

PRACTICE TEXT — SHORT STORY EXTRACT

Read the practice text, then choose one question

Fingerwork

An original text written for this practice paper.

In the wings of the Napier town hall, Lena Vaughan held her hands out in front of her as if they were something borrowed. They were very still. That was what frightened her: how still they were, how neatly the fingers lay against one another, like the pale keys of an instrument that no one had yet touched. Beyond the curtain, the girl before her was finishing the Chopin, and each phrase fell into the dark like a coin into a well.

“Remember to breathe,” said her mother. She stood a pace behind, in the good navy coat that she wore to funerals and parent interviews, her handbag held in front of her with both hands. She had been saying it for three weeks. She had said it over breakfast, and at the bus stop, and into the dark of the bedroom doorway at night. Lena had begun to hear it as an instruction to be somebody else.

It was not that her mother was unkind. That was the difficulty. Her mother had cleaned offices on Sunday evenings for eleven years to pay for lessons, and she kept the receipts in a shoebox in the wardrobe, each one folded in half. She never mentioned the shoebox. She did not need to. It sat in the house as a kind of weather, a pressure Lena felt in her ears whenever she lifted the lid of the piano.

Applause broke over the hall, and the girl came off, flushed and shining, and was gathered into the arms of a tall father. Lena watched them, and felt something small and mean move beneath her ribs. Then the steward touched her arm and said, “Miss Vaughan.” The word sounded like a title in a language she had not learnt.

She walked out under the lights. The piano waited, black and enormous, its lid raised like the wing of a great bird. She sat. The silence of eight hundred people pressed on her skin. She laid her hands on the keys, and thought, with startling clarity, that she could simply not begin. She could sit here for ever, and nothing would be asked of her, and her mother's hands, clenched on the handbag in the third row, would at last be allowed to open.

The first note came out of the piano as if it had been waiting for her to stop thinking. It was soft, and a little late, and it was entirely hers. She played the Debussy that she had practised for a year, and for the first time, she did not count the bars. Somewhere in the second page, she noticed that her mother's coat, in the third row, had slipped from her shoulders, and that her mother had not noticed, because she was leaning forward, her mouth slightly open, listening like someone hearing a language she had spoken in childhood and forgotten.

CHOOSE ONE QUESTION

About 800 to 900 words

QUESTION ONE

**To what extent does the writer present ambition as a burden in 'Fingerwork'?
Develop a critical response, supported by evidence from the text.**

QUESTION TWO

Respond critically to how the writer uses viewpoint and imagery to present the relationship between Lena and her mother in 'Fingerwork'. Support your response with evidence from the text.

QUESTION THREE

Respond critically to the ending of 'Fingerwork': how does the writer prepare for it, and what does it suggest? Support your response with evidence from the text.

Write a critical response of about 800 to 900 words. Make an argument and use precise quotations as evidence.

Planning space (not marked)

Thesis: ambition as a burden, and as something freed at the end.

Sources of burden: the mother's sacrifice, the shoebox, the instruction to 'breathe'.

Techniques: simile, metaphor of weather, symbol of hands, viewpoint.

The shift at the end: what changes?

A MODEL RESPONSE AND GUIDANCE FOR THAT TASK

QUESTION ONE — GUIDE AND MODEL ANSWER

Worked solution

What the question asks

You must develop an argument that answers ‘to what extent’, examining how techniques such as simile, symbol, viewpoint and structure present ambition as a burden, and showing how the ending complicates this reading, with precise evidence.

What each grade looks like for this question

Grade	What the response shows
Achieved	Describes how ambition is a burden and gives some evidence and techniques.
Merit	Convincingly argues that ambition is presented as a burden shaped by the mother’s sacrifice, supported by well-chosen evidence and explanation of techniques.
Excellence	Offers a perceptive, sustained argument that the burden belongs more to love and expectation than to music itself, showing how the final scene reframes ambition as a form of listening and freedom, with insightful evidence.

Evidence you could use

- “as if they were something borrowed”: simile: Lena’s hands do not feel her own
- “It sat in the house as a kind of weather”: metaphor for the pressure of the mother’s sacrifice
- “a title in a language she had not learnt”: simile showing Lena’s alienation from the expectations placed on her
- “it was entirely hers”: the turning point of the ending

Model response (about 840 words, aiming at Excellence)

In ‘Fingerwork’, the writer presents ambition as a heavy burden, but a burden that arises from love and expectation rather than from music itself. The text argues that Lena’s ambition is made unbearable by the weight of her mother’s sacrifice, and it suggests that the burden is lifted only when she plays for herself.

