

A GUIDE ON COMPOSITION WRITING

INTRODUCTION

Composition writing is an important component in the KCPE examination Primary English Paper. In fact it constitutes over 40% of what a candidate gets in the English paper. It goes without saying that highlighting on the various skills, principles and challenges in writing a composition would be very useful to KCPE examination candidates

What is a Composition?

The answer to this question varies from person to person depending on theme and areas of specialization. But as for our case, based on K.C.P.E examination, a composition is a combination of thoughts and ideas put down in a logical manner. A composition can either be fictitious or factual depending on the title given (rubric).

Types of Compositions.

There are a number of composition types covered under the primary school curriculum. The main ones include;-

- (i) Narratives
- (ii) Stories
- (iii) Letters- friendly and official
- (iv) Recipes.
- (v) Reports
- (vi) Minutes
- (vii) Dialogues
- (viii) Filling forms.

NB:- *In all the themes covered in the English syllabus, the last exercises introduces a learner into articulating what he or she has learnt orally into continuous writing. This dictates the need for proper teaching and syllabus coverage to enhance the acquisition of language and writing skills*

When does a child begin writing a composition?

The answer to this question is not fixed. It all depends on the interpretation. But one thing is certain. That composition writing begins as soon as child begins to think critically and recall what he or she sees, learns, hears and feels. This should tell us that a child begins 'writing' composition even before joining a formal system of education. In formal education, a pupil is introduced to letters then to words and subsequently sentences. It is the combination of sentences that bring about a paragraph and many paragraphs bring out a story. Of course the paragraphs should be centered on a given goal lesson or subject. They should also make sense to both the writer and the reader otherwise the whole process could be futile. The writers

thoughts should come out strongly, in fact show me a piece of good writing and I shall tell you the mind of the writer

Writing a Composition.

Writing a composition depends on a number of factors some of which are answers to the following questions

1. **Is it a guided composition?**
This is mainly done in class 3,4 and 5
2. **Is it a topical composition?**

This type of composition is some what restrictive in that the pupil is expected to develop the story from a certain angle or point of view - Much is expected since the facts are known

Examples of topical compositions, given in form of a composition title are;

The August Holiday
A wedding Ceremony
A tree planting day
Soil Erosion

3. **Is it a started composition or an ended composition?**

This has been the mode of K.C.P.E testing of composition since its inception. I don't wish to suggest that a change is impossible. All what is stipulated in the curriculum is examinable and therefore candidates should practice on all the areas.

NB:- In most of the K.C.P.E composition tasks, the topic is often open ended. This means that a learner has a wide scope of what to write about. Below are the beginning of compositions for various years in K.C.P.E.

These and many other questions dictated how a composition should be written. However, one major factor in writing a composition is one's preparedness. Think critically on what you have to write about and list down the main points.

This may sound unusual but unless a person on a journey knows where he is, where he wants to go and how far it is from his initial position, the journey may not take place. The writer can ease the writing of a composition if an attempt is made to answer questions such as what?, where?, when? How? and so? as relates to the composition to be written. For instance if one was to write a composition on the topic **A Wedding Ceremony**, the following questions can go a long way in making a pupil focus on the topic,

1. *Who is wedding?*
2. *Where is the wedding taking place?*
3. *When is the wedding taking place?*
4. *How are the preparations before the wedding?*
5. *What is your take or involvement in the wedding?*

6. *What were the emerging issues during the wedding?*
7. *So how did it end and what was the day like?*

A good composition should therefore have the following notable characteristics:

- (i) **An interesting introduction** – one that captivates the reader and acts as a gateway to the writers thoughts. It should be short, clear and interesting.
- (ii) **A body** – that brings together the writers thoughts and ideas logically and must be explicit/elaborate.
- (iii) **A conclusion** - This captures the lesson experienced in the whole plot. It brings out the writers feeling about the whole story or sums up the story. At times it leaves the reader to guess the outcome of an episode.

Basing on the title – **A wedding ceremony** – the introduction should be such that it touches on the people wedding, the place or venue and the preparation in place.

The body should concentrate much on the ceremony itself- from the service, the officiating, and the signing of the certificate, the cutting of the cake, the eating process and the giving of gifts.

The conclusion should highlight the general feeling of the ceremony and the departure from the venue. The attitude of the writer is felt here. Where need be, a proverb is best placed to conclude a story.

SKILLS IN COMPOSITION WRITING.

Below are a number of skills necessary in writing a good composition.

(i) Legibility

First and foremost, a piece of writing must be appealing to both the writer and the reader. The teacher for that matter looks at the level of legibility as a merit. An illegible (one that cannot be read) composition is bound to score less compared to the former. Let your lettering be correct. Some pupils do not write certain letters correctly which bring about some confusion. For example a pupil can write letter **a** look like letter **Q**, letter **r** that looks like **v**. Let your letters be very clear. The rubbing of any letter or word should be such that the marks do not overlap causing illegibility of the intended word. Avoid crossing a word and writing another one above it.

The spacing of words should be uniform and not too close neither too far apart. The letters if possible should follow a particular pattern preferably erect and should be large enough.

