



PERSONAL / REFLECTIVE WRITING

Higher English model exemplar • 1,286 words

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

Through the Cracks

Before it cracked, my phone screen was spotless. It glowed with photographs, voice notes and hundreds of messages between Mia and me: complaints about homework, terrible photographs and jokes that made no sense to anyone else. Her name appeared so often that I rarely needed to read it. The phone seemed to prove that we were close. We were always connected. At fifteen, I thought those two things meant the same.

Mia and I had been best friends since our first week of secondary school, when we pretended to understand the timetable and ended up outside the wrong classroom. Since then, very little happened without being reported to the other. We messaged on the walk home and sometimes while sitting beside each other. Silence felt suspicious. If the three moving dots disappeared halfway through a reply, I wondered what I had said wrong. Our friendship lived partly in real life and partly behind glass.

The message arrived at 12:17 one Tuesday night. Mia said her parents were separating. She had heard them arguing downstairs and was frightened that, by morning, everything familiar would have changed. The final line read: "Please don't tell anyone. I just needed you to know." I stared at the words, wanting to produce the perfect reply. Every sentence I typed looked false. I did not know how to hold something so serious, so I took a screenshot and sent it to Jamie with one question: "What do I say?"

I told myself I was helping. That was the first lie. The truth was less flattering: passing the message to somebody else made my discomfort easier to carry. Jamie promised not to share it. By lunchtime, half our year seemed to know. Mia's fear became gossip, then entertainment. People glanced towards her



across the canteen with the curiosity usually reserved for a fight. When she looked at me, I knew she had worked out where the story began.

She waited beside the school gates. In her hand was her phone, displaying the screenshot I had sent. My own words sat above it like a signature. I tried to explain that I had trusted Jamie and had only wanted advice. Mia asked why I had not trusted her enough to answer for myself. There was no clever response to that. Still, I reached for excuses. I said Jamie had caused the real damage. I said everyone would forget. I even said Mia was overreacting, because cruelty can sound remarkably like self-defence when we are desperate not to be wrong.

The argument followed us to the bus stop. Rain spotted the screen as I tried to show her my conversation with Jamie, as if more messages could rescue me from the message I had shared. The phone slipped from my hand and struck the pavement face-down. When I lifted it, a crack ran from the top corner to the centre. It cut directly across the photograph on my lock screen: Mia and me at the Christmas market, our heads pressed together beneath a ridiculous pair of flashing antlers. Her face was divided by a thin white line.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then Mia said, "That seems about right," and walked away.

I could still use the phone. That almost made the damage worse. Beneath the broken surface, everything continued to function: messages arrived, photographs remained and the clock advanced as though nothing important had happened. Yet every word was now interrupted by the crack. When Mia eventually wrote, "I can't believe you did that," the line split can't from believe. I read accusation in the gap. Looking back, the distortion was not really in the glass. Fear and guilt were bending everything she said before I had even finished reading it.

I began composing an apology. "I'm sorry, but I was only trying to help." Delete. "I'm sorry you found out that way." Delete. Each version placed a small escape hatch after the word sorry. I wanted forgiveness without having to stand fully inside what I had done. The screen allowed me to edit, soften and retreat. I could watch for a read receipt and prepare my defence before she replied. It offered contact without courage.



For the next week, group chats flashed and notifications stacked across the damaged screen. Yet the one name I looked for did not appear. At school, Mia moved around me with deliberate politeness. That was worse than anger. We had once filled every silence; now we passed in corridors without touching it. I had measured our closeness in numbers: messages sent, photographs saved, days in a streak. None could tell me whether I had been trustworthy when it mattered.

I blamed Jamie for forwarding the screenshot because blame is convenient when it can be divided. It took longer to admit that responsibility could not. Jamie had broken a promise to me, but I had broken mine to Mia first. I had treated her private fear as something I was entitled to copy, store and send. A screenshot looks harmless: one press of two buttons, one silent flash. But it removes words from the person who trusted you with them. I had turned Mia's confession into an object that could travel without her permission.

On Friday, I found her sitting on the low wall behind the football pitches. My phone felt heavy in my pocket, packed with all the explanations I had rehearsed. Before sitting down, I switched it off. The cracked screen went black, and for a second, I saw my own reflection broken into sections. There was no message to hide behind and no delete button if I chose the wrong words.

I told her the truth. I had shared the screenshot. I had betrayed her confidence. I had blamed Jamie because accepting the whole truth made me ashamed. I did not say that I was only trying to help. Intention mattered, but it did not cancel impact. Mia listened without rescuing me. When I finished, she said she was not ready for everything to return to normal. I wanted an ending in which one honest apology repaired us instantly. Instead, I had to accept that forgiveness belonged to her, not to the person asking for it.

She told me about the questions, the whispers and the humiliation of strangers knowing something she barely understood herself. Hearing it face-to-face was different. On a screen, I could hurry towards my response. Beside her, I had to remain quiet long enough for her hurt to exist without competing with my guilt. When we stood, she did not hug me. She only said, "I'll message you." It was not forgiveness, but it was a door left slightly open.



