Revealing problems

1 Identifying explicit information

Learning objectives

- To understand the difference between explicit and implicit information
- To practise identifying explicit details

Exam link

As part of your learning for GCSE you will be expected to identify explicit and implicit information to demonstrate you have understood what you have been reading.

Key term

Interpretation: an explanation or understanding of something

Introduction

Problems present themselves in a variety of ways. This is particularly the case with problems that affect people. In this unit you will look at some of the ways problems are revealed by a writer and begin to explore techniques you can use in your own writing.

As readers, we process information. In a narrative piece this can be information on character or setting, or it can be information that moves the plot along. Some of the information that we gain is explicit, which means that it is clearly and openly expressed, and there is no room for doubt or **interpretation**. For example, if you read in a story that 'Jack is a 16-year-old boy', you explicitly learn that the character is called Jack, is 16 and a boy.

Through reading we can also receive information and ideas that are implicit. This means that the writer might suggest or imply something but that it is not openly stated. In literature you have read, you will have drawn conclusions from suggestions that a writer has made. For example, if you read that 'Jack sat hunched on the sofa, his arms wrapped tightly around his legs', the writer could be implying a number of things: Jack may be cold or upset or angry. As a reader you can infer these things from the description of his body language, 'hunched' and 'tightly'.

Read the following extract from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Bruno, the main character, is a child who is about to be introduced to 'the Fury', an important visitor of his father's.

Extract 1 from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne

The Fury was far shorter than Father and not, Bruno supposed, quite as strong. He had dark hair, which was cut quite short, and a tiny moustache – so tiny in fact that Bruno wondered why he bothered with it at all or whether he had simply forgotten a piece when he was shaving. The woman standing beside him, however, was quite the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. She had blonde hair and very red lips, and while the Fury spoke to Mother she turned and looked at Bruno and smiled, making him go red with embarrassment.

Activity 1

1. Write down at least two explicit details you learn about the appearance of 'the Fury' and his female companion.
2. Write down two of the things that Bruno is explicitly thinking.

Next, you will read a paragraph taken from slightly earlier in the novel before the arrival of 'the Fury'.

Extract 2 from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne

An hour before the Fury was due to arrive Gretel and Bruno were brought downstairs, where they received a rare invitation into Father's office. Gretel was wearing a white dress and knee socks and her hair had been twisted into corkscrew curls. Bruno was wearing a pair of dark brown shorts, a plain white shirt and a dark brown tie. He had a new pair of shoes for the occasion and was very proud of them, even though they were too small for him and were pinching his feet and making it difficult for him to walk. All these preparations and fine clothes seemed a little extravagant, all the same, because Bruno and Gretel weren't even invited to dinner; they had eaten an hour earlier.

Activity 2

Imagine you are helping a younger student with their reading. List ten simple questions you could ask to help them identify some of the explicit details provided by the author in Extract 2.

