- A mosquito bite rose on the back of my knee.
- A spider's thread brushed my face.
- The shade felt cool after the open road.
- My shoes slipped on the roots.
- The boardwalk rail was damp with dew.
- Sweat stung my eyes.

MOVEMENT

- A monitor lizard slid into the water.
- A macaque snatched a bag of snacks from a hiker.
- Dragonflies hovered over the water.
- A squirrel raced along a branch.
- A kingfisher plunged into the reservoir.
- Joggers squeezed past on the narrow path.
- A single leaf spiralled down.
- A line of ants crossed the boardwalk.

IN A DOWNPOUR

- Rain hissed on the canopy before it reached us.
- Brown water raced down the path.
- Dripping hikers crowded the shelter.
- The reservoir turned grey and dimpled with rain.
- Frogs called from every puddle.
- Thunder echoed across the water.
- Leaves bent under the drops and sprang back.

MOOD WORDS

shaded · muggy · secluded · wild · teeming · tranquil · drenched · eerie

PUT IT TOGETHER

Soon after sunrise, the reservoir was flat and still, and the water beside the boardwalk was the colour of weak tea. Somewhere overhead, a koel repeated its two notes, a little higher every time. An old man with a towel round his neck had stopped to watch a monitor lizard slide off the bank and into the water. When I leaned on the rail beside him, it was still damp with dew under my palms.

Details from: sight · sound · movement · touch and heat

TRY IT

Take the reader along a nature trail as a downpour begins. End in a shelter, with one thing you can hear.

Outward Bound camp

TWO TIMES: **A day on expedition** in the coloured panels, and **the campsite at night** in the dark panel

SIGHT

- Twelve backpacks were taller than the people carrying them.
- The far shore was a grey line we had to reach by noon.
- Mangrove roots arched out of the shallows.
- The huts of a fish farm floated out in the strait.
- Our map in its plastic sleeve was soft from folding.
- Coloured holds dotted the climbing wall.
- A wild boar crossed the trail ahead of us.

SOUND

- Paddles clacked against each other until we found a rhythm.
- "Together! Paddle together!" came from the back of the kayak.
- Water gurgled past the hull.
- A bumboat's engine chugged past.
- An instructor's whistle rang across the water.
- A carabiner clicked shut.
- Every head count ended with "Twelve!"

SMELL AND TASTE

- Mangrove mud smelt of rotten eggs.
- The rice burned to the bottom of the pot.
- The half-cooked noodles were the best thing I had ever eaten.
- My T-shirt was on its third day.
- My backpack still smelt of the cupboard at home.

TOUCH AND HEAT

- Blisters rose on my palms from the paddle.
- The life jacket rubbed under my arms.
- The backpack dragged at my shoulders on every slope.
- A sunburnt strip stung where my sleeves ended.
- My shoes never dried.
- The climbing holds felt gritty under my fingers.
- Mud reached my shins.

MOVEMENT

- The slowest of us was sent to the front to set the pace.
- A kayak drifted sideways while its two paddlers argued.
- A capsized watchmate was hauled back on board, laughing.
- We turned the map round and round until it matched the trail.
- Mudskippers skittered over the mud.
- A hornbill flapped heavily over the trees.
- We passed backpacks hand to hand into the boat.

AT THE CAMPSITE AT NIGHT

- Three of us squeezed into a tent meant for two.
- Torches glowed through the walls of the tents.
- The ground pressed into my hip through the groundsheet.
- I wrote in my journal by headlamp.
- I had no phone and nothing to check.
- An insect circled the tent because someone had left the door open.
- Lights lined the far shore.
- A watchmate whispered in the dark long after lights out.

MOOD WORDS

rugged · muddy · gruelling · sunburnt · companionable · unplugged · exhausting · close-knit

PUT IT TOGETHER

By mid-morning, our kayaks were strung out across the strait off Pulau Ubin. The far shore was still a thin grey line. Behind me, Hui Min counted each stroke out loud, and our paddles no longer clacked together. Every pull made my life jacket rub under my arms. On my palm, just below the thumb, a blister had puffed up and turned white.

Details from: sight · sound · touch and heat

TRY IT

Describe a camp, hike or long outdoor activity you have done. End on one detail of your own body.

Words for the senses

These words fit any place, and most run from milder to stronger. Use one in a sentence, and make it the verb where you can: “the shutters rattled”, not “there was a rattling sound”.

