

Extracts and exercises for oral comprehension, dictation and composition

1. *An extract from 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens*

It was cold, bleak, biting weather and he could hear the people in the court outside, go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already—it had not been light all day—and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- Say in one short sentence what the paragraph is about.
- How many complete sentences are there in this paragraph?
- What in this extract tells you that the story is set a long time ago?
- What three actions tell you that the people were cold?
- What does the writer mean when he describes the fog as 'so dense without'?
- Can you find a metaphor in the last line?
- Can you find two examples of alliteration in the first sentence?
- What do you think is the most memorable image (or, what can you picture most clearly when you read the passage)?

b) Study the first sentence of the extract carefully, then write it from dictation.

c) Compose one or two sentences of your own describing the weather today and how the people outside in the street are behaving.

2. *An extract from 'The Mermaid' by Hans Christian Anderson*

Far out at sea the water is as blue as the bluest cornflower, and as clear as the clearest crystal; but it is very deep, too deep for any cable to fathom, and if many steeples were piled on the top of one another they would not reach from the bed of the sea to the surface of the water. It is down there that the Mermen live. Now don't imagine that there are only bare white sands at the bottom; oh no! the most wonderful trees and plants grow there, with such flexible stalks and leaves, that at the slightest motion of the water they move just as if they were alive. All the fish, big and little, glide among the branches just as, up here, birds glide through the air. The palace of the Merman King lies in the very deepest part; its walls are of coral and the long pointed windows of the clearest amber, but the roof is made of mussel shells which open and shut with the lapping of the water. This has a lovely effect, for there are gleaming pearls in every shell, any one of which would be the pride of a queen's crown.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- How many complete sentences are there in this paragraph?
- Say in one short sentence what the paragraph is about.
- Find two similes in the first sentence.

- What are the roof, windows and walls of the palace made from?
- What one word does the writer use to describe the action of both birds and fishes?
- How does the writer make it seem as if he is talking directly to you when you read his words?

b) Study the opening sentence then write it from dictation

c) Compose one or two sentences of your own describing you can see from your window (perhaps a field or your lawn or the sky). Try to use at least one simile.

3. *An extract from 'David Copperfield' by Charles Dickens*

It was the completest and most desirable bedroom ever seen - in the stern of the vessel; with a little window, where the rudder used to go through; a little looking-glass, just the right height for me, nailed against the wall, and framed with oyster-shells; a little bed, which there was just room enough to get into; and a nosegay of seaweed in a blue mug on the table. The walls were whitewashed as white as milk, and the patchwork counterpane made my eyes quite ache with its brightness. One thing I particularly noticed in this delightful house, was the smell of fish; which was so searching, that when I took out my pocket-handkerchief to wipe my nose, I found it smelt exactly as if it had wrapped up a lobster.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- How many complete sentences are there in this paragraph?
- Say in one short sentence what the paragraph is about.
- What is the most remarkable thing about this room, which we are told in the opening sentence?
- Which two types of decoration are unusual (and connected to the sea)?
- What does the word stern mean? And the word rudder? Counterpane?
- How does the writer give a clear impression of the size of the room?
- Can you find a simile?

b) Study the final sentence carefully then write it from dictation.

c) Compose one or two sentences describing some aspect of your bedroom. Use at least one simile.

4. *An extract from 'David Copperfield' by Charles Dickens*

Poor Traddles! In a tight sky-blue suit that made his arms and legs like German sausages, or roly-poly puddings, he was the merriest and most miserable of all the boys. He was always being caned - I think he was caned every day that half-year, except one holiday Monday when he was only ruler'd on both hands - and was always going to write to his uncle about it, and never did. After laying his head on the desk for a little while, he would cheer up, somehow, begin to laugh again, and draw skeletons all over his slate, before his eyes were dry. I used at first to wonder what comfort Traddles found in drawing skeletons; and for some time looked upon him as a sort of hermit, who reminded himself by those symbols of mortality that caning couldn't last for ever. But I believe he only did it because they were easy, and didn't want any features.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- How many complete sentences are there in this paragraph?
- Say in one short sentence what the paragraph is about.
- What odd thing do we learn about Traddles personality on the opening sentence?
- Can you find a simile in the opening line?
- How does the writer make you feel towards Traddles in this extract?
- What are the 'symbols of mortality' to which the writer refers?
- What is a hermit?
- Can you explain what the writer first thinks is the reason for Traddles drawing skeletons, and then explain what he eventually decides is the real reason?

b) Study the opening sentences carefully then write them from dictation (from 'Poor Traddles! In... boys'.)

c) Compose one or two sentences describing a friend of yours in an amusing way. Try to give some idea both of what he looks like and what his personality is like.

