

Friendly letters: descriptive

There are usually only a few things you can be asked to describe, including:

- your home
- your family
- your school
- your hobbies/free time.

The main points to keep in mind when writing about any of these topics are:

- create interest
- personalise for the reader
- support each idea
- do not list.

■ How to describe your home

Before looking in detail at ways of describing your home, it is worth being sure that you know the different kinds of houses in England.

- A *flat* – all the rooms are on one floor. There may be other flats on the same floor. The building is called a 'block of flats'.
- A *house* – most people in England live in houses. Usually they have living rooms downstairs and bedrooms upstairs. Most have a garden at the back of the house and some also at the front. A 'detached house' is usually expensive because it does not join onto any other house. A 'semi-detached house' (or 'semi'), as the name suggests, is joined to a neighbouring house on one side.
- A *terraced house* – one of a row of houses joined onto each other.
- A *bungalow* – all rooms are on one level, like a flat, but a bungalow stands alone at ground level, and usually has its own garden.

I live in a (give the name of the house). It's a house built on stilts to keep us above water in the floods.

However, the important thing is to make sure you:

- do not list
- do not state the obvious.

Remember

It is not necessary to describe your real house. You are free to use your imagination. This is your chance to create the house of your dreams if you wish!

Describing location

Describing the location of your house is one way to create interest.

Where can houses be located? Here are a few ideas to start you thinking. Be careful with the prepositions (words like *in, on, of, with*); these are difficult in English, and give a bad impression if incorrect. Make sure you learn them perfectly.

Describing an inner city location

(quite) near the city centre

(right) } in the centre of } the city
 } in the heart } Paris

★ Remember

Listing is boring and suggests to the examiner that

- your style is weak
- your knowledge of vocabulary is basic
- you know only words, not OR constructions.

... with a } lovely } the busy/noisy market square
 } marvellous } the famous/well-known river Nile
 } wonderful } the bus station
 } great } a park/lake
 } fantastic } the cathedral/mosque

... overlooking } the busy/noisy market square
 } the famous/well-known river Nile
 } the bus station
 } a park/lake
 } the famous/well-known cathedral/mosque

For example:

I live right in the centre of Paris, with a marvellous view of the river Seine.

I live quite near the city centre, overlooking a park.

I live in the heart of Cairo, with a fantastic view of the famous mosque.

Describing a location on the outskirts (edge) of a city

not far from }
on the outskirts of } + name of city
in the suburbs of }

about half an hour's } walk }
 } drive } from + name of city
 } bus ride }

For example:

I live on the outskirts of Athens.

I live about half an hour's drive from Madrid.

Describing a location in the countryside

in the heart of the }
in the middle of the } country(side)

... with a } lovely }
 } marvellous } the snow-covered mountains
 } wonderful } the pine forest
 } great } fruit orchards
 } fantastic }
 } breathtaking }

or

... overlooking } the snow-covered mountains
 } the pine forest
 } fruit orchards

For example:

I live in the middle of the country with a wonderful view of the pine forest.

I live in the heart of the country with a fantastic view of the mountains.

I live in the heart of the countryside, overlooking fruit orchards.

★ Remember

Make sure your prepositions are accurate

Adding support

Describing the location of your house to your friend also involves adding support. Look at a sentence without support:

I live right in the centre of Athens.

In order to find what to include in the support phrase, ask yourself:

- Why am I telling my friend this?
- Why should this interest my friend?

I live right in the centre of Athens, so we can go sightseeing any time.

If you know your friend enjoys shopping, for example, you could write:

I live right in the centre of Milan, so we can go shopping whenever you like!

Make sure that the support phrase links to the friend's character.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ... so you'll never be at a loose end | (she gets bored easily) |
| ... so we can go shopping whenever you like | (she enjoys shopping) |
| ... so we can easily walk to the tennis club | (she is sporty) |
| ... so we can sit and watch the world go by | (she is happy to stay at home) |
| ... so you can put your feet up, relax and enjoy the view | (she comes from a stressful environment) |

If you realise the location may not be what your friend was hoping for, then you should support it in a favourable way, to persuade her.

I live on the outskirts of Paris, only half an hour by train from the centre – so we can go shopping whenever you like!

Creating interest

One of the best ways to create interest when you write is through contrast.

I live in a three-bedroom house right in the centre of the city. It's very different from your quiet village and there are so many things to do, you will never be bored!

