

2019 NAPLAN Topic (Years 3 & 5)

The Gate

Write a narrative (story) that involves a gate.

Who or what is on the other side of the gate? Is the gate open or closed?

Perhaps opening or getting past the gate leads your characters to something exciting or difficult.

Note: This exemplar was written by Jen McVeity, creator of the Seven Steps to Writing Success and the author of over 20 books. She wrote this in the exact time that all children receive to draft and submit their NAP writing test. We have not checked or changed Jen's spelling, grammar or punctuation – this example is exactly as she wrote it in the time allowed.

.....
Planning (3.5 minutes)

Writing (36 minutes)

Editing (4 minutes)
.....

The Gate

Let me tell you about fate and the gate...

You know all those books that tell you to set your goals, work smarter not harder, change in a day, cure how to procrastinate... I swear I'd read them all.

In fact I'd read about five procrastinate books because Mum kept buying them for me. Odd that.

Time, that was another Top Topic of my reading list. I mean what happens to the time between school and snacks and Facebook, Snapchat... and homework? Suddenly it is 10.00pm and it's time for bed. And no time to finish the assignment on the Feeding Habits of Frogs. I swear time expands and contracts.... It somehow just disappears when you most enjoy it - and least expect it.

It's hard to explain this to a company high achieving mum and a channel surfing dad I only saw on some weekends.

'But what are your goals?' Mum always asks. Help, she's got me in the 'kitchen deadlock', me stuffing just cooked muffins in my mouth and a pile of homework in my bag and I'm hoping she hasn't noticed I haven't unpacked the dishwasher – my job for the day.

'Ummmm,' I mumble between muffin crumbs, 'I'm thinking of applying to study Vet Science.' I mean I liked animals right?

'How long is the degree?'

'Ummmm.' Muffin crumbs make it hard to think.

'Hey Dad, I'll be around on Saturday for the footy match.'

'Don't be late!' It was a long-standing joke between us. There was that time disappearing thing you know. It happened at Dad's, too.

'I'll be there in time to see my team beat yours!'

I didn't get my homework done at Dad's either.

How did my friends get so organised? Meet you at 4.00 at the movies – and they were there. See you at 10.00 for breakfast and they were on their second coffee when I got there. They always had such great ideas about doing stuff. How did they fit it all in? Like tonight 'See you at Fed Square for the light show.' Right, just have to check my email and text a few people, grab a shower, try out some new shirts... and now, the black hole of time has made me late again.

Oh and Mum is lurking and the dishwasher is waiting and now I am sneaking out the back door trying to escape again.

The side gate creaks. Damn, I was supposed to oil that. And she calls out:

'Empty the dishwasher before you go.'

Caught. I race inside and rattle dishes into drawers.

'And oil the gate too.' She was making cruel and unusual punishment. She knew it and I knew it. I grab the oil and smack it on hinges and grab my gear and go.

'Running a little late,' I text Jake.

'Me too,' he replies. Well that's a relief. He's late too for a change.

And then I'm on the train and thinking nothing more at all.

Until the texts suddenly start piling in...

'OMG, are you safe?'

'Tell me you you're OK!!!'

And from Jake 'Oh hell, I hope you were late. I hope you weren't there!

There's been a bombing in Fed Square.'

I got off the train. Cold and quaking and trying hard to breathe.

Told Mum I was safe. Jake was safe. We had been late.

Answered all the email and texts and FB posts. Tried not to snivel or cry or think too much about the deaths and the sadness. It would come later.

And then went home.

I expected some sort of ironic joke from Mum about being late saving my life. She didn't say anything, she couldn't seem to get any words out at all. She just held me so tightly for a long long time.

Time is such a strange thing. Sometimes it is fast and sometimes slow.

A few small minutes could hurt you – a car accident, a closing door...a bomb.

A few seconds can save you.

Or change you.

Tick. Flick.

Time matters.

Don't waste it.

The Gate – Annotated

Let me tell you about fate and the gate...

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It's hard to explain this to a company high achieving mum and a channel surfing dad I only saw on some weekends.

'But what are your goals?' Mum always asks. Help, she's got me in the 'kitchen deadlock', me stuffing just cooked muffins in my mouth and a pile of homework in my bag and I'm hoping she hasn't noticed I haven't unpacked the dishwasher – my job for the day.

'Ummmm,' I mumble between muffin crumbs, 'I'm thinking of applying to study Vet Science.' I mean I liked animals right?

'How long is the degree?'

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'Hey Dad, I'll be around on Saturday for the footy match.'

'Don't be late!' It was a long-standing joke between us. There was that time disappearing thing you know. It happened at Dad's, too.