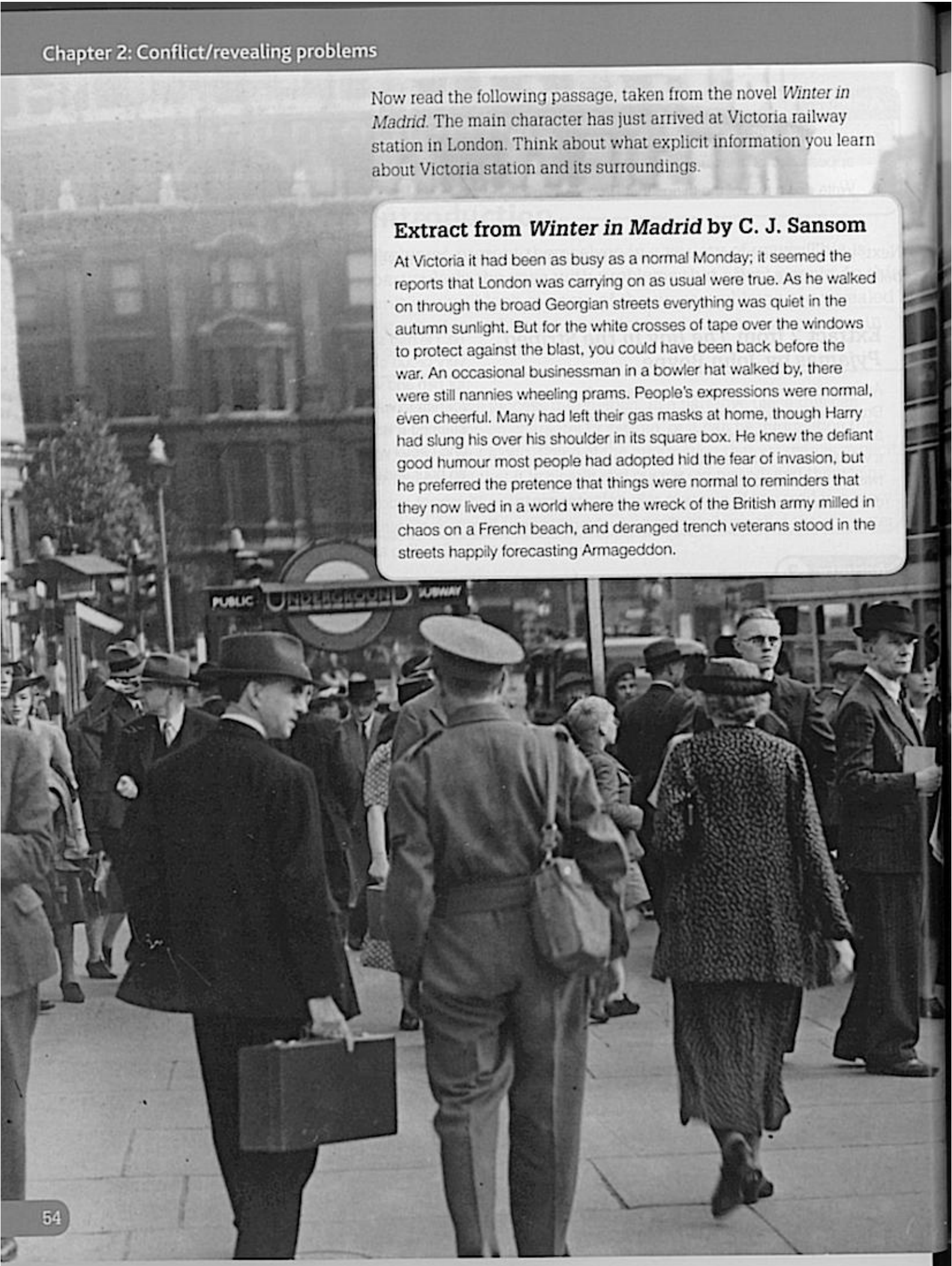
For example, you could begin as follows:

