

## How to use supporting detail

### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **15 minutes**

### Reminder

#### What is valid supporting detail?

Valid supporting detail is the use of detail in your own essay to support the points you are making in each body paragraph. Remember, simply summarizing the text is probably not enough to supply sufficient supporting detail in your own essay, unless it is used to clearly support your own ideas. Make sure you use details from the text **and** from your own personal experiences (examples) to support what you are saying.

#### What kinds of details are acceptable?

The details you choose should be appropriate and on topic in terms of what you are saying. They should support your thesis, reactions and response ideas. Avoid getting side-tracked and off topic, especially in your comments and reactions. You may quote and/or paraphrase from the text to back up what you are saying. You may bring in your own experiences, as long as they are relevant to what you are saying. Do not get carried away with presenting your own personal experiences and forget you are responding to a text in your own essay.

#### What do I avoid?

Some repetition for emphasis is always acceptable. Excessive repetition, too much generalization or irrelevant material may prevent you from meeting this objective, however. Avoid relying on the same few details throughout your essay. Also, avoid using details that digress from your main points, and do not make general claims without detailed support.

## Instructions

In this exercise, you will practise choosing the kinds of details to use as you present your ideas about the text you have decided to write about. These details are used to back up the points you are making in your own essay. It is important to stay on topic and not to be too general in what you are saying. Use only relevant, exact details that accurately support claims you are making about a text.

Determine whether the sample paragraphs below are acceptable or unacceptable in terms of 1) correct paraphrasing of material from the original text; 2) references to details in the original text; 3) inclusion of details from the writer's ideas concerning the text.

# Exercise

Please note: Each paragraph below may have problems in one or more of these three areas.

**EXAMPLE:** (student reacting to an essay about people and their favourite pets)

People have all kinds of pets at home, and often the pets they have go along with the age and personality of the owner. Young children will have small pets like a rabbit or a hamster that is easy to care for. Teenagers often have a dog that they can train and take for a walk when it needs to go outside. Ladies often prefer a cat, because cats are independent and need little care overall. People who want a pet as a friend might choose a small terrier or a pit bull, depending on whether they like a dog they can treat more like a small child or a pit bull that demands a person willing to train and control the dog. My favourite pet would be fish in a tank, because fish can be left alone for long periods but remain beautiful to watch. The reality is that there are all kinds of pets like there are all kinds of people.

Acceptable   X                        Unacceptable       

**ANSWER:** This is a fairly good example of a **unified paragraph** that uses details and examples to present a follow-up of the main idea introduced in **the topic sentence, the first sentence**. The examples provide **some detail** about the paragraph topic, namely people and their pets, and there is even a personal example from the writer. The paragraph is **unified and coherent** and makes **good use of details**, in this case, the many examples.

1. Seeing the crane means many things to different people in the story. For Lee, it is a chance for his grandfather to relive his past, to see something rare, to have a special outing. For the father, it represents a dangerous trip because he knows the old man is not strong. But he also says “He just had to see it.” As for the mother, it was a rash and dangerous decision. She loves the old man and does not want to lose him. Finally, for the grandfather, seeing the crane symbolizes a dying wish, a special moment to cherish, remembering and reliving his past, and saying to everyone he can do what he wants.

Acceptable                             Unacceptable

2. A farm is not the easiest place to live. We get up at 4 AM to feed the cows and then we do the milking at 6 AM. We also do some cleaning in the barn before we have breakfast. We work so hard during the day that we need a big breakfast. In the afternoon we usually work in the fields until about 5 PM. Supper is always the best meal of the day and we need to relax and get to bed early because 4 AM comes pretty quick. The later you go to bed, the harder it is to get up in the morning.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

3. McCourt uses realistic dialogue throughout the story when the characters are speaking to one another. The boy talks like a young boy; his parents talk like adults; the grandfather talks just like my grandfather does. When they try to get the horse going, the words they use are realistic. When the mother tells Lee he should have gone out with the grandfather she talks like a real mother. The grandfather's comments are realistic too; of all the characters, his dialogue is the most real. I love the way he speaks. I like talking to older people.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

4. One of the things the story tells us is that we have to be really careful when dealing with old people. Their health is sometimes fragile. The grandfather says he wants to go see the whooping crane, "Boy, I got to see it. I tell you I have to", Lee has to decide what to do. He actually tries to tell the old man not to go: "But the buggy hasn't been used in years," he says. In the end Lee decided to bring him, not because he did not care about the consequences, but rather because he knew this was something very important for the old man. I often bring my own grandfather to the shopping centre, and sometimes I wonder if it might be too much for him.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

5. The story is all about seeing a bird in the woods and the reality is who cares anyhow. If it was a white tiger or a white rhino then maybe I could understand, but it is just a bird. Maybe if it was a bald eagle or another bird that is almost extinct it would work, but it is just a crane and you can see them anytime. Why would someone get so excited about a crane? There are cranes in every zoo and pink cranes in Florida everywhere. I see them on CSI Miami every week. They fly really well.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

# Answer key

1. **Acceptable.** Here we have a topic sentence introducing the idea of what the crane means to the characters, and the supporting details that follow consider how four characters view the crane. This unified paragraph starts by saying it will discuss exactly what the crane means (symbolizes) for the characters in the story and that is what it does. The symbolism of this trip into the wilds to see a rare bird is especially important for Lee and his grandfather. There is good use of detail, for example in why the trip is so important for the grandfather and in the plot summary events listed.
2. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph has lots of details about farm life, but what does all this have to do with the story? Details are interesting but the examples are off-topic. The details of farm life presented are mostly irrelevant details in terms of an analysis of the story.
3. **Unacceptable.** Here we have a good topic introduced in sentence one, but the rest of the paragraph is full of repetition and excessive generalizations. Why are there no quotations or no relevant references for illustration?
4. **Acceptable.** The complications involved in dealing with elders are the topic of the paragraph and both the quotations used and personal family incident mentioned are on topic. Lee has to make a quick decision about what to do, but he does not act rashly. He thinks about the consequences.
5. **Unacceptable.** Much more important than any particular student's own opinions about whooping cranes is grasping how the characters actually react to the bird in the story. Whatever the student writer believes to be the case, within the context of the story, at least, the whooping crane is rare: "There's only twenty-eight whoopers left in the whole world," as Lee points out. For the grandfather this is a once-in-lifetime experience and it really means a lot to him. The paragraph is actually full of meaningless and irrelevant details.