'I'll be there in time to see my team beat yours!'

I didn't get my homework done at Dad's either.

How did my friends get so organised? Meet you at 4.00 at the movies – and they were there. See you at 10.00 for breakfast and they were on their second coffee when I got there. They always had such great ideas about doing stuff. How did they fit it all in? Like tonight 'See you at Fed Square for the light show.' Right, just have to check my email and text a few people, grab a shower, try out some new shirts... and now, the black hole of time has made me late again.

Oh and Mum is lurking and the dishwasher is waiting and now I am sneaking out the back door trying to escape again.

A **Sizzling Start** does not always have to be about big bang action. It can make your reader startled, amused... and in this case curious.

In this case a single object (a gate) is linked to a big idea (fate). Brainstorming words that rhyme with 'gate' was the quick trick that teased out that idea. (Step 1: Plan for Success). You don't have much time in NAPLAN to plan, so you need to practise brainstorming quick, original ideas.

On the narrative story graph, we show a place where **backfill** might be put in to tell us about the character. Here, we start to see that he is a procrastinator – he has good intentions, but he's always running a bit behind.

That character development is carried through in the next two or three paragraphs.

Dialogue (Step 4) does a lot of the heavy lifting in this story. It keeps the pace bouncing along, it reveals character and – at the end – it's the device by which we learn about the plot twist.

NAPLAN testing time moves fast! If there had been more time to edit this piece, the segment about the footy at Dad's might have been deleted (Step 6: Ban the Boring).

Show, Don't Tell – this is a strong Step 5 moment. The protagonist has trouble getting things done. We think maybe Dad is a procrastinator, too. Of course, the homework didn't get done at Dad's. These moments build a strong picture of rounded characters through what they intend – versus what actually happens.

The side gate creaks. Damn, I was supposed to oil that. And she calls out:

'Empty the dishwasher before you go.'

Caught. I race inside and rattle dishes into drawers.

'And oil the gate too.' She was making cruel and unusual punishment. She knew it and I knew it. I grab the oil and smack it on hinges and grab my gear and go.

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I got off the train. Cold and quaking and trying hard to breathe.

Told Mum I was safe. Jake was safe. We had been late.

Answered all the email and texts and FB posts. Tried not to snivel or cry or think too much about the deaths and the sadness. It would come later.

And then went home.

Dialogue (Step 4) reinforces the relationship between the mum and the kid. Dialogue reveals character and moves the plot along. This is also an example of Step 5: Show, Don't Tell. We infer that the kid means well, and so does the mum, but she is the exasperated, busy – trying hard to bring him up well.

Tension (Step 3) occurs here, partly in the change of pace ('suddenly') and the contrast between 'nothing more' and 'OMG'. One is low energy, one is very high. This is the **action climax**.

There is a sudden shift in the story here. Dialogue (Step 4) delivers the plot twist. Sentences are short and quick so that we feel the tension (Step 3) as the story theme shifts from the preoccupations of one kid to bigger world problems.

This is a great example of Show, Don't Tell (Step 5). We feel empathy with the character's intense emotion without being told what it is.

This reveals a bit more about the character and makes it feel real. It also illustrates Ban the Boring (Step 6) because with only four words 'It would come later.' the whole aftermath is made clear to the reader. Very economical use of words.

The ending took a bit of time (8 mins) because it was deliberately crafted for impact.

I expected some sort of ironic joke from Mum about being late saving my life. She didn't say anything, she couldn't seem to get any words out at all. She just held me so tightly for a long long time.

Time is such a strange thing. Sometimes it is fast and sometimes slow.

A few small minutes could hurt you – a car accident, a closing door...a bomb.

A few seconds can save you.

Or change you.

Tick. Flick.

Time matters.

Don't waste it.

The character resolution or emotional wrap-up comes after the action climax. Here, the Exciting Ending (Step 7) moves firmly into the emotional realm and we are affected by the feelings the mum has for her son. We empathise.

There is more character resolution here (Step 7) as we realise that the protagonist has changed. He's grown up suddenly just a bit.

The Gate

by Jen McVeity

(2019 NAPLAN response, Year 3 & 5 writing task)

Sizzling Start

The story begins as the narrator directly addresses the reader: 'Let me tell you a story about fate and the gate...'

This introduces the main themes and prompts curiosity in the reader so they want to read on!

Exciting Ending (Action climax)

He gets off the train, shaking. His world has suddenly changed. Is Jake safe? Yes. Both had been late.