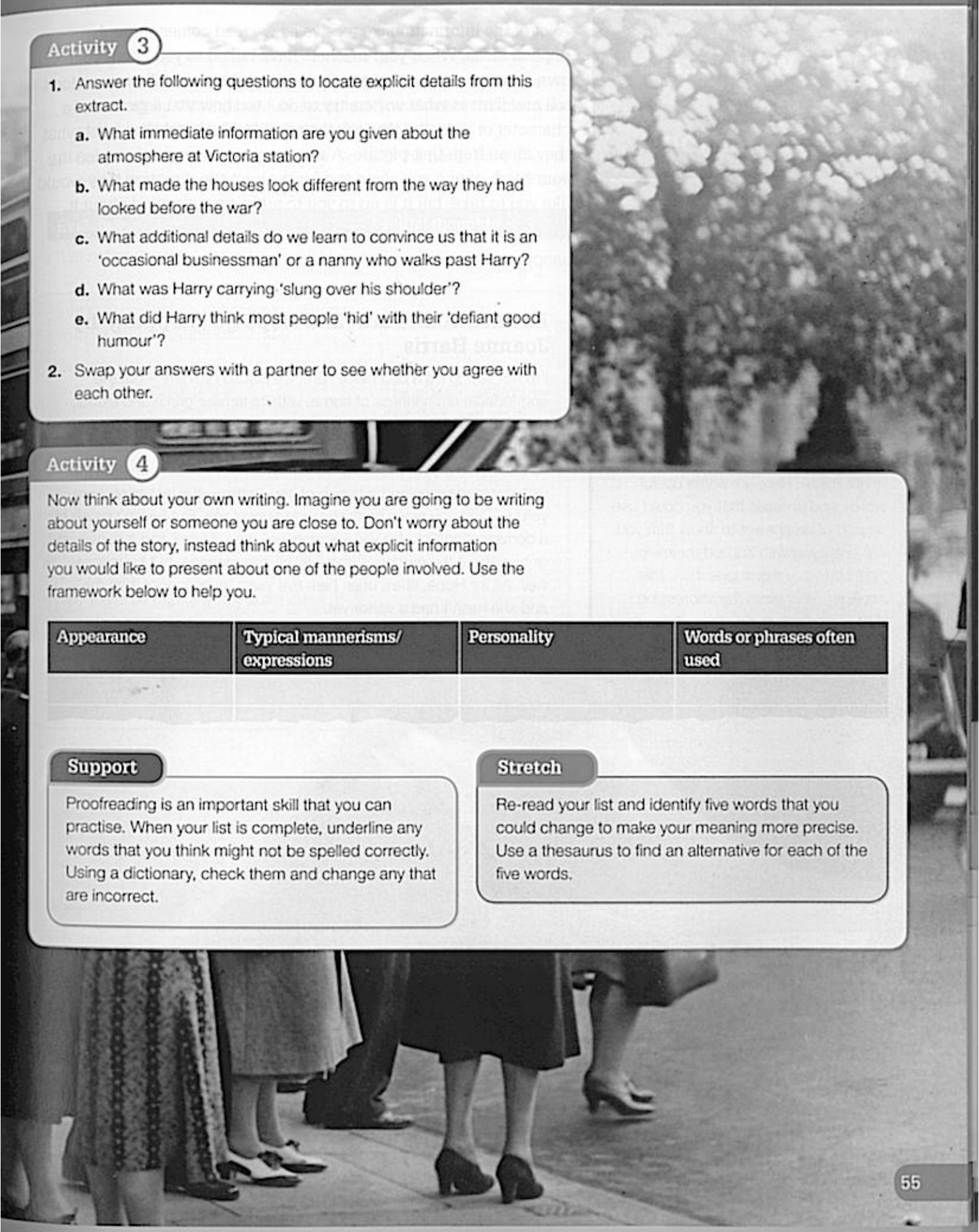
1. When were Gretel and Bruno brought downstairs?

Now read the following passage, taken from the novel *Winter in Madrid*. The main character has just arrived at Victoria railway station in London. Think about what explicit information you learn about Victoria station and its surroundings.

Extract from *Winter in Madrid* by C. J. Sansom

At Victoria it had been as busy as a normal Monday; it seemed the reports that London was carrying on as usual were true. As he walked on through the broad Georgian streets everything was quiet in the autumn sunlight. But for the white crosses of tape over the windows to protect against the blast, you could have been back before the war. An occasional businessman in a bowler hat walked by, there were still nannies wheeling prams. People's expressions were normal, even cheerful. Many had left their gas masks at home, though Harry had slung his over his shoulder in its square box. He knew the defiant good humour most people had adopted hid the fear of invasion, but he preferred the pretence that things were normal to reminders that they now lived in a world where the wreck of the British army milled in chaos on a French beach, and deranged trench veterans stood in the streets happily forecasting Armageddon.





Activity 3

1. Answer the following questions to locate explicit details from this extract.
   a. What immediate information are you given about the atmosphere at Victoria station?
   b. What made the houses look different from the way they had looked before the war?
   c. What additional details do we learn to convince us that it is an 'occasional businessman' or a nanny who walks past Harry?
   d. What was Harry carrying 'slung over his shoulder'?
   e. What did Harry think most people 'hid' with their 'defiant good humour'?
2. Swap your answers with a partner to see whether you agree with each other.