Sound

quiet to loud in each group

MILDER → **faint** · **soft** · **loud** · **booming** · **deafening** → STRONGER

SOFT

- A tap **dripped**.
- Pages **rustled**.
- A pen **scratched**.
- A curtain **swished**.
- A spoon **clinked**.
- A chair **creaked**.
- Voices **murmured**.

LOUD

- A bag **thudded** down.
- Lids **clattered**.
- A gate **clanged**.
- A door **slammed**.
- A horn **blared**.
- Glass **shattered**.

MACHINES

- A fan **whirred**.
- A phone **buzzed**.
- A microwave **beeped**.
- A vacuum cleaner **droned**.
- Bus brakes **hissed**.
- A motorbike **revved**.

NATURE

- Waves **lapped**.
- Rain **pattered**.
- A bird **trilled**.
- Crows **cawed**.
- Thunder **rumbled**.
- Thunder **crashed**.

PEOPLE

sighing · whispering · muttering · sniggering · groaning · wailing · bellowing

QUIET AND SILENCE

- hushed
- muffled
- still
- a lull
- a pause
- The talking died away.
- Someone’s stomach rumbled, and everyone heard.

Smell

words for a smell, pleasant to foul: scent · aroma · whiff · odour · stench · reek

MILDER → **faint** · **mild** · **strong** · **pungent** · **overpowering** → STRONGER

PLEASANT

fresh · clean · sweet · floral · fragrant · lemony · minty · nutty · toasted · buttery

UNPLEASANT

stale · musty · sweaty · sour · mouldy · fishy · burnt · acrid · rancid · rotten

HOW A SMELL MOVES

- drifted
- wafted
- hung
- lingered
- clung to my clothes
- caught in my throat

Touch and temperature

how things feel against the skin

MILDER → **icy** · **cool** · **warm** · **hot** · **scorching** → STRONGER

ROUGH TO SMOOTH

jagged · prickly · bristly · coarse · gritty · grainy · smooth · polished · silky · glassy

WET AND STICKY

damp · moist · clammy · soggy · sodden · dripping · tacky · sticky · greasy · slimy

HARD TO SOFT

rock-hard · rigid · stiff · firm · springy · spongy · squashy · floppy · limp

Light, movement and time of day

Light changes through the day, so the time of day is also a way to set a scene. In Singapore the sun rises and sets at about seven o'clock all year.

Light and colour

dim to bright; colours can also be faded, bleached or streaked

MILDER **pitch-dark** | **dim** | **soft** | **bright** | **dazzling** STRONGER

LIGHT VERBS

glimmered · flickered · glowed · gleamed · glinted · sparkled · blazed · glared

KINDS OF LIGHT

- lamplight
- torchlight
- neon
- fluorescent tubes
- dappled shade
- the blue glow of a screen

EXACT COLOURS

scarlet · maroon · rust · amber · mustard · olive · jade · teal · navy · slate

Movement

verbs for people, then for things

MILDER **crept** | **ambled** | **strode** | **hurried** | **sprinted** STRONGER

PEOPLE ON FOOT

tiptoed · shuffled · plodded · trudged · limped · staggered · scurried · darted · dashed · bolted

IN A CROWD OR A SEAT

- squeezed
- jostled
- weaved
- fidgeted
- flinched
- slumped
- sprawled
- craned to see

THINGS AND WATER

quivered · fluttered · swayed · wobbled · toppled · trickled · seeped · gushed

Time of day

the sun rises at about 7 a.m. and sets at about 7 p.m. all year

DAWN

- A road sweeper was out before the traffic.
- The first buses had their lights on.
- A coffee shop rolled up its shutters.
- Dew lay on car windscreens.
- Crows woke the block.

MIDDAY

- My shadow had shrunk to a patch under my feet.
- The white walls glared.
- The playground was empty.
- Umbrellas went up against the sun, not the rain.
- Workers napped in the shade.

DUSK

- The orange sky went dark within half an hour.
- The corridor lights came on.
- Fruit bats flew over the trees.
- Joggers set out as the heat eased.
- Dinner smells filled the corridors.

NIGHT

- The road was white under the street lamps.
- The sky never went fully black.
- A 24-hour coffee shop was still lit.
- The expressway hummed.
- An empty taxi crawled past.

Weather

Weather tells the reader when a scene happens and helps to set its mood. Keep it true of Singapore: heat, sudden rain and haze, never snow or autumn leaves.

Heat and humidity

a still afternoon, a crowded bus stop, a room with no air-con

MILDER — warm · hot · sweltering · stifling · scorching — STRONGER

ON THE BODY

- The backs of my knees were sticky.
- As I left the mall, my glasses fogged up.
- A dark patch grew under my bag strap.
- My fringe was damp.
- My water bottle was empty by ten.