Character Wrap-up (Emotional resolution)

His Mum's reaction: 'She didn't say anything, she couldn't seem to get any words out at all. She just held me so tightly for a long long time.' We see he has changed in the closing statement:

'Time matters.
Don't waste it.'

Boulder (Main tension scene)

A sudden shift in the story. Messages and calls pour in and through them and dialogue we learn that there has been a bombing at Fed Square.

Rock (Medium problem)

He's on the train, late for his meeting with friends at Fed Square. He feels bad, his Mum is a bit mad at him, he knows he isn't on top of things. Jake is also late.

Pebble (Small problem)

His Mum keeps pressing him about his goals. 'But what are your goals?' Mum always asks.' The narrator hasn't a clue and we can see conflict will be the result.

Backfill

The narrator can't seem to get things done. Time slips away. Homework and chores.

Gradual build up of tension

Interest level

Marked Results

2019 NAPLAN writing task (Years 3 & 5), Narrative Genre

NAP Marker: Kerrie Shanahan

Criterion	Marks	Score	Comments
Audience	0–6	6	A highly engaging and original narrative that instantly connects with the audience, by directly addressing the reader. The style of writing builds suspense, and 'draws the reader in' by constructing a strong connection between writer and reader. Deliberate language choices and narrative devices are used throughout to affect the reader emotionally, and encourage reflection.
Text Structure	0–4	4	A sophisticated narrative structure. Orients the reader by building a strong picture of the main character. The sudden complication immediately affects the characters, and readers can infer that it also has a lasting impact. The ending is moving and poignant. The final reflection effectively sends a message to the reader.
Ideas	0–5	5	Ideas are well-developed and skilfully crafted. The ideas build upon each other towards a climax that shocks. Global themes are introduced in a way that allows readers to relate to them, through their connection with the characters.
Character and setting	0–4	4	The use of first person narration gives the reader an insight into the main character's inner thoughts and emotions. The character's personality strongly emerges through the use of introspection, dialogue, and interactions with others. The use of humour helps to show a likeable character who has relatable flaws. Readers are readily invested in the main character's actions.
Vocabulary	0–5	5	Precise choice of words and phrases enhances the narrative and suits the style. For example: Use of imagery: <i>kitchen deadlock, black hole of time</i> Use of synonyms: <i>Snivel or cry</i> Alliteration: <i>Top topic</i> Repetition: <i>She knew it and I knew it</i> Technical language: <i>Facebook, Snapchat, emails</i> Descriptive phrases: <i>...stuffing just cooked muffins in my mouth, cold and quacking, deaths and sadness, ... just held me so tightly for a long, long time.</i>
Cohesion	0–4	3	Meaning is clear and the text flows well. Cohesive devices are used deliberately to enhance meaning. Links between paragraphs are subtle, and could have been more explicit in some cases. There is also a change in tense from present to past towards the end of the script.
Paragraphing	0–2	2	Paragraphs are deliberately structured to pace the narrative and guide the reader through the character's experiences.

Sentence Structure	0–6	5	Sentences are varied in structure and length giving the script a good mix of fast paced narration and character self-examination. Writing demonstrates control over mainly precise sentences. Some incorrect or ‘clunky’ sentences: <i>cure how to procrastinate, company high achieving mum, She was making cruel and unusual punishment.</i>
Punctuation	0–5	3	Uses a range of punctuation to pace and control the script, such as the clever use of points of ellipsis to indicate the omission of words. Most (over 80%) but not ALL sentence level punctuation correct due to the use of splice commas.
Spelling	0–6	6	Correct spelling of all words including at least 15 difficult words: <i>minute, procrastinate, achieving, company, assignment, ironic, assignment, noticed, science, supposed, unusual, disappearing, organised, accident, answered</i> (Allowance made for minor slip <i>lng/long</i>)

Total marks:

43 out of 47 – Band 10



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Planning and Insights

This year's prompt, 'The Gate', was very specific, but it allowed for a wide range of responses from students depending on their various experiences.

Here's how the Seven Steps helped me plan and write my response.

Step 1: Plan for Success

So, I started by thinking about the different gates to place shown in the prompt images, for example:

- heaven
- mansions
- zoos.

You would have to have an extraordinarily original idea to stand out if you wrote on one of these basic suggestions.

So, I decided to try a different type of brainstorming. I played around with words that rhyme with 'gate' until something grabbed me:

- Cate and the gate – about a dating theme
- Date and the gate – same idea
- Fate and the gate – somehow this combination just clicked.

So why fate and gate? Simple. Link a small thing like a gate – to something big to make it symbolic. In this case a kid who was frittering away time, procrastinating, needing to focus and grow up a little more.