Activity 4

Now think about your own writing. Imagine you are going to be writing about yourself or someone you are close to. Don't worry about the details of the story, instead think about what explicit information you would like to present about one of the people involved. Use the framework below to help you.

Appearance	Typical mannerisms/ expressions	Personality	Words or phrases often used

Support

Proofreading is an important skill that you can practise. When your list is complete, underline any words that you think might not be spelled correctly. Using a dictionary, check them and change any that are incorrect.

Stretch

Re-read your list and identify five words that you could change to make your meaning more precise. Use a thesaurus to find an alternative for each of the five words.

2 How writers reveal information

Learning objective

- To investigate some of the implicit ways writers reveal information

A lot of the information we receive as we read comes through implicit ideas. When your teachers have talked to you about your own creative writing you may have heard them say, 'Show me, don't tell me.' This is what writers try to do – to show you a picture of a character or a setting through their words. You must then infer what they mean from that picture. A writer sows the seeds of an idea in your head, giving you clues and hints about the direction they would like you to take, but it is up to you to make up your mind about it.

Read the following extract from a story called 'Faith and Hope go shopping'.

Extract from 'Faith and Hope go shopping' by Joanne Harris

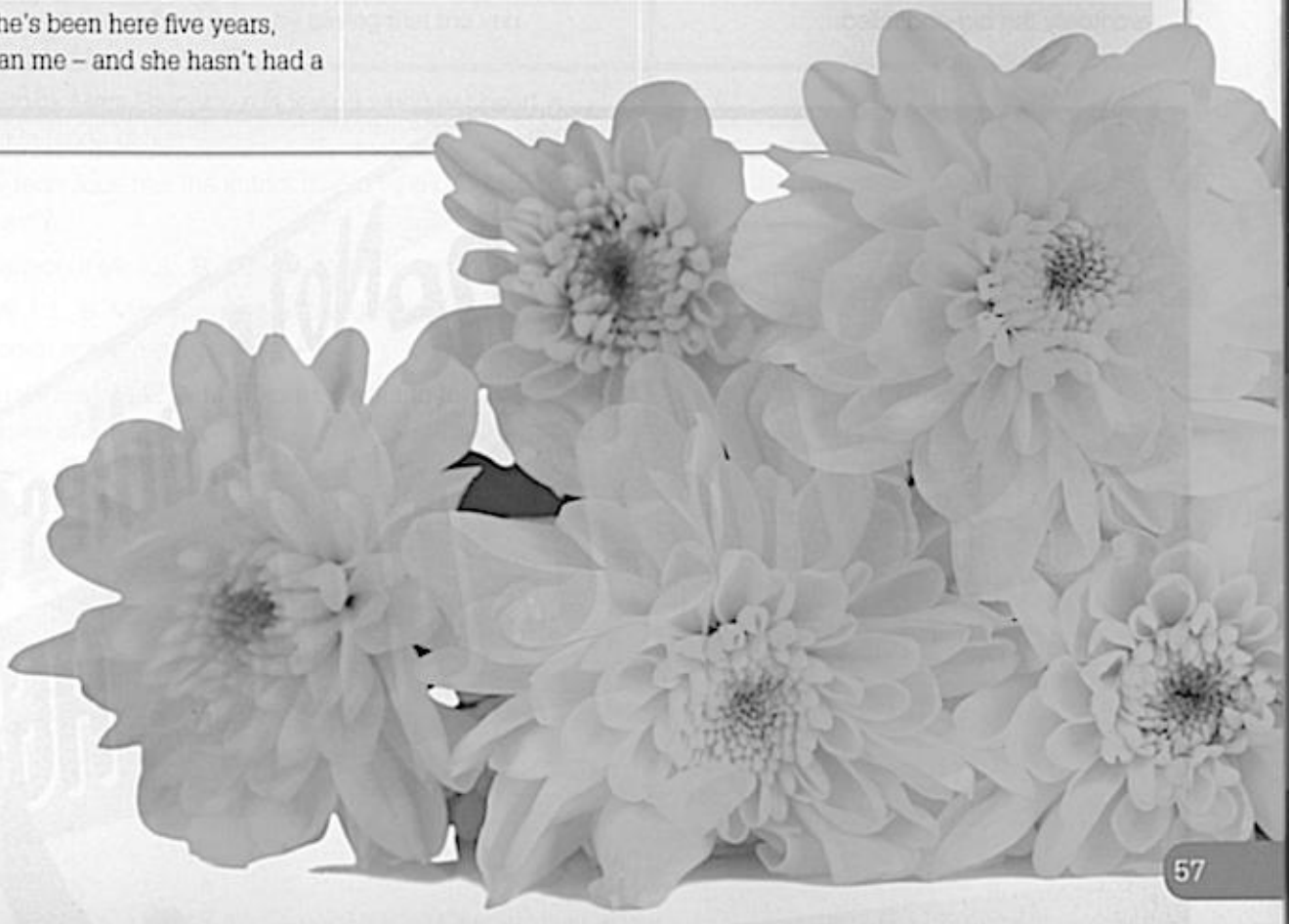
I'm not saying it's a bad place here. It's just so *ordinary* – not the comfortable ordinariness of home, with its familiar grime and clutter, but that of waiting-rooms and hospitals, a pastel-detergent place with a smell of air freshener and distant bedpans. We don't get many visits, as a rule. I'm one of the lucky ones; my son Tom calls every fortnight with my magazines and a bunch of chrysanths – the last ones were yellow – and any news he thinks won't upset me. But he isn't much of a conversationalist. *Are you keeping well then, Mam?* and a comment or two about the garden is about all he can manage, but he means well. As for Hope, she's been here five years, even longer than me – and she hasn't had a visitor yet.