(ii) Fluency

A script should be such that ideas tend to flow in a logical manner. Many candidates find themselves mixing up ideas. For example, what should have been the introduction comes last and what should have been the conclusion comes first. In the case of events, we would expect

a certain sequence of proceedings that do not seem to overlap. Fluency is also affected by ideas that do not seem to fully develop or come in quick successions. Such a composition is termed as being “jerky”.

For example, in reference to a composition on **A wedding ceremony**, it is not in order to have the arrival of bridal team coming first, then followed by writing about the venue and then jumping onto the party and then the signing of the certificate. In such a case the flow is hampered. Another element that hampers flow in composition writing is the mixing of tenses and wrong structures that tend to confuse the reader. Punctuation is yet another area that affects the fluency of a composition as we shall see later under challenges in composition writing.

(iii) Accuracy

This includes all the other elements of language in terms of word agreement, correct use of words, phrases, proverbs, paragraphing, and punctuation and so on. What hinder accuracy are the numerous errors displayed in the scripts. These will be highlighted later.

(iv) Creativity

This is a skill that has to be developed through interest and being dynamics while interacting with the course content as well as the immediate environment. It involves coming up with a unique composition that use correct but unfamiliar words, expressions and creates suspense - You keep yearning for more when the story ends. Involvement of all the senses in a composition makes it interesting, varied and the reader relates well with it. Creating scenes within a scene but still keeping the flow can be one way of expressing creativity.- for example on a composition on **sports**, a writer could create a scene within the main scene about sports where perhaps a player is about to score but a mad man dashes into the field as if from hell and picks the ball after which he runs with it into the maize plantation, or The guest of honour in a harambee meeting thanks the audience and volunteers to pray for the hefty collection only to find the money gone after.

(v) Originality

Our learning environment has become affected by an attitude of laxity. Most learners have a tendency of copying work or cramming or memorizing passages, stories or paragraphs from the many sample composition in textbooks in order to impress the teachers. This hinders originality of a composition.

This is a practice that should be avoided at all cost. Candidates should realize that those who mark KCPE composition are teachers who have come across all those compositions in revision books. They can therefore tell when one writes such a composition that has been crammed from books.

COMMON CHALLENGES IN COMPOSITION WRITING.

(a) Mother tongue influence

A learner first interacts with his or her language before getting introduced to English. This has an effect on the writing of the child unless thorough work is done to alleviate this. A good example is:- ‘*today is today*’ from the Kiswahili saying *Leo ni leo msema kesho ni mwongo*. It may sound proper English but that is far from the truth. Other examples of instance where mother tongue interference occur are;

- *My brother removes job in Nairobi, instead of, **My brother works in Nairobi***
- *The tisha told us to go out, Instead of **The teacher told us to go out***
- *We ate lice rast night, Instead of, **We ate rice last night***
- *Where is my pook? Instead of **Where is my book?***

(b) Spelling errors:

This is a very common problem with most pupils. Some words such as *tomorrow, surprised, beautiful, received, until, writing* among other are often not spelled correctly. Teachers can give dictation to pupils as a remedy to this problem. Pupils on the other hand are advised to read widely. Looking up new words in a dictionary is another sure way to arrest the problem.

(b) Mixing of speech

For example, When *the teacher came in he asked us are you going to the show? We said Yes and we boarded the bus.* The underlined words were to be punctuated. The correct way of writing it would be- *When the teacher came in, he asked us “**Are you going to the show?**” We said “**Yes**” and we boarded the bus.* Alternatively, it can be written as a reported speech to read- *When the teacher came, he asked us whether we were to go to the show. We told him that we were interested and we boarded the bus.*

Pupils should learn how to write in the correct speech. This is only possible if they practice writing compositions which should be marked and errors noted by the teacher corrected.

(c) Use of short form

This is another area that challenges a number of pupils. KCPE candidates are advised to be careful when writing short forms of the following words among others

Word	short form
Cannot	can’t
Shall not	shan’t
	Is not isn’t
Will not	won’t
	Could not couldn’t
	They are they’re
	Would not wouldn’t

Here is an example of a sentence with short form of some words. *We couldn’t go home so the teacher asked us to remain in class. He wouldn’t let us play.* Unless in direct speech, contracted form of verbs should be avoided.

(d) Wrong use of vocabulary, expression, phrase

I will use the example below to illustrate wrong use of vocabulary, expression and phrase.

I occasionally without wasting time left the hall and went straight to the office. Within a snitch of time, I was holding a convocation with the principal.

In the above example, the word **occasionally** refers to frequency and therefore does not sound well with the sentence which is on time. *In a nick of time, within a stitch of time or in a fraction of a second* would be the right expression to use. The writer must have held a **conversation** with the principal or rather a dialogue.

(f) Omission and commission

Some errors are mastered and unless revision is carried out, they will keep recurring year after year. Such errors are such as *return back, enter in, discuss about, congratulate for reached* at among others are common. The additional prepositions are wrongly placed which distorts the rule of the English language.

