

## How to use supporting detail

### **Before you begin**

#### **What you need:**

Related text: **“Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

### **Reminder**

#### **What is valid supporting detail?**

Valid supporting detail is detail used 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 or 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 will use these details to back up the points you make 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. Lewis Thomas has an interesting list of wonders that he has come up with. First we see bacteria, then a beetle species, then a virus, then a cell and then a termite. The last two he mentions are a child and the planet Earth. Earth makes him wonder most of all: "Of all the celestial bodies within reach or view, as far as we can see, out to the edge, the most wonderful and most marvellous and mysterious is turning out to be our planet earth." Thomas finds our planet amazing, a marvel, and something that really makes him wonder. It is alive and strange at the same time, and can keep us awake just thinking about it.

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

2. At one point Thomas mentioned the termite as one of his wonders. Termites often destroy buildings and I once lived in an apartment where we had termites and the place had to be fumigated. Termites are just like cockroaches and when you are infested with them it is impossible to get rid of them. Not even good insect repellents work.

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

3. Thomas tells us that humans, starting with the child, are simply amazing creatures. As children grow they learn, almost naturally, to work with others, but only in small groups. When the groups become too large problems often occur. Thomas says that "... when we gather in very large numbers, as in the modern nation-states, we seem capable of levels of folly..." We are like nations, where today we can see that even the strongest nations (i.e., Russia, USA) are having lots of problems, like Russia in Chechnya or the US in Iraq. The larger nations also pollute the most.

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

4. The olfactory cells mentioned by the author in his explanation of the fourth wonder allow us to have a sense of smell. It is like the cells that allow us to see and hear and taste. The problem is that as we grow old, the smell cells start to die and eventually we will no longer be able to smell, because the brain cells that are connected to the nose will die as well and then we all lose our sense of smell. Thomas says "cells wear out and die." Cells even have moods; all this makes cells amazing.

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

5. Thomas describes a virus that kills some animals like sheep and goats. It makes these animals senile, like humans suffering from dementia. The virus can take a long time before acting, like it takes years to diagnose breast cancer or how it seems like forever when you are in the dentist's office waiting for your appointment. He says a virus has no DNA but does have lots of protein and it is too small to detect.

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

# Answer key

1. **Unacceptable.** While at first glance this might seem a good summary paragraph, you should note it is no more than obvious summary and offers facts but not much more. The quotation is obvious, probably too obvious. The comments on the quotation are a direct repetition of what the quotation says. The final part tries to paraphrase but uses too much of the language of the text without actually quoting it and without a clear indication it is paraphrase.
2. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph has details the student has brought from his own experiences but the comments on termites and roaches are off-topic. What amazes Thomas is how termites communicate and work together, not how they are like roaches or what damage they can do. A more appropriate personal reference might discuss a childhood ant colony or consider how in an office everyone needs to work together.
3. **Acceptable.** Here the comments key in and centre on the main ideas of the original essay the student is responding to and what Thomas says about the human species as wonder number seven. The quotation chosen reflects Thomas's concerns, and the effective analogy used by the student goes along with what Thomas seems to be saying and even applies Thomas's idea to current political events.
4. **Unacceptable.** The paragraph misinterprets Thomas's comments about wonder number four. The author of the original essay says they "wear out, die, and are replaced by brand new cells" and this whole regeneration process is what is amazing. He does not say we will lose our sense of smell at all. The paragraph has picked up on some details, but misinterprets significantly what Thomas is saying, and has then even used a faulty interpretation to bring in other ideas. The student goes off-topic because of misinterpretation and faulty use of details from the essay.
5. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph attempts to pick up on details Thomas uses to describe the scrapie virus, but rather than paraphrasing, uses the same language Thomas uses. Even the paraphrasing has errors because Thomas actually says no one has discovered its DNA, not that it doesn't have DNA. The student's inappropriate personal references do not reflect the time element Thomas mentions and the references are off-topic and irrelevant.