Tip When writing about implicit meaning, you will usually be putting forward your ideas as a suggestion about what the writer might mean. Here are some useful words and phrases that you could use as part of an answer to show that you are engaging with implied meaning: *This shows..., this suggests..., this implies..., this gives the impression that..., perhaps the writer..., the writer may be inferring that...*

Activity 1

1. The narrator is describing the nursing home she lives in. Read the extract again, thinking carefully about how you visualize this place and what it is that leads you to those conclusions.
2. Copy and complete the table below. Some of the boxes have been filled in as examples, but you could add to these with thoughts of your own.

Evidence	Initial thoughts	Development of ideas
'I'm not saying it's a bad place'	It's okay.	...but she's not saying it's a good place either. Is there something wrong?
'not the comfortable ordinariness of home, with its familiar grime and clutter'	She likes home.	'Familiar grime and clutter' suggests it is her own grime and clutter and at least that is personal to her.
'a pastel-detergent place'	The place is defined by its colour and smell.	
'a smell of air freshener and distant bed-pans'		
'We don't get many visits, as a rule'		
'I'm one of the lucky ones; my son Tom calls every fortnight'		
'any news he thinks won't upset me'		
'As for Hope, she's been here five years, even longer than me – and she hasn't had a visitor yet.'		



Read the following extract from *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party*. Mma Ramotswe, the main character, is a private detective in Botswana.

Extract from *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party* by Alexander McCall Smith

Mma Ramotswe's van had served her well, and she loved it. Its life, though, had been a hard one. Not only had it been obliged to cope with dust, which, as anybody who lives in a dry country will know, can choke a vehicle to death, but its long-suffering suspension had been required to deal with persistent overloading, at least on the driver's side. That, of course, was the side on which Mma Ramotswe sat, and she was, by her own admission and description, a traditionally built person. Such a person can wear down even the toughest suspension, and this is exactly what happened in the case of the tiny, white van, which permanently listed to starboard as a result.

Mma Ramotswe's husband, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, that excellent man, proprietor of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors and widely regarded as the best mechanic in all Botswana, had done his best to address the problem, but had tired of having to change the van's shock absorbers from side to side so as to equalise the strain. Yet it went further than that. The engine itself had started to make a sinister sound, which grew in volume until eventually the big-end failed.

'I am just a mechanic, Mma Ramotswe,' he had said to his wife. 'A mechanic is a man who fixes cars and other vehicles. That is what a mechanic does.'

