

First Language English 0500:

50 Excellent Descriptive and
Narrative Essays (2026 Edition).

SAMPLE

Victor Tan

Prompt: Write a description with the title, ‘The shelter’.

Essay:

The shelter did not so much appear as lurch into existence: a low jaw of concrete in the floodlit rain, its mouth swallowing people two at a time. My shoes skidded on algae-slick steps. Behind me, metal screamed—sheeting torn loose, a gate buckling, the storm wrenching at anything bolted down.

“Keep moving!” a woman barked, palm to my shoulder. Her hand was cold through my wet shirt, but steady.

Inside, the air changed instantly. Outside was shrapnel rain and sirens; here it was damp breath, wool, iodine, and the sour sweetness of panic. Emergency lamps hummed with the tired yellow of old teeth. Water ran down the walls in glistening veins, finding cracks the way grief finds soft spots in a voice.

I was pushed deeper, into the press of bodies. A child clung to a plastic carrier; inside it, a cat’s eyes shone hard and green. Somewhere, a radio muffled wind speed and tide level.

Then the lights flickered.

In that half-second of dimness, the shelter’s own voice rose: the groan of rebar under strain; the patter of water collecting in a corner; prayers leaking from people who didn’t believe in prayers. When the lamps steadied, the room exhaled as one.

At the far end, against a wall furrowed with salt stains, a handwritten sign hung crookedly: THIS IS A SHELTER. NOT A HOME. The words were thick with marker, defiant as a bruise. Beneath it, an old man sat on a turned crate, cradling a framed photograph in a plastic bag. He stroked the bag as if it were a sleeping animal.

I edged closer, drawn by the quiet in him. His lips moved, but not in prayer. Lightning strobed in the frame’s glass, revealing the same memory again and again: a porch swing, a woman’s laugh caught mid-air, a dog blurred with motion—ordinary, unbearable.

A volunteer knelt beside him with a blanket. “Sir,” she said, “you’re safe.”

He looked up, eyes watery but sharp. “Safe,” he repeated, tasting the word like something spoiled. Then he tipped the frame toward me. The photograph’s corner had torn in the storm, and through the tear you could see what he had taped behind it: a page from a child’s exercise book, letters wobbling in pencil.

DON’T LET THE WATER TAKE YOU. STAY WHERE THE WALLS ARE STRONG.

My throat tightened on a laugh that wasn’t a laugh. The ceiling thudded once, as if the storm had tried the door again. The old man smoothed the pencilled line with his thumb.

Outside, things were breaking.

Inside, for the first time that night, something held.

Comment:

This essay reaches the very top of the criteria W1 to W5. The content (W1) is complex, engaging and effective: the shelter is not merely a physical refuge but becomes a moral and emotional one, and the child's pencilled warning — “letters wobbling in pencil” — shifts the piece from storm-spectacle to human fragility without a trace of melodrama. The structure (W2) is secure and deliberately managed: the essay opens in medias res, tightens into the pressure-cooker of the shelter's interior, and uses the flicker of the lamps as a hinge between action and revelation.

The style (W3) is precise and vivid — “a low jaw of concrete”, “the tired yellow of old teeth”, and water running down the walls “finding cracks the way grief finds soft spots in a voice”. Sentence lengths are varied for rhythm, with short commands and one-line paragraphs controlling the pace. The register (W4) is consistently serious and immediate, appropriate to a crisis, and spelling, punctuation and grammar (W5) are controlled throughout.

The closing contrast — “Outside, things were breaking. Inside, for the first time that night, something held.” — provides a memorable, deliberate resolution that binds the outer storm to the essay's inner meaning.

To continue developing, the writer should read *The Dead* by James Joyce for how controlled detail builds atmosphere and how a quiet emotional reveal lands with lasting force. Joyce's patient zooming — from room, to faces, to a single object — is exactly the deliberate camera movement this kind of description requires.

Mark awarded for content and structure = 16/16

Mark awarded for style and accuracy = 24/24

Total marks awarded = 40/40

Prompt: Write a story which includes the words, ‘... it could not be stopped ...’.

Essay:

The train did not slow for the red signal; it surged through it like a thought you try not to think. The platform lights smeared into white claws against the rain-dark air. People scattered. Someone screamed my name—thin, panicked—while my shoes hammered the yellow line as if I could outrun steel.