The opening image of Lena holding her hands “as if they were something borrowed” sets up the theme of ownership. The simile suggests that her body, and her talent, are not wholly hers, but have been lent to her by the people who have invested in them. The stillness of the hands, which “lay against one another, like the pale keys of an instrument that no one had yet touched”, adds to this sense: Lena is both the player and the instrument, and she is waiting to be played upon by others’ hopes.

The mother is central to this burden, but the writer is careful not to present her as unkind. “It was not that her mother was unkind. That was the difficulty.” The short sentence “That was the difficulty” is the key to the text, because it shows that pressure can come from love. The mother’s instruction to “breathe” is repeated until Lena hears it “as an instruction to be somebody else”. The writer’s choice of the word “instruction” transforms a gesture of care into an order, and shows that even kindness can feel like a demand.

The symbol of the shoebox is perhaps the most powerful detail. It holds the receipts from eleven years of office cleaning, “each one folded in half”. The folded receipts suggest careful, tender record-keeping, and they make the mother’s sacrifice concrete. Yet the writer presents them through a metaphor: the shoebox “sat in the house as a kind of weather, a pressure Lena felt in her

ears". Weather is something one cannot refuse or escape, and the image of pressure suggests that the sacrifice has become an atmosphere that Lena must live in. The burden, then, is not music but debt.

The writer also uses the other girl to show Lena's feelings. When the girl is embraced by "a tall father", Lena feels "something small and mean move beneath her ribs". The adjectives are honest and unflattering, and the line shows that ambition has made her envious. This detail avoids sentimentality and persuades us that the burden has real psychological effects. The steward's "Miss Vaughan" sounds "like a title in a language she had not learnt", a simile that makes her success feel like a foreign identity that she is expected to wear.

The structure of the extract reinforces this reading. The first half moves slowly through memories, with long, detailed sentences about the shoebox and the mother's routines, so that the reader feels the accumulation of obligation. By contrast, the moment of decision is delivered in short, sharp statements: "She sat." The brevity of the sentence heightens the tension, and the silence of "eight hundred people" which "pressed on her skin" makes Lena's fear almost physical. The writer therefore uses pace, as well as imagery, to make the burden felt rather than merely described.

The climax of the story is Lena's moment of choice. She thinks that "she could simply not begin", and the writer adds that if she did not, her mother's "hands, clenched on the handbag in the third row, would at last be allowed to open". The image of the clenched hands shows that the mother is also burdened: she holds her handbag with both hands as though holding on to the whole enterprise. The reader understands that the pressure is shared, and that it is bound up with love.

The ending resolves this tension. The first note "came out of the piano as if it had been waiting for her to stop thinking", and the writer says that it was "entirely hers". The word "hers" answers the opening simile of the borrowed hands. Lena no longer counts the bars, which shows that she has stopped performing for approval. The final image of the mother, "leaning forward, her mouth slightly open, listening", completes the change. The mother is no longer clutching a handbag but listening like "someone hearing a language she had spoken in childhood and forgotten". This suggests that Lena's playing has given her mother something back.

To a large extent, then, the writer presents ambition as a burden, but the text complicates this reading. The burden is created by sacrifice and expectation, and it is lifted when Lena finds her own voice. Ambition becomes bearable when it is shared as listening instead of being carried as debt. The writer's final contrast between a clenched handbag and an open, listening face leaves the reader with a quiet but powerful idea: that the greatest gift one person can give another is not instruction, but attention. By ending on the mother's face and not Lena's hands, the text also shows that the cost of ambition, and its reward, belong to more than one person.

Why this response earns Excellence

- It answers 'to what extent' with a clear, qualified argument that develops through the essay.
- It analyses techniques (simile, metaphor, symbol, viewpoint) and comments on single words ("instruction", "hers").
- It reads the ending as a response to the opening, which shows an understanding of the whole text.

KEY TAKEAWAY

For 'to what extent', take a position, qualify it, and show how the ending confirms or complicates it, with precise evidence throughout.

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