Mma Ramotswe had listened politely, but her heart within her was a stone of fear. She knew that the fate of her van was at stake, and she would prefer not to know that. 'I think I understand what a mechanic does, Rra,' she said. 'And you are a very good mechanic, quite capable of fixing a – '

She did not finish. The normally mild Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had raised a finger. 'A mechanic, Mma,' he pronounced, 'is different from a miracle-worker. A miracle-worker is a person who... works miracles. A mechanic cannot do that. And so when the time comes for a vehicle to die – and they are mortal, Mma, I can assure you – then he cannot wave a wand and make the car new again.' He paused, looking at her with the air of a doctor imparting bad news. 'And so...'

The extract on page 58 uses **metaphors** and **personification**. As an effective reader you do not just need to identify that a writer has used **literary techniques**; you need to explain *how* they have been used and what *effect* they have had on the narrative.

Activity 2

1. How is personification used in this extract?
2. Why does the personification work well here? Think about how it makes you feel about what is being personified and what it shows about the characters' feelings.

Stretch

Choose any fictional book from the library. Read the first couple of chapters and note down examples of metaphors and personification that you think work well. For each example you have selected, explain *why* you think it works well.

Activity 3

Re-read the extract and answer these questions.

1. Why has Mma Ramotswe's van had a hard life?
2. Can you explain how Mma Ramotswe contributed towards the van's problems?
3. What do you think the writer means by saying that the van 'permanently listed to starboard'?
4. How do you think Mma Ramotswe is feeling when her heart is described as 'a stone of fear'?
5. What literary technique has the author used in the description 'a stone of fear'?
6. What is the effect of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni raising his finger?
7. Why does Mr J. L. B. Matekoni explain the difference between a miracle-worker and a mechanic?
8. What do you think Mr J. L. B. Matekoni is about to tell Mma Ramotswe at the end?

Key terms

Metaphor: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used to describe an object or an action without using *as* or *like*, e.g. 'There's daggers in men's smiles' (from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*)
Personification: the attribution of a personal nature or human characteristics to something non-human
Literary technique: a method used by a writer to convey his or her message

Developing dialogue

4 Exploring dialogue

Learning objective

- To explore the idea of dialogue

Introduction

Speech, discussion and dialogue are all terms used to describe the way we communicate. It is through speech and dialogue that problems can be presented, discussed and potentially resolved. In this unit you will look at what these terms mean and think about how they work in fiction.

You will begin by exploring how dialogue is used – in everyday life and in writing.

For our purposes, dialogue can be defined in two ways:

- the words spoken by characters in a play, film or story

or

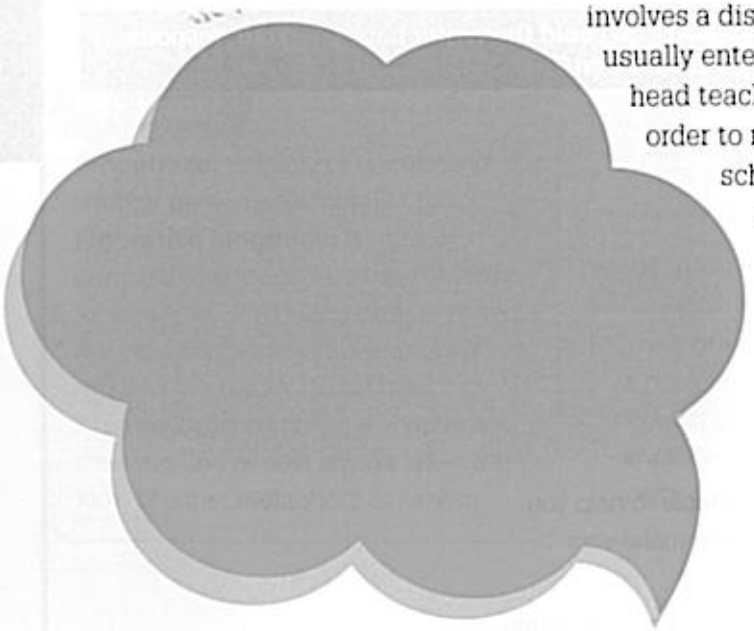
- a conversation or discussion.

