

How to use supporting detail

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Dance with a Giraffe” by Christine Jurzykowski**

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 don't 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 you are writing about; 2) reference to details in the original text; 3) inclusion of details from your own 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 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.

- The author has used a first-person narration technique to get us involved in her story. It starts with general diary-type entries about her world travels. Then we see how she started to be concerned about animals. By the time she is telling us about the death of the giraffe she is even more personal. "I knew he would die soon. I knew he knew it too." The author reveals her inner feelings and the special link she has with the giraffe. "This is what we shared. The knowing." All this makes the emotional effect stronger, and the "I" narration helps.

Acceptable Unacceptable

2. We see the author travelled a lot when she was younger and how she came to appreciate animals. She did not like New York all that much and so she moved to Texas and a ranch where there were many animals. Old Nick came to them from Kansas and when he got sick she took care of him. The giraffe was dying but she took care of it in the last days. She felt very attached. She helped him until the end and the death reminded her of her links with the natural world.

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

3. It is clear Jurzykowski felt very close to the dying giraffe. The death of this animal becomes for her a symbol of the unique relationship between animals and humans. The whole point of the essay is to communicate her idea that we all need to care, that animals know we care, that we are all a part of the wonderful natural world. This is what the quote “You are my friend, you are safe here, you will be taken care of” means. It also goes beyond living things. If you take care of your car, keep it clean and do tune-ups, it will last longer. If you do same with your clothes and stay careful how you clean them, they will last longer and you can save money. Using soft soaps can help.

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

4. Anyone who has ever owned a pet can truly relate to this essay. When she describes in detail the death of the giraffe it reminded me of the loss of my dog when I was sixteen. I had raised my Collie since I was seven years old. When I was sick, he would sleep by my bed and when I looked in his eyes I could see he knew I was suffering. When he broke a leg once, he could not move for weeks and we all took care of him at home. When he got better, he was an even closer friend. When he got sick, we tried to keep him at home but it was not possible. I was with him until the end at the vet’s place and it was the saddest day of my life. Like the giraffe in the essay, it is evident that, } many animals are quite able to appreciate our care.

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

5. The author has used short sentences. The narration is not third omniscient or third objective, but first-person. There are no rhetorical questions and argumentative techniques in evidence. There is no enumeration. There is no repetition and the setting is in Brazil, Paris, New York, Kansas, and Texas and in the barn too. For example she says “Giraffes sleep very little, usually twenty minutes at a time.” The tone is clear and the level of language symbolic most of the time. She means what she says.

Acceptable_____ Unacceptable_____

Answer key

1. **Acceptable.** The paragraph starts by saying it will discuss the essay's very personal narrative structure and the narrator-author and that is exactly what it does. A couple of good details (examples) are used in the quotations from the essay to illustrate. The quotations are relevant to a discussion of the use of narration in the original essay. The paragraph's topic sentence focuses on the text's personal narrative, and the rest of the paragraph considers details that show the personal emphasis of the text arising from the use of first-person narration.
2. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph has some very general details, but it is really just a one-paragraph general summary of major events in the essay. As a #2 content-summary paragraph it might be acceptable, but as an analysis-reaction-response to the events portrayed in the essay, it is unacceptable and not detailed enough. It is very general overall and brings in nothing from the writer. The paragraph takes no distance from the text and fails to use details from the text to back up what the student writer is saying in response to that text.
3. **Unacceptable.** The first four sentences of the paragraph work well. The paragraph begins with a promising claim linking the giraffe as symbol to a central theme of the text but the examples of the car and clothes are really off-topic, irrelevant evidence. The essay is all about living beings, not material things. The essay is all about living things and the natural world, not the commercial world. Personal references must relate to the central ideas in the original essay.
4. **Acceptable.** Here the student has used a long personal anecdote from her own experience to identify with the themes of the Jurzykowski essay. The dog story represents an appropriate anecdotal response to the essay and deals with the same themes as the essay. This presumes, however, that this paragraph is only part of the student's essay, because the student's essay is not OK if it is only about her dog. One such paragraph of personal supporting detail is acceptable as long as the student's other paragraphs focus fully on the text.
5. **Unacceptable.** While this might seem to be detailed information about literary techniques used, the examples are irrelevant. The techniques mentioned are mainly those not used, and we are not concerned with what is not used. The way the techniques are dealt with here makes the paragraph full of irrelevant evidence and bad references. One should limit oneself to two or three techniques at most, and demonstrate how they are used, not simply provide a list of techniques used or not used.