

A Letter from C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis was a British author and academic. He wrote many books for children and adults. His best-known children's books are *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of seven fantasy novels. In this abridged version of his letter, Lewis offers one of his fans advice on how to write well.

26 June 1956

Dear Joan—

5 Thanks for your letter of the 3rd. You describe your Wonderful Night v. well. That is, you describe the place and the people and the night and the feeling of it all, very well — but not the *thing* itself — the setting but not the jewel. And no wonder! Wordsworth often does just the same. His *Prelude* (you're bound to read it about 10 years hence. Don't try it now, or you'll only spoil it for later reading) is full of moments in which everything except the *thing* itself is described. If you become a writer you'll be trying to describe the *thing* all your life: and lucky if, out of dozens of books, one or two sentences, just for a moment, come near to getting it across.

[...]

What really matters is:—

1. Always try to use the language so as to make quite clear what you mean and make sure your sentence couldn't mean anything else.
- 15 2. Always prefer the plain direct word to the long, vague one. Don't *implement* promises, but *keep* them.
3. Never use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. If you mean "More people died" don't say "Mortality rose."
- 20 4. In writing. Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to *feel* about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was "terrible," describe it so that we'll be terrified. Don't say it was "delightful"; make *us* say "delightful" when we've read the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers, "Please will you do my job for me."
- 25 5. Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say "infinitely" when you mean "very"; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something *really* infinite.

Thanks for the photos. You and Aslan both look v. well. I hope you'll like your new home.

30 With love,
yours

C.S. Lewis

1

What metaphor does Lewis use to comment on the way Joan described her "Wonderful Night"?

.....

1 mark

2

In your own words, explain why Lewis tells Joan not to read Wordsworth's *Prelude* until she is older.

.....

.....

2 marks

3

Do you think Lewis finds describing "the thing itself" easy or difficult? Explain your answer.

.....

.....

2 marks

4

In lines 12-13, Lewis advises Joan to avoid (circle one):

- a. repetition
- b. contradictions
- c. exaggeration
- d. ambiguity

1 mark

5

What does this letter tell you about how you should use adjectives in your writing?

.....

.....

2 marks

6

In your own words, summarise the advice that Lewis offers about writing in lines 12-26.

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2 marks

Total
out of 10