Notice the following:

- I live – Always use **person + verb** instead of a noun (*my house*) to create friendly register.
- *in a three-bedroom house* – Why should this interest your friend? The number of bedrooms in a house usually gives an indication of its size. If your friend is coming to stay, this might interest him.
- *right in the centre of the city* – Why should this interest your friend? This will probably be a contrast with where he lives.
- *it's very different from your quiet village.*
 - This creates interest through contrast.
 - This personalises the situation for your friend because it is relevant to his personal life.
 - This also shows the reader that your relationship is a friendly one because you know your friend lives in a quiet village.
- *there are so many things to do, you will never be bored!* – This supports your statement by explaining *why* your friend will enjoy coming to stay in a noisy city.

Describing living arrangements

Describing your house also involves describing the living arrangements, especially if your friend is coming to stay. Consider the following points:

- Where will he / or she / sleep?
- Will he have a room of his own, or will he have to share? Some people do not like to share, others welcome the idea – they may feel more secure in a strange house, or they may just find the idea fun, especially if they are an only child, or have never shared with anyone before.
- Will someone have to 'move in' with a brother or sister so that the guest can have his own room?

Use the past tense as a polite way of giving information. It would be quite rude to write to your friend:

✘ We've only got three bedrooms, so you'll have to share with me.

or

✘ You will stay in the guest room.

The use of will and going to can be very strong in English. It is far more considerate and polite to use the past tense. Look at these examples:

I thought you might like to share my room with me, so we can listen to my music together, but the guest room is all ready, if you prefer.

I thought you might like some privacy, so you can have my brother's room if you like, and he'll move in with me.

Note that it is polite to give your guest a choice. Remember, he may prefer not to share, or he may feel unhappy to be alone in a strange house.

Mum has got the spare room ready for you, but if you prefer, you can share my room.

Support your sentence and take the opportunity to personalise – in other words to show how well you know the person you are writing to. A list of phrases used for personalising can be found on pages 24 and 25.

I know you share a room with your younger brother, so I thought you might like the luxury of having a peaceful room all to yourself!

My room is on the other side of the house from my younger sister's, so bring those favourite CDs of yours and we can listen to them at full volume without having to worry about disturbing anyone!

Do not fall into the trap of listing when discussing the advantages of your bedroom.

✘ In my room there's a TV, a CD player, a DVD player, a computer, a piano, a mini-library and a Playstation.

This just sounds like showing off. Choose one of the items in your room that is interesting to your friend so that you can support and personalise it. If your friend spends a lot of time playing football and watching horror films at the cinema, he probably will not be interested in your piano or your stamp collection!

You'll be glad to know I've got the old family computer in my room, so we can spend hours playing your favourite games, if you like!

★ Remember

• Use the past tense as a polite way of giving information.

• Support your sentence and take the opportunity to personalise.

• Avoid listing.

How to describe your family

What is wrong with the following sentence written by a student?

- ✗ My family consists of five members – my father, my mother, my brother, my sister and myself.

my father, my mother, my brother, my sister and myself is an example of listing.

★ Language Point

- Notice that there is also inappropriate use of register in this sentence.
- consists of – This is formal register.
- The sentence begins with a noun: My family. Replacing the noun with person + verb will make the sentence less formal.

A better way to write the sentence might be:

I have an older brother, Mark, and a sister called Maria, who is two years younger than me.

Notice how important it is to give brothers and sisters names.

My older brother, Mark, is mad about computers, just like you!

(Just like you – In other words, I know you well enough to know how interested you are in computers.)

I'm sure you'll get on well with my Dad. He loves football almost as much as you!

(I'm sure – In other words, I know you well enough to judge who you will like. I also know how much you love football.)

This gives your friend a clear picture of your brother or father. The support phrases inform your friend that your brother and father share the same interests as your friend (that's why you mentioned them) and this will make your friend keen to come and stay. The personalising phrase again emphasises your friendship.

My sister Maria is two years younger than me and loves to sing at the top of her voice whenever I am trying to study! Don't worry – she's going to summer camp so we won't be seeing much of her!

(Don't worry – In other words, I know you so well that I am aware of the things that worry you. Why tell your friend that your sister is going to summer camp? So he knows she will not be there to bother him! This suggests that your friend prefers a quiet life!)

Remember

- Keep asking yourself: why am I telling my friend this? and why should this interest him?
- Support each sentence and personalise it for the reader if possible.

Ideas for describing family members

Here are some ideas to help you describe members of your family. You can use the vocabulary and phrases in your sentences.