ALL AROUND

- Heat wavered above the road.
- Everyone at the bus stop stood in one strip of shade.
- A cat lay flat under a parked car.
- The slide was too hot to touch.
- The canal was down to a trickle.

Rain

it comes fast, often in the afternoon

MILDER — drizzle · shower · heavy rain · downpour · deluge — STRONGER

BEFORE IT FALLS

- The sky turned slate-grey.
- A cool gust lifted the dust.
- Leaves showed their pale undersides.
- A dusty, metallic smell rose.
- People glanced up and walked faster.
- Mum rushed the washing indoors.

AS IT FALLS

- A fine mist coated my glasses.
- Fat drops gave way to a roar.
- Rain drummed on the bus-stop roof.
- Umbrellas were no use below the knees.
- A crowd sheltered at the void deck.
- After the lightning, I counted to the thunder.

AFTER THE RAIN

- Steam lifted off the hot road.
- The flower beds smelt earthy.
- Every corridor ledge dripped.
- The canal ran high and brown.
- Snails crossed the wet path.
- The air was a few degrees cooler.

Haze and wind

haze in some years, from fires in the region; wind before a storm

HAZE

- The blocks across the road were blurred.
- The sun was a dull orange disc.
- Our flat smelt of burning.
- We checked the PSI at breakfast.
- The air purifier ran behind shut windows.

WIND

- Umbrellas turned inside out.
- Leaves skittered along the pavement.
- Palm fronds thrashed.
- A Sumatra squall hit before dawn.
- The blinds slapped the window frame.

The same place, two times

bring back the same detail at both times to show the change

BUS STOP

- **7 A.M.** Every seat was taken, and nobody spoke.
  → **MIDNIGHT** One man lay asleep along the bench, his slippers lined up beneath it.

SCHOOL CANTEEN

- **RECESS** The queue at the Western food stall reached the drinks counter.
  → **3 P.M.** The same stall was shuttered, and a pigeon walked along the counter.

PLAYGROUND

- **AFTER SCHOOL** Shrieks came from the slide, and parents chatted on the benches.
  → **LATE AT NIGHT** The swings hung still, and the slide was pale under one lamp.

LIBRARY

- **SATURDAY** Every desk was taken, and a toddler laughed in the children's corner.
  → **CLOSING TIME** The children's corner was empty, with one picture book left open.

Clichés and how to replace them

A cliché is a phrase used so often that it no longer gives the reader a picture. Replace each one with a detail from your own story.

CLICHÉ	TRY INSTEAD	WHY IT DOES NOT WORK
FEELINGS		
Beads of perspiration formed on my forehead.	I dried my palm on my shorts before I picked up the pen.	In Singapore, sweat shows the weather as much as a feeling.
Tears streamed down my face like a waterfall.	I wiped my eyes on my sleeve before anyone could see.	It is too big for most moments, so the reader stops believing it.
I was over the moon. I jumped for joy.	I ran down the corridor to tell Ma, still in my socks.	Both are clichés for "very happy".
My heart skipped a beat.	I stood still, my key in the lock.	It fits any shock in any story.
WEATHER AND SETTING		
It was a bright and sunny day, and the birds were chirping merrily.	Start with a person. If the weather matters: "Rain had soaked my canvas shoes."	It fits any story, so it tells the reader nothing about yours.
Dark clouds gathered, as if the sky knew something bad would happen.	The corridor lights were already on, though it was only four o'clock.	Weather that matches the mood this neatly does not seem real.
The sky was a beautiful shade of cerulean blue.	By nine, the sky above the carpark was a hard, pale white.	A rare word used only to impress adds nothing.
OPENINGS AND ENDINGS		
Riiing! My alarm clock rang loudly.	Start at the problem: "The venue had changed overnight."	It starts too early, and many stories begin with the same sound.
Little did I know that this day would change my life.	Nobody noticed that the gate had been left open.	It promises something huge and gives away the ending.
I woke up and realised it was all a dream.	End with a later action that shows what changed (page 7).	It cancels the story, so nothing that happened in it matters.
SIMILES AND COMPARISONS		
She was as white as a sheet.	Her lips had lost their colour.	Readers have met it so often that they picture nothing.
I ran as fast as lightning.	I took the stairs two at a time.	Nobody believes it. A real action is easier to see.
Time seemed to stand still.	Nobody moved. On the screen, the cursor blinked.	It says the moment felt long, but not what happened in it.

