



PERSONAL / REFLECTIVE WRITING

Higher English model exemplar • 1,282 words

Teacher-created model exemplar for learning and discussion. This must not be submitted or adapted as a candidate's own folio work.

Two Sugars

The first cup of tea slowly surrendered its warmth beside a red number: 38%. Mum placed it on the kitchen table carefully, as though one sudden movement might cause the mark to fall even lower. Steam rose between us while I stared at the Maths prelim folded beneath my hand. She had used my usual mug, the blue one with a chip near the handle, and added two sugars without asking. On any other day, that would have meant comfort. That afternoon, it felt like pity served with milk.

I had never failed anything important before. I had collected good marks and worn them like proof that I belonged in the *clever group*. People called me "naturally bright", and I accepted the compliment without noticing the trap inside it. If success was natural, difficulty felt like evidence that I had been exposed. During the prelim, the questions seemed to rearrange themselves. When time was called, my page was crowded with half-finished calculations and the certainty that everyone else understood a language I had forgotten.

Mum did not offer a speech. She nodded towards the cup. "Drink that before it goes cold." I wanted her to say the teacher had marked it wrongly or that prelims did not matter. Instead, she asked what I would do next. I said I was dropping the subject, carried the untouched tea upstairs and poured it away. I could not change the mark, but I could reject the comfort offered beside it.

For two days, I hid the paper, avoided my Maths teacher and announced that I had always hated algebra anyway. Pretending not to care seemed safer than admitting how much I cared. Failure had not simply lowered my average; it had interrupted the story I told about myself. I believed capable people moved forward without confusion. Asking for help meant surrendering the version of me who never needed it.



On Thursday evening, the kettle clicked off downstairs. A few minutes later, Mum appeared with another cup. She did not ask whether I deserved it or whether I had produced a revision timetable. She set it beside me and picked up the prelim. Together, we unfolded the page I had tried to make disappear. The tea warmed my hands while we examined the red crosses. Mum understood none of the equations, which was strangely helpful. She was not there to solve them. She was there to make looking at them bearable.

We made a list: topics I understood, nearly understood and topics apparently invented by people who disliked teenagers. The final column was longest. For the first time, the mark looked less like a verdict and more like information. Thirty-eight per cent did not say I was stupid. It said I could not yet complete particular questions. The word yet felt small, but it opened a space where the future could fit.

The next morning, I asked my teacher for help. My voice came out quietly, but the ceiling did not collapse, and nobody removed me from the clever group. She showed me where I had gone wrong and arranged a weekly lunchtime session. Several classmates attended already. People I assumed understood everything were simply better at admitting when they did not. Intelligence, I realised, was not the absence of struggle. Sometimes it was the decision to stay in the room with it.

Revision settled into our evenings. At seven, the kettle boiled. At five past, a mug appeared beside my notes. Cups left pale rings across practice papers, marking the weeks more honestly than my colour-coded timetable. Some nights I made progress. On others, I spent longer choosing a playlist than working. The tea did not transform me into a perfect student. It created a pause: enough time to begin one question before panic persuaded me to avoid them all.

Mum rarely checked what I had completed. Her support was quieter. She remembered when I stayed late, bought teabags before we ran out and listened while I explained methods she did not understand. I had imagined encouragement as a dramatic sentence delivered at the right moment. Instead, it arrived repeatedly in a chipped blue mug. Care does not always announce



itself. Sometimes it is placed within reach and allowed to cool until you are ready for it.

Progress was untidy. Three weeks before the exam, I scored 46% on a practice paper. Reaching for my calculator, I knocked over the mug. Tea flooded the desk, carrying ink through carefully written answers. I stared at the stain and began to cry with an intensity the situation did not deserve. Mum ran in and lifted papers from the puddle. Holding up a dripping sheet, she said, "Well, that's definitely fluid mechanics." I laughed despite myself.

We rescued what we could and rewrote the rest. The ruined paper became more useful than notes I had been afraid to mark. Its wrinkled pages reminded me that improvement was not neat. I could work hard and still perform badly. I could understand something on Monday and forget it by Friday. A setback did not return me to the beginning. The tea stain dried across the 46%, turning another disappointing number into part of the route rather than its ending.

On the exam morning, Mum made tea before my alarm rang. I sat in uniform, listening to cupboards opening and the spoon striking the mug. The exam still frightened me, but fear no longer meant I should run. I had learned to work while uncertain. I drank half the tea, left the rest beside my revision cards and walked to school before I could attempt to relearn the course at the bus stop.

Results arrived in August as a line of text. I read it three times: B. It was not the effortless A once demanded by the version of me who feared being ordinary. It meant more. The grade contained lunchtime questions, failed papers, damp notes and every moment I continued while feeling incapable. Mum read over my shoulder and hugged me until the phone pressed into my cheek. Then, naturally, she put the kettle on.

We carried two mugs into the garden and sat on the back step. Mine was the chipped blue one, still holding two sugars. This time, the tea did not taste like pity. It tasted of relief, gratitude and the slightly metallic flavour produced by a spoon left in too long. Mum said she had always known I could do it. I told her that I had not. That was the difference her cups of tea had made: they had kept me company until I could borrow some of her belief and slowly replace it with my own.



Months later, I came home to find Mum sitting at the kitchen table after a difficult day at work. Her shoulders were lowered and her usual questions were absent. I filled the kettle, chose her favourite mug and placed the tea beside her. One sugar, strong, hardly any milk. I did not offer solutions or tell her everything would be fine. I simply sat down.