5. *An extract from 'David Copperfield' by Charles Dickens*

My aunt was a tall, hard-featured lady, but by no means ill-looking. There was an inflexibility in her face, in her voice, in her gait and carriage, amply sufficient to account for the effect she had made upon a gentle creature like my mother; but her features were rather handsome than otherwise, though unbending and austere. I particularly noticed that she had a very quick, bright eye. Her hair, which was grey, was arranged in two plain divisions, under what I believe would be called a mob-cap; I mean a cap, much more common then than now, with side-pieces fastening under the chin. Her dress was of a lavender colour, and perfectly neat; but scantily made, as if she desired to be as little encumbered as possible. I remember that I thought it, in form, more like a riding-habit with the superfluous skirt cut off, than anything else. She wore at her side a gentleman's gold watch, if I might judge from its size and make, with an appropriate chain and seals; she had some linen at her throat not unlike a shirt-collar, and things at her wrists like little shirt-wristbands.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- How many complete sentences are there in this paragraph?
- Say in one short sentence what the paragraph is about.
- Is the aunt ugly? How do you know?
- Which other word used here means very much the same as inflexible? Is this inflexibility only in the way her face does not move much, or does it express something about her personality too?
- What colour is meant by lavender? What is meant by scantily?
- What does the manner of her dress tell us about her personality (clue: 'as little encumbered as possible')?
- What in this description makes the aunt sound quite masculine?

b) Study the sentence, '*Her dress was of a lavender colour, and perfectly neat; but scantily made, as if she desired to be as little encumbered as possible.*' Write it from dictation.

c) Compose one or two sentences describing a female member of your family. Try to show how her appearance (the way she chooses to dress) tells you something about her personality.

6. An extract from 'Alice through the Looking Glass' by Lewis Carroll

The Knight looked surprised at the question. 'What does it matter where my body happens to be?' he said. 'My mind goes on working all the same. In fact, the more head downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things.'

'Now the cleverest thing of the sort that I ever did,' he went on after a pause, 'was inventing a new pudding during the meat-course.'

'In time to have it cooked for the next course?' said Alice. "Well that was quick work, certainly!"

'Well, not the *next* course,' the Knight said in a slow thoughtful tone: 'no, certainly not the next *course*.'

'Then it would have to be the next day. I suppose you wouldn't have two pudding-courses in one dinner?'

'Well, not the *next* day,' the Knight repeated as before: 'not the next *day*. In fact,' he went on, holding his head down, and his voice getting lower and lower, 'I don't believe that pudding ever WAS cooked! In fact, I don't believe that pudding ever *will* be cooked! And yet it was a very clever pudding to invent.'

'What did you mean it to be made of?' Alice asked, hoping to cheer him up, for the poor Knight seemed quite low-spirited about it.

'It began with blotting paper,' the Knight answered with a groan.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- What do we call a conversation between two people? (a dialogue)
- Look at the way this passage is structured. What makes it easy to see when a new person is speaking? How might this be useful if you were trying to read the passage aloud to someone?
- Find all the words you can which are alternatives for 'said' (there are four). Can you think of any others which might have been used instead?
- The knight places an emphasis on certain words. How is this shown in the printed text? You can show it in your own writing by using capital letters.
- Study the third sentence spoken by the knight and use it to answer these questions: if direct speech is split into two parts, which punctuation mark is needed before the first closing speech marks and before the second opening speech marks? Is a capital letter needed to open the second part of the speech?
- Study Alice's first piece of dialogue ('In time...') and use it to answer these questions: if direct speech is split into two parts but the first part is a completed sentence, does the information about the speaker need to end in a full stop? Is a capital letter needed to open the second part of the speech?

b) Study the two sentences given above and write them from dictation. Make sure you keep to exactly the same structure.

('Now the cleverest thing of the sort that I ever did,' he went on after a pause, 'was inventing a new pudding during the meat-course.'

'In time to have it cooked for the next course?' said Alice. "Well that was quick work, certainly!")

c) Write a short dialogue in which you describe to a friend a new, unusual type of pudding which you have created, and he responds to your idea. In at least one person's speech, split the speech into two parts. If you can, try to use an emphasised word by putting it in capitals. Be careful in using speech marks and punctuation correctly, and remember to start new speech on a new line.

7. An extract from 'Rab and His Friends' by Dr. John Brown

I wish you could have seen him. There are no such dogs now. He belonged to a lost tribe. As I have said, he was brindled, and gray like Rubislaw granite; his hair short, hard, and close, like a lion's; his body thick-set, like a little bull,—a sort of compressed Hercules of a dog. He must have been ninety pounds' weight, at the least.

He had a large blunt head; his muzzle black as night, his mouth blacker than any night, a tooth or two—being all he had—gleaming out of his jaws of darkness. His head was scarred with the records of old wounds, a sort of series of fields of battle all over it; one eye out, one ear cropped close. The remaining eye had the power of two, and above it, and in constant communication with it, was a tattered rag of an ear, which was forever unfurling itself, like an old flag; and then that bud of a tail, about one inch long, if it could in any sense be said to be long, being as broad as long - the mobility, the instantaneousness of that bud were very funny and surprising, and its expressive twinklings and winkings, the intercommunications between the eye, the ear, and it, were of the oddest and swiftest.