Four more things to avoid

Stacking. "My heart pounded, my hands shook and my knees trembled" stacks three clichéd details in one sentence. Choose one exact detail.

Purple prose. This is writing crowded with grand words. "The gargantuan, majestic, towering block" says less than "the sixteen-storey block".

Memorised passages. A passage learnt by heart rarely fits the topic, and the reader can tell which parts were written for another story.

Mixed tenses. Keep to the past tense. In "I opened the door, and the room is dark", change "is" to "was". Speech and thoughts can be in any tense.

Practice: show, not tell

The exercises go from single sentences to whole paragraphs, and from easy to hard, so do them in order. Sample answers are on page 59.

1. Telling or showing?

Write **T** if the sentence tells you the feeling, or **S** if it shows it. For each S, write the feeling you think it shows.

SENTENCE	T OR S	FEELING SHOWN
a. I was scared of the dark.		
b. I hid under my quilt and lay very still, listening to every creak.		
c. Dad slammed the car door and did not say a word during the drive home.		
d. My little sister was sad when her balloon floated away.		
e. Ravi ran out of the hall, waving his medal above his head.		
f. I felt embarrassed when I tripped on the stage.		

2. Telling to showing

Rewrite each sentence so that it shows the feeling without naming it. For a to c, use one of the five ways on page 5. For d to f, use two. You can take ideas from the feeling pages, but change every detail you take.

a. I was nervous before my oral exam.

b. My cousins were excited to reach the chalet.

c. I felt lonely on my first day at my new school.

d. Pa was angry about the scratch on his car.

e. I was relieved to find my wallet at the bus stop.

f. Hui Min was jealous when I became group leader.

YOUR SENTENCES

Practice: show, not tell (continued)

3. Cleaning up clichés

This paragraph has six clichés. Underline them, then rewrite the paragraph with details of your own (page 55).

> It was a bright and sunny morning, and the birds were chirping merrily. Little did I know that it would be the worst day of my life. When Mr Lim handed back our Science papers, my heart skipped a beat. My jaw dropped to the floor and I turned as white as a sheet. Tears streamed down my face like a waterfall.

YOUR REWRITE

4. Slowing down a moment

Rewrite this rushed moment as one slow-motion paragraph of about 100 words (page 6). Mix action, a sense, a thought and speech, and put a very short sentence at the turning point.

> The lift stopped between the ninth and tenth floors. My little brother started to cry. I pressed the alarm button, and after a while a man answered. I was very scared but also very relieved.

YOUR PARAGRAPH

Practice: show, not tell (continued)

5. Describing a place

Describe a place from the place pages (page 34), or a place near your home, in about 100 words. Write in the past tense.

- Move from the wide view to one close detail.
- Use at least two senses.
- Start with the thing, not “I could see”.
- Put in one person doing something.
- Choose one mood, and name it once at most.
- Change every detail you take from a page.

YOUR PARAGRAPH

Harder: the same place at another time

Write a second paragraph about the same place at another time, such as late at night or after the rain. If your place has a page in this book, use the dark panel on that page, which shows the place at a second time. Bring back at least two things from your first paragraph, and show how they have changed.

YOUR SECOND PARAGRAPH

Answers: show, not tell

Your details will be different from these. Check that each answer shows the feeling without naming it.

1. Telling or showing?

a. T **b.** S: afraid **c.** S: angry **d.** T **e.** S: proud or happy **f.** T

Sentences a, d and f name the feeling, so they tell. Sentences b, c and e give actions the reader can see, so any feeling that fits those actions is right, such as "upset" for c.

2. Telling to showing

SENTENCE	SAMPLE ANSWER	WAYS USED
a. nervous	Outside the exam room, I kept adjusting my collar and glancing at the door every time it creaked.	hands and actions
b. excited	Before the bus had even stopped, my cousins were on their feet, bags on their shoulders, crowding the door.	hands and actions
c. lonely	At recess, every table in the canteen seemed to have exactly enough seats for its group, and none for me.	the setting
d. angry	Pa crouched beside the car and ran his thumb along the scratch, twice. When he finally spoke, his voice was flat and quiet. "Who parked here last night?"	hands and actions; voice and words
e. relieved	My wallet was still there, wedged under the bench. I laughed out loud, alone at the bus stop, and kept one hand pressed on my pocket until I got home.	voice and words; hands and actions
f. jealous	"Congratulations," Hui Min said to her worksheet, and for the rest of the lesson she asked everyone except me for help.	voice and words; hands and actions

3. Cleaning up clichés

The six clichés are "a bright and sunny morning ... chirping merrily", "Little did I know ... the worst day of my life", "my heart skipped a beat", "My jaw dropped to the floor", "as white as a sheet" and "Tears streamed down my face like a waterfall". The sample leaves out the weather and "Little did I know", and starts when the papers come back.