Key term

Direct speech: words quoted in the form in which they are or were actually spoken

The first definition is fairly straightforward and refers to the way conversations are usually presented in fiction. In a story, for example, dialogue is often represented through the use of **direct speech** and any additional description of the characters who are speaking. For example, *'What are you doing?' asked Seb in astonishment.*

The second definition is more open to interpretation, but generally involves a discussion between two or more people or groups, and is usually entered into to gain some sort of resolution. For example, a head teacher may need to engage in a dialogue with parents in order to resolve a problem with unsafe car parking at his or her school. Similarly, a police officer who has been injured in the line of duty may have a dialogue with senior officers about how they can support his or her return to work.



Activity 1

Write down at least three or four examples of when you have entered into a dialogue with someone in order to resolve something.

If we return to the idea of dialogue in fiction – or the conversations that take place in a story – it is important to think about how this is often different from the speech that takes place between two or more people in real life. Think about your own conversations; there will be pauses, repetition of ideas, **fillers** such as 'erm' or 'ah' and **false starts**. Your language use may also be very different from the way a character in a story would speak.

Key terms

Filler: a word or sound that fills a pause in an utterance or conversation (e.g. *er, well, you know*)
False start: an unsuccessful attempt to begin something

Activity 2

Record a conversation with a partner. Choose a topic you are familiar with and record what you say for two or three minutes. Use this recording and attempt to write down the beginning of your conversation as direct speech (you should aim to write at least half a side in continuous prose, but you don't need to write down the entire conversation). Apart from speech tags (e.g. *he said* or *Mark replied*), don't add in anything that is not in the recording and make sure you don't miss out any of the speech or sounds that either of you make in the part of the conversation you are writing about.

Support

For example, a typical conversation might begin:

> I said to Michael, 'Err. Did you watch the match last night then?'
>
> Michael yawned. He said, 'Mmm. Yeah. Thought I was going to miss it. I – I got back late from the gym.'

Activity 3

1. Read through your written conversation. Compare it with your partner's. Have you missed any of the content of the conversation that needs to be added in? When you feel that your conversation is a good representation of what took place, read it through for a final time.
2. Write down as many reasons as you can why this would not be an effective way to write dialogue in a story.

The truth is that if we write down all the content of our conversations, it is not very interesting. There are lots of pauses and some stumbling for words; we often restart what we are saying and don't always follow through to the ending we intended. Dialogue in narrative is very different. Read the following extract, which features the characters of George and Lennie from *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck.

Extract from *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

Lennie looked timidly over to him. 'George?'

'Yeah, what ya want?'

'Where we goin', George?'

The little man jerked down the brim of his hat and scowled over at Lennie. 'So you forgot that awready, did you? I gotta tell you again, do I? Jesus Christ, you're a crazy bastard!'

'I forgot,' Lennie said softly. 'I tried not to forget. Honest to God I did, George.'

'OK – OK. I'll tell ya again. I ain't got nothing to do. Might jus' as well spen' all my time tellin' you things and then you forget 'em, and I tell you again.'

'Tried and tried,' said Lennie, 'but it didn't do no good. I remember about the rabbits, George.'

'The hell with the rabbits. That's all you ever can remember is them rabbits. OK! Now you listen and this time you got to remember so we don't get in no trouble. You remember settin' in that gutter on Howard Street and watchin' that blackboard?'

Lennie's face broke into a delighted smile. 'Why sure, George. I remember that ... but ... what'd we do then? I remember some girls come by and you says ... you says...'

'The hell with what I says. You remember about us goin' into Murray and Ready's, and they give us work cards and bus tickets?'

'Oh, sure, George. I remember that now.' His hands went quickly into his side coat pockets. He said gently: 'George ... I ain't got mine. I musta lost it.' He looked down at the ground in despair.

'You never had none, you crazy bastard. I got both of 'em here. Think I'd let you carry your own work card?'

Lennie grinned with relief. 'I ... I thought I put it in my side pocket.'