Mother/Father

- Is she a football fan/computer nut (= someone very keen on computers)/television addict?
- Is she easy to talk to/to get on with/always interested in other people's viewpoints?
- Is she a workaholic (= someone addicted to work), always at the office/business, so you don't see much of her?
- Is his bark worse than his bite? (In other words, is he strict? Does he shout a lot, but never take any real action or carry out his threats?)
- Does she fancy herself as a linguist, and is she looking forward to trying out her English (which she hasn't used since school) on your penfriend?
- Is she young at heart? (In other words, does she still have the outlook of a young person?)
- Is he easy to talk to/always ready to lend an ear?
- Is he a brilliant cook? Can he make your penfriend's favourite food?

Be careful not to make these common mistakes:

✗ *My father is a tall man with black hair.*

Of course your father is a man! This is stating the obvious. Only describe a physical feature if it is unusual in some way.

✗ *My father is nice.*

This is stating the obvious. Of course your father is nice – and if he isn't, you would not tell your penfriend, as this would definitely discourage him from coming.

✗ *My mother is an excellent cooker.*

(cooker = a kitchen appliance!)

Older brother/sister

- Is he hard-working/studious/always in his room?
- Do you never really see her – not even at weekends?
- Does he listen to music at full volume whenever he's at home?

Younger brother/sister

- Is she a nuisance/always disturbing you/always playing tricks on you?
- Is he a bookworm? (In other words, does he read books all the time?)
- Does he have any particular features? Round face/orange hair/spiky hair/thick-rimmed glasses? (Think of a cartoon character!) Does he (or she) look cheeky, innocent, a genius?

Now ask yourself: *why* am I telling my friend this and *why* have I selected this piece of information? By answering these questions, you will provide the support for your ideas.

How to describe your school

When asked to write a letter to a friend describing your school, all the points mentioned previously apply.

Remember

Use your imagination!

Describing the school building

Is there anything special about your school or its buildings?

Is it very old?

I go to a very old school - it was } founded } almost two hundred years
built } nearly ago.

Is it very new?

I go to a very modern school. In fact it was only built last year!

Is it near your house?

It's only a } fifteen-minute } walk } my house.
half-hour } bus ride } to school from } where I live.

It only takes me ten minutes to bike to school (from home).

Or is it far away?

I have to get up at six o'clock to catch the bus to school - it takes almost an hour/it's about an hour's trip!

You'll be glad to know it's only a ten-minute walk to school from my house, so you won't have to get up early!

Remember

Support and personalise whenever possible.

Do not give a guided tour of your school buildings.

* On the left is administration and two bathrooms, on the right are three classrooms.

Why are you telling your friend this? She will almost certainly not be interested. What can you find to interest your friend, to make her look forward to coming to school with you? You have to create interest. Think back to the mental picture you produced of your imaginary friend, and consider her (or his) interests.

If she is keen on (= enjoys) sport:

- write to her about the new gym - it should be finished by the time she arrives
- tell her how popular the volleyball court is at lunch breaks. If she is part of a team at home/a brilliant player, everyone will want her to join the school team while she is staying with you
- you could mention the Olympic-sized indoor/outdoor swimming pool (heated if you live in a cold climate, cooled if you live in a hot country). She can relax/get her exercise there each day/after school/at weekends.

If he is keen on music:

- write about the music room - he can practise the guitar at lunch break
- perhaps he can join the school orchestra/choir.

If she is keen on reading:

- write about the well-stocked library. She can shut herself in there whenever she likes - while you are playing football, if she is not keen on sport.

There are other topics you can mention to make your friend interested.

Describing the teachers

Describing teachers is another way to create interest and should be approached in the same way as describing your family. Choose only one teacher to describe (do not fall into the trap of listing). In order to be interesting for your friend, the teacher you choose should either have a strong personality or have some connection with your friend's particular interests. You may describe the sports teacher, for example, if your friend is sporty.

Wait till you see Mr Jones, our absent-minded physics teacher! He never remembers to comb his hair, his jacket sleeves are too short and he's always dropping things!

Be careful not to make these common mistakes:

- * There are teachers in my school.

This is stating the obvious.

- * My teachers are nice.

Nice is a weak adjective.

- * At my school I study maths, biology, physics, chemistry, history, geography, economics, business and English.

This is an example of both listing and stating the obvious – these are subjects which almost everybody studies at school, not stamp collecting or skating!

Describing your school friends

Of course you want to include your friends in the letter, but avoid stating the obvious.

- * My friends are nice.
- * My friends are very friendly.

Try something indirect:

- ... they can't wait to meet you!
- ... they're really looking forward to meeting you!
- ... they're dying to meet you!

How to describe your hobbies and free time

How many different hobbies do you have? Do not be tempted to write down all the hobbies you can think of, and then string them together – and do not feel that you should be doing something adventurous all the time.