SAMPLE REWRITE

Mr Lim walked down the rows, handing back our Science papers. When he reached my desk, he put mine down and moved on quickly. I flipped it over. Thirty-eight, circled in red. I slid it under my pencil case before Jia En could see, and kept my eyes on the whiteboard until the bell rang.

4. Slowing down a moment

SAMPLE PARAGRAPH

Between the ninth and tenth floors, the lift jolted and stopped. The light went out, and a dim emergency light came on. My six-year-old brother, Wei Ming, grabbed a fistful of my T-shirt and began to whimper. I pressed the button for our floor, then every button on the panel. The fan above us slowed to a stop, and the air turned warm and thick. What had the notice by the door said? I found the button with the bell on it and held it down. Four seconds. Five. Then a voice. "Hello? Which block are you in?" I answered so fast that I had to say it twice.

The paragraph covers less than a minute. The question about the notice is the thought, the warm air is the sense detail, and "Then a voice." is the turning point. Answering twice shows the relief. Only the voice speaks in quotation marks, so the moment can stay in one paragraph (page 8).

Answers: show, not tell (continued)

5. Describing a place

SAMPLE PARAGRAPH: THE VOID DECK

At seven on a weekday morning, the void deck below my block was cool and half in shadow. By the lift lobby, two children in primary school uniforms sat on a stone bench and swung their legs, while their grandmother held both water bottles and watched the road for the school bus. Somewhere above, a radio was playing an old Hokkien song. Near the letter boxes, an old man in a singlet swung his arms back and forth, counting under his breath. Then the lift doors opened, and a boy in PE kit sprinted out, still chewing his bread. The grandmother watched him go and shook her head, smiling.

The sample goes from the whole void deck to one bench and one boy, and uses touch, sight and sound. The running boy shows how calm everything else is. For more details, see the void deck page.

HARDER PART: THE SAME VOID DECK AT NIGHT

By eleven that night, the void deck was lit by a row of white tube lights, and the stone bench by the lift lobby was empty. The radio upstairs had gone quiet. Near the letter boxes, where the old man had counted his arm swings that morning, a cat sat washing one paw. Two floors up, a gate clanged shut. The lift doors opened on nobody, waited, and closed again.

The bench, the radio and the letter boxes come back from the morning paragraph, so the reader sees how the place has changed. The empty lift gives the night its mood without naming it.

Check your own writing

Check your answers to the exercises with this list, and use it on every story or description you write.

- I showed the important feelings and did not name them as well.
- For the key moment, I used two or three different ways.
- The key moment is my longest paragraph, and it covers only seconds or minutes.
- The reader can see how the feeling changes from the start to the end.
- My last line shows something and does not explain it.
- My speech is short, and it is punctuated correctly.
- My description moves through the place in a clear order.
- I used at least two senses and one person doing something.
- My details all build one mood.
- I changed every detail I took from a page to fit my story.
- There are no clichés, and no sentence stacks three details.
- I used the past tense all through, except in speech and thoughts.

WHAT I WILL CHANGE NEXT TIME

Notes

Notes

Notes

Show, Not Tell

This book teaches you to show a feeling or a place through details the reader can see and hear, instead of naming it. It gives you a page of details for each of 20 feelings and 16 places in Singapore, to change and use in your own stories and descriptions. Short lessons, model paragraphs and practice with answers show you how.

For students from Primary 3 to Secondary 4, and their teachers.

INSIDE

- Five ways to show a feeling, with examples
- How to slow down the key moment, show a change of feeling and use speech
- A page for each of 20 feelings, with a word ladder and a model paragraph
- A page for each of 16 places in Singapore, at two times of day
- Words for the senses, the weather and the time of day
- Clichés to avoid, practice from easy to hard, and answers

TELLING

~~I was nervous before I went on stage.~~

SHOWING

From behind the curtain, I could hear the hall filling up. My mouth had gone dry. I checked the time twice in one minute. I told myself it would all be over in five minutes. When Mrs Lim called my name, I said, "Good morning," and my voice climbed half a note.

Details from the Nervous page: face and body · hands and actions · voice and words · thoughts · the setting

TOM NG