Dialogue within a story has to do more than represent the speech that is taking place. It is also one of a writer's tools for developing the story. We find out information about the characters of George and Lennie and what is happening to them through what they say and the way they say it.

Activity 4

1. Use a table like the one below to list what you find out about the characters of George and Lennie and their situation. First, look for information you are given directly, and then try to analyse both the explicit and implicit meanings.

Dialogue	How words are spoken	What this tells you	What we can deduce
'Yeah, what ya want?'		George can be quite short in the way he speaks to Lennie.	George might just be rude, or Lennie frustrates George, perhaps asks a lot of him and George is weary of this.
'George?'	timidly	Lennie is nervous about George's reaction to what he is about to say.	Lennie has done something wrong, or something he knows George won't be happy about. This suggests he cares about what George thinks.

2. Once you have completed your table, write up character profiles for both Lennie and George. Imagine you are a director who will be giving instructions to actors who are auditioning to play the parts of George and Lennie in a new film adaptation. Write a paragraph which summarizes the key information you want the actors to know before auditioning.
3. Compare your profiles with a partner. Were they similar? Did you do anything differently? Discuss any differences and explain why you made the choices you did, using evidence from the extract to support your arguments.

Activity 5

Stretch

Look back at the written conversation that you produced for Activity 2. Using a highlighter pen, highlight a few lines of the conversation that you think could be used as a starting point for dialogue in a story. This time you should add descriptive detail and edit the content in order to engage a reader.

5 Writing speech

Learning objective

- To revise the presentation of direct speech in fictional prose

Below is a reminder of how speech should be set out in writing and an extract from *The Hobbit* demonstrating the use of speech.

Key information

✓ Speech marks or inverted commas are used when writing direct speech. It is fine to use either double (" ") or single inverted commas (' '), but make sure that you consistently use the same ones.

✓ The punctuation that goes at the end of the words that are spoken always appears *inside* the final set of speech marks. The first word that is spoken by a character always begins with a capital letter, even if it follows a comma.

Extract from *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien

'Now we are all here!' said Gandalf, looking at the row of thirteen hoods – the best detachable party hoods – and his own hat hanging on the pegs. 'Quite a merry gathering! I hope there is something left for the late-comers to eat and drink! What's that? Tea! No thank you! A little red wine, I think for me.'

'And for me,' said Thorin.

'And raspberry jam and apple-tart,' said Bifur.

Activity 1

Copy out the sentences below and insert the necessary speech punctuation.

SPAG

1. The weather has been dreadful this week, commented Mrs Phillips.
2. I want to go first! demanded Max.
3. The doctor replied, The news isn't good, I'm afraid.

If direct speech is broken up by information about who is speaking, you need to remember the following things:

You should use punctuation to end the first piece of speech.

If the second part of the speech is still part of the same sentence, it should also begin with a lower-case letter.

There should also be either a comma or a full stop before the second piece of speech.

'Looking back,' I said, 'we should have guessed there was something wrong.'

'I can't believe it!' Jack said. 'He was lying all along.'

'Please don't give me that,' she said. 'I can't stand mashed potato.'

Activity 2

Copy out the sentences below and insert the necessary speech punctuation.

SPAG

1. That's the doctor, said the woman behind the desk. He's back now and will be with you soon.
2. Let go of the rope, warned the leader, or you will hurt yourself.
3. What time is it? I asked. Can we have dinner yet?

Every time a new speaker says something you should start a new paragraph. For example:

'It's not possible,' said James.

'That's what I said,' agreed Harry, 'but he is convinced he can do it.'

'We've got to stop him,' James urged.

Activity 3

Copy out the following text and correct the punctuation and paragraphing.

SPAG

How are you getting into town? asked my mum. I'm going to catch the bus with Sam, I replied. I'm going shopping myself later, she said. It won't be for a while but I can give you both a lift back if you like? Maybe, I said, I'll see what time we're thinking of setting off and give you a ring. No problem, I'll have my phone on me. Mum replied. Don't leave it in the car like you usually do, I joked. As if I would! she smiled.

Stretch

Find a piece of your own writing where you have used direct speech and highlight any mistakes you made. Next, rewrite the incorrect speech accurately.