The cup of tea had once represented comfort I was too ashamed to accept. During revision, it became a quiet sign of patience and persistence. Now, making one for Mum, I understood it as something that could be passed on. The tea never solved an equation or changed a mark. Its power came from being ordinary: a small promise that failure did not have to be faced alone. I used to think success meant proving I needed nobody. Instead, it taught me to recognise the hands that steady us—and, when our own hands are steadier, to put the kettle on for someone else.

Essay Feedback

Suggested mark: 15/15

This is an uplifting and thoughtfully written personal/reflective essay. It explores the experience of failing an important prelim, but its deeper message concerns self-worth, accepting support and learning that struggling does not make someone incapable.

What works particularly well?

1. The opening immediately creates interest:

“The first cup of tea slowly surrendered its warmth beside a red number: 38%.”

The disappearing warmth reflects the narrator’s fading confidence. Placing the comforting tea beside the disappointing result also introduces the essay’s central conflict: support is available, but the narrator is initially too ashamed to accept it.



2. It explores more than an exam result

The essay is not simply about improving from 38% to a B. It explores why failure feels so threatening to someone who has always been considered clever:

“If success was natural, difficulty felt like evidence that I had been exposed.”

This demonstrates mature reflection. The narrator realises that being described as “naturally bright” has created a fear of struggling and asking for help.

3. The feelings are honest and believable

The narrator does not respond perfectly. They hide the paper, avoid their teacher, pretend not to care and pour away the first cup of tea.

“I could not change the mark, but I could reject the comfort offered beside it.”

This makes the narrator convincing. Growth feels more meaningful because it happens gradually.

4. The cup of tea is successfully developed

Its meaning changes throughout the essay:

- Untouched tea represents rejected comfort and shame.
- Tea beside the prelim makes confronting failure bearable.
- Repeated cups during revision represent patience and persistence.
- Spilled tea represents messy progress and setbacks.
- Results-day tea represents relief, gratitude and confidence.
- Tea made for Mum represents care being understood and returned.

The tea does not merely reappear. Every recurrence adds something new to the essay’s message.



5. Mum is shown through actions

Mum does not deliver a dramatic motivational speech. Instead, she makes tea, sits beside the narrator and helps them face the prelim:

“She was not there to solve them. She was there to make looking at them bearable.”

This is effective because it shows that support does not always involve fixing someone’s problems. Sometimes it means quietly remaining beside them.

6. Reflection is sustained throughout

The writer regularly considers what the experience means:

“The mark looked less like a verdict and more like information.”

“Intelligence...was not the absence of struggle.”

“A setback did not return me to the beginning.”

These reflections develop naturally from the events. They show the narrator’s understanding changing over time.

7. The humour provides balance

The line:

“Well, that’s definitely fluid mechanics.”

adds gentle humour without weakening the emotion. It briefly releases the tension and helps make the relationship between the narrator and Mum feel warm and believable.

The reference to spending longer choosing a playlist than revising also makes the voice relatable.



8. The ending transforms the motif

At the beginning, Mum makes tea for the narrator, but the comfort is rejected. Near the end, the narrator makes tea for Mum:

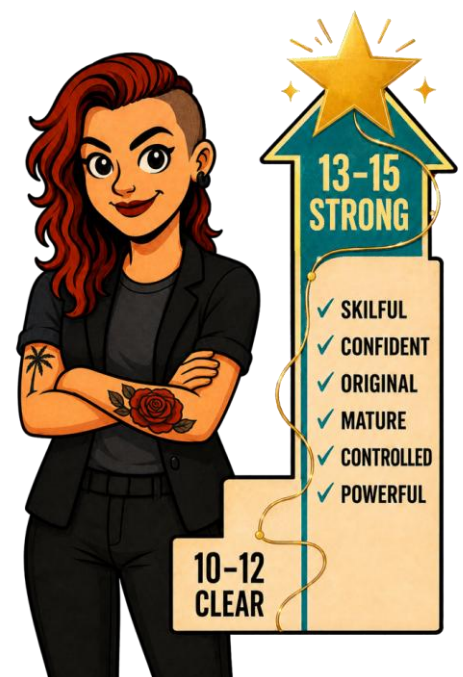
**“I did not offer solutions or tell her everything would be fine.
I simply sat down.”**

This shows that the narrator has learned how quiet support works. They can now offer someone else the patience previously given to them.

Why would this reach the top range?

The essay demonstrates:

- ✓ Strong attention to purpose and audience.
- ✓ A convincing and consistent personal voice.
- ✓ Thoughtful and sustained reflection.
- ✓ An uplifting but believable message.
- ✓ Skilful structure.
- ✓ Varied and controlled language.
- ✓ Effective use of humour.
- ✓ Strong technical accuracy.
- ✓ A motif whose meaning genuinely develops.
- ✓ An ending which echoes and transforms the opening.



Even better if...

There is very little requiring improvement. However, pupils should be careful not to include too many polished “life lesson” statements in their own essays.

The strongest reflection grows out of specific details: the chipped mug, the red crosses, the tea-stained paper and the spoon hitting the side of the cup. Concrete details make the deeper ideas believable.

Overall

This is a warm, perceptive and carefully structured personal essay. The ordinary cup of tea becomes a convincing symbol of comfort, patience, persistence and returned care.

The most important lesson is:

Top-quality reflection does not simply explain how the writer succeeded. It explores how the experience changed what they believed about themselves and other people.

Suggested mark: 15/15