Another challenge here is joining words that should not be joined. For example

Iam instead of **I am**

Infact instead of **In fact**

Infront instead of **In front**

Or separating a word that one for example

Can not instead of **Cannot**

every thing instead of **everything**.

my self instead of **myself**

There are also errors of omission such as in the two sentences below

1. My uncle lives in USA.
2. The monitor put some on the table

The correct way of writing the sentences would be

- (i) My uncle lives in **the** USA.
- (ii) The monitor put some **books** on the table.

The underlined words were omitted

(g) Tenses

This is a major concern in the writing and speaking of English. We more often than not write what we speak and with a lot of broken English carrying the day, remedial measures must be put in place. It is not surprising to find a writer with the kind of writing shown below :

- My mother take coffee and I took tea.
- We eat ugali and meat and then we go home.
- My uncle said that we can go swimming that afternoon.
- She wake up hurriedly and shout for help
- I likes eating rice and meat

The correct way of writing the above sentences is as shown below. Note the underlined words which were not correctly used earlier.

- My mother **took** coffee **but** I took tea. took but to
- We **ate** ugali and meat and then we **went** home.
- My uncle said that we **could** go swimming that afternoon.
- She **woke** up hurriedly and **shouted** for help.
- I **like** eating rice and meat. I like eating rice and meat.

(h) Poor sentence construction:

A sentence is NOT a sentence unless it fulfills the grammatical rule. It would be ridiculous to say:

Me I always come to school early, the correct way should be- *I always come to school early.*

We are see that is not easy to go back home. The correct way should be- *We realize that it was not easy to go home.*

All visitors they could not believe. The correct way should be- *All visitors would not believe.*

That was the episode day to recall until I kick the bucket. The correct way should be- *That was an episode to recall until I kick the bucket or That was an unforgettable episode*

NB: It is wrong to have two pronouns or a noun and a pronoun in a sentence following each other.

(i) Punctuation errors

Many candidates either do not know the use of punctuation marks in writing or they simply ignore them. Emphasis need to be put in order to alleviate the vice. Some common punctuation errors involve wrong punctuation such as

- What a great day it was? Instead of *What a great day!*
- My brother's wives are coming today. This might sound ambiguous but reading through a composition, the writer might be referring to his two or three brothers' wives. To correct this,

the apostrophes should come after (s) so that the sentence reads- *my brother's wives are coming today.*

Mr. Nguri our teacher of English is absent today. Commas are, missing to separate the main idea from the additional statement. - This is very common. The correct way of writing is -*Mr. Nguri, our teacher of English, is absent today*

(j) Irrelevancy

This comes about when the writer deviates from the subject matter and goes on to write a story that has no relationship with the topic one supposed to write about. For example if one was writing on the topic **Sports**, it would be a grave mistake to go a head and ignore the subject and instead write about a kidnap ordeal or wedding. This is usually common among candidates who cram a given sample composition from books prior to a test.

Once again I would like to discourage this. There are instances where a whole class crams a given composition which they reproduce during the examination. If this happen during KCPE examination, chances of all the candidates being penalized is very high.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I wish to state that for a learner to be able to write an elaborate story, a lot of preparedness has to be done. The teacher has to inculcate the discipline of wide reading, research, use of the dictionary and the speaking of English. This enhances confidence in the learner which in turn creates a sense of determination in composition writing.

To the teacher,

The evaluation or making of composition should be objective. A teacher should target what to look for in a given composition. If for instance your aim is to look for spelling errors, do so without putting much emphasis on writing or any other aspect of language. This should be alternated every other time with emphasis on a different area. Since practice makes perfect, pupils should be made to write as many compositions as is practical.

As for the candidates, I wish to advise that you desist from lifting passage, stories or extract from past papers, newsletters, revision composition books or any other source but rather be creative in your own way. This does not mean that you should not borrow words, expressions, phrases, but copying a whole story hampers your own intellectual capability

Read the story below and underline the errors discussed earlier. There are more than thirty errors!

SAMPLE COMPOSITION.

I wake up very early in the morning and headed to the bathroom. I took a cold shower that left me as fresh as a cucumber. I took a few minutes at the dressing table before emerging looking elegant.

The table has been set. I sat comfortably and served myself. There were all sorts of delicacy ranging from sausages, bacon, egg not to mention toasted bread. In no time, I had gulped my scrumptious breakfast and washed it down with a glass of warm water. I was set for the long journey that awaited me- a tour in Tsavo National park.

The journey was to commence shortly before eight thirty. I walked the short distance from home to the local market centre where the Moi primary school bus was to pick up. To my utter amazement, Ochola, the monitor of our class, was already there. I joined him and congratulated him for his early arrival.

By quarter past eight almost everybody had arrived at the place except Kasuve who, as long as I could remember has never arrived to school earlier than eight. He was a renowned latecomer.

The bus negotiated a corner from the far end of the end of the market and halted at the bus stop area. We filed in as the class teacher Mr Nguri called the register. It was not until the driver ignited the engine that Kasuve was seen running towards the bus. As soon as he entered the bus it set off.

You may ask questions if you wish, the teacher said as the bus drove on and on. With its windscreen glittering as the sun shone on it was surprising to find that what seemed a day's journey took us not more than two hours to be there.