Rab had the dignity and simplicity of great size; and, having fought his way all along the road to absolute supremacy, he was as mighty in his own line as Julius Caesar or the Duke of Wellington, and had the gravity of all great fighters.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- Find three similes in the first paragraph.
- What does the word 'brindled' mean?
- The writer describes Rab as '*A compressed Hercules of a dog*'. Do you think it is good image? If so, how does this image help you picture Rab?
- Describe in your own words what was remarkable about the dog's size, his teeth and his eyes.
- Why were the quick movement and expressiveness of Rab's tail so surprising?
- What does the phrase 'absolute supremacy' mean?
- What impression does the writer give by comparing the dog to Hercules, Wellington and Julius Caesar?

b) Study the last sentence and write it from dictation.

c) Write a few sentences describing a dog or any other animal you choose (it does not have to be a real animal you actually know). Make him sound odd and remarkable but realistic. If you can, compare him to one or more famous people whom he in some way resembles.

8. An extract from 'More William' by Richmal Crompton.

Something in the window of a house he passed caught his eye and he stopped suddenly. It was a stuffed bird under a glass case. Now that was something like a hobby, stuffing dead animals! He wouldn't mind having that for a hobby. And it was quite quiet. He could do it while Uncle George was resting. And it must be quite easy. The first thing to do of course was to find a dead animal. Any old thing would do to begin on. A dead cat or dog. He would do bigger ones like bears and lions later on. He spent nearly an hour in a fruitless search for a dead cat or dog. He searched the ditches on both sides of the road and several gardens. He began to have a distinct sense of grievance against the race of cats and dogs in general for not dying in his vicinity. At the end of the hour he found a small dead frog. It was very dry and shrivelled, but it was certainly a dead frog and would do to begin on. He took it home in his pocket. He wondered what they did first in stuffing dead

animals. He'd heard something about "tannin" them. But what was "tannin'," and how did one get it? Then he remembered suddenly having heard Ethel talk about the "tannin" in tea. So that was all right. The first thing to do was to get some tea. He went to the drawing-room. It was empty, but upon the table near the fire was a tea-tray and two cups. Evidently his mother and sister had just had tea there. He put the frog at the bottom of a cup and carefully filled the cup with tea from the teapot. Then he left it to soak and went out into the garden.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- What is William's new hobby?
- What gave him the idea?
- What does he feel grieved about? How does the writer make this humorous?
- What mistake does he make thinking of 'tannin' What word has he mistaken for 'tannin', and what do both words really mean in relation to animals and tea?
- This paragraph is written in a very informal style. In one place, a group of words (a phrase) is used instead of a proper sentence, though it is given a full stop and a capital letter. Can you find it? It is in the first half of the paragraph.
- Why do you think the author writes in such an informal, easy going way?

b) Study the first three sentences and write from dictation.

c) Earlier in this story we are told that William very much disliked his Uncle George who wanted William to be "a gentle boy of exquisite courtesy and of intellectual pursuits." Consequently, William was always looking for a way to play tricks on his uncle. Bearing this in mind, write a few sentences to conclude the story, trying to keep to a similar style.

9. An extract from 'Quills the Indifferent' by C.G.D Roberts

Quills little guessed how often, as he was gnawing complacently at his meal of hemlock bark, he would be watched longingly by savage and hungry eyes. But had he guessed it, his indifference would have remained quite unruffled. He had all he could eat, and a warm hole to sleep in, and why should he borrow trouble?

But one biting December afternoon, Quills complacency got something of a shock. Just as he was crawling luxuriously into his den, one of those great horned owls which are feathered Apaches of the wilderness, came winnowing low overhead on wings as silent as sleep. His round, staring eyes caught sight of Quills' hindquarters just vanishing into the hole. There was no time to note exactly what it was, and hunger had made the great bird rash even beyond his wont. He swooped instantly and struck his terrible talons into the tail and haunch. With a loud hiss, like that of an angry cat, he let go precipitately, and fairly bounced up into the air again, both murderous talons struck deep with spines which seemed to burn into his sinews. He flew in haste to the nearest branch, steadied himself with difficulty on the perch and set himself to the painful task of plucking out the torments with his beak, holding up first one claw and then the other.

a) Read the passage aloud then study it together. Here are some ideas for discussion:

- What kind of animal is Quills?
- Why does the writer say Quills would have 'remained indifferent' even if he had known how many creatures wanted to eat him?
- What were the only two things Quills required for a comfortable life?

- Why did the bird attack without looking more carefully first?
- Can you find a simile in this paragraph? Can you explain what it means?
- What does the author mean by describing owls as 'feathered Apaches of the wilderness'? Is this a simile or a metaphor?
- What do the following words mean: *unruffled*, *complacency*, *precipitately*?

b) Study the first two sentences and write from dictation.

c) Write a few sentences describing the moment when a cat pounces on a hedgehog. Try to use a simile and/or a metaphor.