The crack remained. I could have asked for the screen to be replaced, but for months I carried it as it was. Gradually, messages from Mia returned: cautious at first, then warmer. Our friendship never became the exact version preserved in the photograph beneath the broken glass. Perhaps it should not have. Trust repaired slowly, through ordinary choices that could not be captured in a screenshot: keeping a confidence, listening properly, turning up when I said I would.

Before the argument, the spotless screen had seemed to represent a perfect connection. Afterwards, the crack became evidence of betrayal and of the guilt that distorted every exchange. Now, when the dark screen reflects my face through that same thin line, I see something less comfortable but more honest. Being constantly available is not the same as being trustworthy. Real connection sometimes begins when the phone is switched off, the excuses are put away, and another person is allowed to speak without fear that their words will travel further than they intended.

Essay Feedback

Suggested mark: 15/15

This is a thoughtful and skilfully written personal/reflective essay. It does more than describe the breakdown of a friendship: it explores trust, guilt, responsibility and the difference between being constantly connected and being genuinely close.

What works particularly well?

1. The essay explores a meaningful experience

The central event is believable and relevant: the writer shares a screenshot of a friend's private message, which is then spread around the school.

However, the essay does not simply explain what happened. It considers why the writer made that choice and what they came to understand afterwards:

“I was uncomfortable, and passing the message to somebody else made the discomfort easier to carry.”



This is honest reflection. The writer recognises an uncomfortable truth about their own behaviour instead of presenting themselves as completely innocent.

2. The cracked screen is an effective motif

The meaning of the screen develops throughout the essay:

- The spotless screen represents closeness and constant connection.
- The crack represents betrayal and fractured trust.
- Messages viewed through the crack represent guilt and distorted thinking.
- The switched-off screen represents honesty and face-to-face communication.
- The remaining crack represents damage that has been acknowledged rather than hidden.

The motif is not simply repeated. Every time it returns, it adds something new to the writer's understanding.

3. The opening introduces the deeper message

The opening appears to describe an ordinary phone, but it quickly establishes the essay's central idea:

“We were always connected. At fifteen, I thought those two things meant the same.”

This immediately suggests that being in constant online contact does not necessarily mean that two people truly understand or respect one another.

4. The writer accepts responsibility

One of the essay's greatest strengths is that the narrator does not blame Jamie forever:

“Jamie had broken a promise to me, but I had broken mine to Mia first.”



This demonstrates maturity. The writer understands that another person's poor choice does not remove responsibility for the original betrayal.

The reflection continues through:

“I had turned Mia’s confession into an object that could travel without her permission.”

This is a powerful way of explaining the danger of sharing screenshots and private messages.

5. The feelings are convincing

The writer's first attempts at apologising are not perfect: **“I’m sorry, but I was only trying to help.”**

The narrator eventually realises that every apology contains **“a small escape hatch.”** This is an original image which reveals that the writer is still trying to avoid full responsibility.

The final apology feels more sincere because the narrator removes the excuses:

“Intention mattered, but it did not cancel impact.”

6. The friendship is not magically repaired

Mia does not immediately forgive the narrator. She says she is not ready for everything to return to normal. This makes the ending more realistic. The narrator learns: **“Forgiveness belonged to her, not to the person asking for it.”**

A weaker essay might end with the friends hugging and instantly forgetting what happened. This essay recognises that rebuilding trust takes time.



7. The language is controlled and memorable

Several expressions create a strong effect:

“My own words sat above it like a signature.”

“Cruelty can sound remarkably like self-defence when we are desperate not to be wrong.”

“It offered contact without courage.”

“Blame is convenient when it can be divided.”

These phrases are effective because they communicate the narrator’s changing understanding. They are not techniques inserted merely to impress the marker.

8. The ending transforms the opening

At the beginning, the spotless screen appears to prove that the friends share a perfect connection. By the ending, the cracked screen represents something more honest:

“Being constantly available is not the same as being trustworthy.”

Switching off the phone allows the narrator to stop editing, avoiding and defending. The writer finally listens properly.

This creates a satisfying link between the beginning and ending.



Why would this reach the top range?

The essay demonstrates:

- ✓ Strong attention to purpose and audience.
- ✓ A convincing and consistent personal voice.
- ✓ Honest, sustained reflection.
- ✓ Mature understanding of responsibility.
- ✓ Skilful control of structure.
- ✓ Carefully chosen language.
- ✓ Varied sentence construction.
- ✓ Strong technical accuracy.
- ✓ An effective, developing motif.
- ✓ An ending that echoes and transforms the opening.



Even better if...

There is very little requiring improvement. However, pupils should be careful not to copy the essay's phrases or structure too closely.

Some reflective statements are highly polished. In your own writing, these moments must grow naturally from your experience. Do not place a dramatic life lesson in every paragraph. Straightforward details and honest admissions are often more powerful than complicated vocabulary.

Overall

This is a confident, perceptive and carefully structured personal essay. The cracked screen successfully connects the event, the writer's emotions and the deeper message.

The most important lesson is:

A strong personal essay does not simply admit that a mistake was made. It explores why it was made, who it affected and how the writer's understanding genuinely changed.

Suggested mark: 15/15