Fate is a big thing. And given the sadness and senselessness of terror killings, well that is something we all have feelings about, or imagine – it was strong in my mind.

Plus, I always like to write about family, it is an enduring and important theme for me.

So, there you have it, an original idea in less than five minutes. Take a look at the story graph on page 7 to see how the story builds up to a sharp action ending and a strong emotional character resolution.

Step 2: Sizzling Start

So, having come up with the concept of a small gate and a big fate I wanted to highlight that in the opening.

A Sizzling Start doesn't always have to be about big bang action. It can make your reader startled, amused, and in this case curious.

Here's how I started:

Let me tell you about fate and the gate.

Then I introduced the main character – he’s a procrastinator, not really focused:

You know all those books that tell you to set your goals...

Finally, I introduced the other key character – the high-achieving mother:

Mum kept buying them for me. Odd that.

In just 56 words I have:

- made the reader curious
- helped them identify with an engaging but flaky narrator
- given them an insight into the other key character, the mother.

No that’s orientation; we’ve got the theme and the who, what, why. Now we need to get to know more about our characters and the main plot and theme. Enter Step 4: Dynamic Dialogue and Step 5: Show, Don’t Tell.

Step 4: Dynamic Dialogue

I used dialogue throughout the text to reveal character and move the plot along. For example, look at how much the following scene reveals about the relationship between the two main characters:

The side gate creaks. Damn, I was supposed to oil that. And she calls out:

‘Empty the dishwasher before you go.’

Caught. I race inside and rattle dishes into drawers.

‘And oil the gate too.’ She was making cruel and unusual punishment. She knew it and I knew it.

It’s a good relationship, but she is not letting him off this hook this time.

Step 5: Show, Don’t Tell

I also used Show, Don’t Tell to reveal that the main character is nice, but a bit flaky. For example:

He never does his homework on time:

I mean what happens to the time between school and snacks and Facebook, Snapchat... and homework? Suddenly it is 10.00pm and it’s time for bed.

The mother is trying to get him on track, but the kid just doesn’t get it:

‘But what are your goals?’ Mum always asks. Help, she’s got me in the ‘kitchen deadlock,’ me stuffing just cooked muffins in my mouth and a pile of homework in my bag and I’m hoping she hasn’t noticed I haven’t unpacked the dishwasher – my job for the day.

You can see she cares because she’s cooked muffins despite her high-powered job. He sort of feels that, but he hasn’t changed.

Step 3: Tightening Tension

We start with a kid on the train and his biggest problem is that his mum is a bit mad at him and he’s late. Then, suddenly his world changes.

I'm really proud of how the main tension scene panned out. There's a clear shift from a light-hearted family situation to the huge sadness and fear of terrorism. To make that shift I had to make sure that I brought the reader on the journey. I used dialogue to help me do this:

...the texts suddenly start piling in...

'OMG, are you safe?'

'Tell me you you're OK!!!'

And from Jake 'Oh hell, I hope you were late. I hope you weren't there!

There's been a bombing in Fed Square.'

Suddenly you have the reader involved in the cold, stark fear of a near-death experience and the unexplainable cruelty of terrorism. A small family 'drama' of people who love each other is now contrasted with the cold senselessness of terrorism.

Step 7: Endings with Impact

Now it is time to wrap up the text. There are two parts to a great ending, first there is an action climax:

I got off the train. Cold and quaking and trying hard to breathe.

Told Mum I was safe. Jake was safe. We had been late.

Then comes the character resolution – his mother's reaction:

She didn't say anything, she couldn't seem to get any words out at all. She just held me so tightly for a long long time.

And, finally, his own reflections on how he has been changed by the experience:

Time is such a strange thing.

A few small minutes could hurt you – a car accident, a closing door...a bomb.

Time matters.

Don't waste it.

Step 6: Ban the Boring

There are three forms of editing:

- Structural – big picture
- Expression – making each sentence richer and clearer
- Line editing – proofreading

In a test situation, with 4 minutes left I finished by doing a line edit. Checking for spelling and typos probably gave me an extra 1–2 marks.

In real life, however, I would focus on the big picture editing – making sure that the text builds up to the ending and leaves the reader inspired.

Conclusion

In deconstructing this NAPLAN response, don't think for moment I consciously thought about all these things as I wrote.

I didn't.

The key to NAPLAN is having a set of tools at hand to brainstorm, write, pull together a text in a very short period of time. Confidence and mastery (knowing you know lots of techniques) will help students enormously.

For more detailed insights, watch Jen's video:

<https://www.sevenstepswriting.com/samples/naplan-writing-samples/>

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