- ⌘ On Saturday morning I go deep sea diving. Then at ten o'clock I go mountain-climbing. At eleven I go water-skiing. After lunch I go trekking. Then I go sailing. In the evening I go ...

When writing about your free time, one of the dangers is, once again, listing. Do not be tempted to write a complete timetable of your week, starting from when you get home from school.

Choose a popular sport. Why do you enjoy playing squash? The answer to this question will be your support phrase: it keeps you fit/gives you a chance to meet other people of the same age.

Does your friend share the same hobby or enjoy the same sport? If so, this is an opportunity to personalise. Perhaps she does not enjoy sport of any kind. This is a chance to personalise/create interest through **contrast**. Writing this way involves your penfriend and the examiner, avoids listing and makes the whole letter sound interesting and natural. It takes practice, though!

★ **Remember**
Support your ideas.

★ **Remember**
Create interest by including your friend and emphasising the similarities and comparisons between you.

Personalising phrases

Here is a list of phrases which help you to join your ideas together and also personalise them for the reader – in other words, these phrases will make the reader feel that he is included in your thoughts as you write and that his feelings and opinions have been taken into account. Using these phrases will result in a more personal and friendly letter. These phrases apply to all types of friendly letters.

1 You'll be glad to know ...

2 I know } you'll } love ...
I'm sure } get on (really) well with ...

3 Wait until you } see ...
} meet ...
} taste ...

4 You'll really enjoy ...

5 I can't wait till you ...

6 As you know, I ...

7 I know you ...

8 ... - (just) like you!

9 ... - as usual!

The following examples show you how to use these phrases.

Phrase 1

You'll be glad to know there's a fitness centre near where I live, so we can work out in the gym anytime.

You'll be glad to know = personalising; it shows you know something about what makes your friend happy, her hobbies, character, etc.

there's a fitness centre near where I live – Why tell your friend this? To create interest.

so we can work out in the gym anytime. = personalising again, because it shows you know your friend likes to work out. It is also support, because it explains why your house is in a good location for your friend.

Phrase 2

I'm sure you'll get on really well with my brother Sami! He's mad about football, just like you!

I'm sure you'll get on really well with my brother Sami! = personalising

He's mad about football, = support

just like you! = personalising

I know you'll love my mum's cooking! She can make almost anything – especially your favourite, pizza!

I know you'll love my mum's cooking! = personalising; it shows you know your friend well enough to know what food she likes.

– especially your favourite, pizza! = personalising again; you know your friend loves pizza. It is also support.

Phrase 3

Wait until you taste my mother's cooking! You'll never want to go home!
Wait until you meet our physics teacher!

What can you put to support this sentence?

Phrase 4

You'll really enjoy not having to walk to school in the mornings!

You'll really enjoy not having to walk to school = personalising; you know your friend hates walking to school. He's lazy!

Phrase 5

I can't wait till you meet my friends! (Support this.)

I can't wait till you get here! (Support?)

Phrase 6

As you know, I'm not much good at swimming, but ...

As you know, I'm not much good at swimming = personalising; this shows you have told your friend personal things about yourself.

... but (support?)

Phrase 7

I know you enjoy sightseeing, so I thought you might like to go and see the Pyramids.

I know you enjoy sightseeing = personalising

... so I thought you might like to go and see the Pyramids. = support

I know how much you love music, so ...

I know how much you love music = personalising

... so (support?)

Phrase 8

My sister adores pizza - just like you!

Phrase 9

At the weekends I am quite lazy - as usual!

as usual! = personalising; your friend knows your habits.

■ Conclusion of a descriptive letter

The conclusion for a descriptive letter should be quite short; probably two or three lines, and, if possible, should return to the point which began the letter. For example, if you are writing to a friend who is coming to visit you for the first time, your introduction might have started something like this:

It was lovely to get your letter yesterday and to hear that you're coming to stay! I thought I'd drop you a line to give you some idea about life over here.

Your conclusion should reflect the points made in the introduction and also bring the reader back into the letter.

Anyway, I hope this gives you some idea about us here, and that you're getting excited about coming!

This is particularly important if you have been writing mainly about yourself, for example, your hobbies.

Anyway, now you know all about how I spend my free time. Maybe when you write you could tell me what you do in yours.

If possible, add a personal sentence:

Don't forget to let me know what time your flight arrives.

Don't forget to pack a swimsuit!

Write soon and let me know whether/when/where ...

■ Ending and signature

(I'm) looking forward to seeing you } soon.
on Friday.
next week.

Looking forward to hearing from you!

And finally,

With love,

Love from

With best wishes,

Yours,

+ your first name *only*, in writing that the examiner can read.