

How to use supporting detail

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Powder” by Tobias Wolff**

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; 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 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. Wolff has used first-person narration well in the story to see everything from the boy's perspective. He seems to be a teenager but he must be at least 17 or 18 because his father sneaks him into a bar to see a jazz artist. On the other hand, he says things like "I stuck to him like white on rice" which reveals a sensitive or perhaps older narrator. Could he be an older person looking back, something like James Joyce does in his "Araby" story? On the other hand, the son makes typical teenager comments like "I decided to stop moping and began to enjoy myself." Is this the boy of back then or an older boy now talking?

Acceptable Unacceptable

2. The story is about skiing and a drive home in the snow. It is about the snow on the ski hill and the snow on the highway. It is about the joy of skiing down a hill on skis and then in a car. It is about a boy and his father travelling together. It is about people and how they do or do not get along. Most of all, it is about love, especially love of sports. They just can't leave. "We got in several last runs," says the narrator.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

3. "Powder" presents a comparison between powder skiing and powder driving. Not everyone has had the chance to experience skiing through powder snow, but most people (in Canada at least) have had the chance to drive in snowy conditions. I have been skiing for years and nothing beats the thrill of tearing down a run in knee-deep powder. It is the same when driving, although you have to be super careful because you must control the car. You also have to be careful on a steep slope when skiing. This is what he means when he says "If you haven't driven fresh powder, you haven't driven" at the end.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

4. The father clearly has an unrealistic appreciation of his driving capabilities. "I'm a great driver," he says. He thinks he is a Gilles Villeneuve but he forgets there is a foot of snow on the road. He does realize that he is driving an old bazoo and that it will be quite a test. He always wanted to be a race driver. Nothing can beat the thrill of doing 180 on a race track. He says he has "an old heap" and that they had better be careful because it might break down. The boy even says the car is "jerky."

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

5. Nothing is more important than family and when there are family gatherings you just have to make sure and get there no matter what happens. This is what "Powder" is about mainly. The boy says "we should have left before." The father says "Your mother will never forgive me for this." It is important for both of them not to miss an important family gathering. They are not going to a weekly family brunch or a come-if-you-like type of party. The mother is counting on their presence and as important as it is for the father to want to bond with his son, it is even more important that they make it home right away. I once had a brother travel 2,000 miles for my birthday party. Nothing beats family.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Answer key

1. **Acceptable.** The paragraph starts with a sentence explaining how it will discuss the story's narrative structure and the narrator-character, and that is indeed exactly what it does. Good details from the story are used to illustrate. The quotations used are relevant to a discussion of the author's use of his narrator in the story because they reveal things about the author that hint at his real age. The way the boy reacts to events in the story is important. There is even a comparison with the use of narration in a story by Joyce.
2. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph has some details but it loses focus due to excessive repetition, general comments, and even a quotation used out of context. It says a lot but not much, if anything at all, about what is really happening in the story between the characters. It makes some broad claims about the themes of the story but does not focus on specific points in the text which support those claims.
3. **Acceptable.** The comments here bring in some appropriate personal details from the student and relate them to the story. The student relates the skiing in the story to the thrill of personal skiing experiences. The quotation is well chosen and the paragraph deals with the title of the story and allows the student to bring in a relevant personal experience. The student identifies with the boy in the story because they both know the thrill of "powder skiing," where the snow is light and fresh and makes for great skiing.
4. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph totally misinterprets the quotations used and brings in irrelevant details about race cars. The father says he is a good driver only to give confidence to his son, there are only six inches of snow, the wipers are jerky and not the car, and when he says "old heap" he is being ironic and affectionate—it is a new car that he loves. Neither character sees himself in a race.
5. **Acceptable.** The importance-of-family theme is the topic of the paragraph and both the quotations used and personal incidents mentioned are on topic. The story may be seen to be as much about the exciting drive home through the snow as about why they must do it. These are two acceptable main ideas and themes from the story. There are even hints of a family reconciliation: "I want us to be together again." Like many stories, this one has more than one main idea. Appropriate details are used. The student refers to elements presenting the importance of family as a theme in the story and then brings in a personal situation that echoes that theme.