“Ben!” Leena’s voice snapped. “Leave it!”

But the boy on the tracks wasn’t “it”. He was a small shape in a school hoodie, a name tag still pinned to his bag strap, frozen between the rails as the wind from the oncoming carriages lifted his fringe. His eyes were huge, not with fear, but with that blank surprise children have when the world suddenly refuses to be gentle.

My hand found the emergency lever. Red plastic. A promise I yanked.

Nothing happened.

No heroic shudder. No obedient shriek of brakes. Just the same relentless roar, the train’s nose cutting the rain into shreds.

A guard in a soaked vest lunged at me. “It’s delayed!” he shouted over the noise, face twisted. “The system—there’s lag—”

Lag. A stupid word for a life.

Leena pushed past, hair plastered to her cheeks, and grabbed my wrist. Her palm was warm despite the cold. “Ben,” she said, and there was a pleading steadiness in it, “we can’t—”

The train’s horn detonated the night. The boy flinched, finally waking, and stepped—wrongly—towards the platform edge, towards the very place the train would swipe clean.

I let go of Leena. I jumped down.

The ballast stones rolled under my feet like teeth. Heat and wind slapped my face as the train bore down, impossibly close, a corridor of steel and breath-sucking wind. My mind did that strange, lucid thing, unspooling details I didn’t ask for: the boy’s untied shoelace; the smell of wet iron; Leena’s breath catching above me.

I reached him and my hand closed around his sleeve.

He was lighter than I expected—only a bundle of bones and waterlogged cloth—and he looked up at me as if I were the one who had wandered somewhere forbidden.

“Run,” I said.

He didn’t move.

So I moved for him. I hauled him sideways, towards the shallow gap between the tracks and the platform, where the concrete dipped and the dark collected. The train screamed past, so close it sucked the air from my lungs, so close it shook my teeth. The world became vibration, thunder, a single monstrous sentence.

Above us, the guard's voice cracked: "... it could not be stopped ..."

For a breathless eternity, we pressed ourselves flat. The boy's heart battered against my ribs. My own heartbeat felt like it belonged to someone else—someone braver, someone already dead.

Then the last carriage whipped by, trailing dirty rain and paper scraps like a torn banner. Silence crashed in behind it. The platform lights steadied. Somewhere, a woman sobbed—raw, animal.

Leena's face appeared over the edge, white as chalk. Her hands trembled as she reached down. She pulled the boy up first, then me, as if the order mattered, as if saving could be counted.

The boy stood, shaking, and finally began to cry. Not loudly, just a leaking sound, like a tap left on.

I stared at the red signal still glowing at the end of the platform, focusing and useless. My hand was scraped open where the gravel had bitten it, and blood mixed with rain, pinking the puddles.

Leena held my wrist. "You could have—"

"I know," I said.

But what I didn't say was that the worst part wasn't that the train ignored the lever. The worst part was how quickly my body had accepted the truth.

How, when the guard shouted it, something inside me had agreed.

It could not be stopped.

Comment:

This essay meets the criteria W1 to W5 at the highest level. The content (W1) is immediately high-stakes and emotionally charged, but it becomes complex by binding the external danger — the unstoppable train — to an internal realisation about helplessness: the narrator’s worst discovery is “how quickly my body had accepted the truth”. The structure (W2) is deliberately managed: in medias res urgency, the failed emergency lever, the climax on the tracks compressed into “a single monstrous sentence”, and the required words placed at the peak of danger, then echoed in the final line for circular cohesion.

The style (W3) is precise and driving: the train “surged through it like a thought you try not to think”; “the ballast stones rolled under my feet like teeth”; and after the last carriage passes, “Silence crashed in behind it.” The alternation of clipped dialogue and longer descriptive lines controls the pace superbly. The register (W4) is urgent, realistic and emotionally restrained enough to stay credible, and accuracy (W5) is secure, with the ellipses of the required phrase handled correctly.

To keep developing, study Ernest Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” for how high-pressure immediacy can be spliced with reflective, moral weight — draft the action first, then weave in a single, carefully placed inner thought at the moment of maximum tension, exactly as this story does at its close.

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Mark awarded for style and accuracy = 24/24

Total marks awarded = 40/40