



PERSONAL / REFLECTIVE WRITING

Higher English model exemplar • 1,288 words

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

The Boots Beneath My Bed

When Dad placed the boots in my hands, their leather was unblemished and their studs untouched by dirt. They seemed to hold every ambition I had, each lace threaded with the promise of the footballer I might one day become. I was thirteen, which meant I was old enough to pretend I was not excited and young enough to sleep with the box beside my bed. Even now, I can remember their sharp, new-leather smell. To anyone else, they were black boots with a white stripe. To me, they were evidence: I was going somewhere.

Dad had saved for them. I understood that only later. He had spent years driving me to training in darkness, standing beside pitches in sideways rain and insisting, through chattering teeth, that he was "quite comfortable". Football was the language we spoke most easily. We discussed formations over dinner and celebrated goals with a nod that meant more than a speech. When he said the boots were for serious players, I heard something larger: he believed I could be one.

Soon, the leather lost its shine. Mud packed itself between the studs, the laces frayed and one heel developed a permanent crease. I loved them more for it. Each stain felt earned. They carried the smell of wet grass, the sting of frozen Saturday mornings and the thunder of teammates hammering on lockers before a match. Pulling the laces tight changed me. In school, I could be uncertain and painfully aware of where to put my hands. On the pitch, I knew exactly where I belonged.

I began to mistake that belonging for identity. Belonging gives you somewhere to stand; identity can convince you that you are nothing without it. Every decision bent around football. I refused birthday parties before matches and treated a poor performance as a verdict on my character. Adults called me dedicated, and



I wore the word proudly. Nobody warned me that ambition can become a room with only one door.

The injury itself was not dramatic. There was no heroic last-minute tackle, no crowd falling silent. I turned to chase a pass I was never going to reach, planted my foot and felt my knee give way. A small movement. A soft, sickening click. Then the sky was above me and the pain arrived: bright, immediate and impossible to argue with. As my teammates gathered around, I stared at my boots. The right one was twisted into the turf at an angle that seemed to belong to somebody else's body. Mud clung to the leather. Only minutes earlier, it had represented effort. Now it looked like damage.

At first, I treated recovery as another opponent. I followed every instruction and imagined returning fitter than before. My boots waited by the back door, still dirty, because cleaning them felt too much like admitting I was finished. But weeks became months. Appointments replaced training. The physio's careful language defeated my optimism: progress, patience, manage expectations. Then came the sentence I feared. Returning to competitive football was unlikely. The consultant explained what I could still do. I heard only what I could not.

I carried the boots upstairs and pushed them beneath my bed. Months after the injury, they lay abandoned in the darkness, the mud from my final match still clinging stubbornly to their leather: a reminder of the person I had once believed I would become. I could not throw them away, but I could not bear to see them either. Hiding them allowed me to pretend I was postponing football rather than grieving it.

Grief seemed too grand a word. Nobody had died. My family reminded me, gently, that I was lucky: my knee would heal enough for ordinary life. They were right, which made me feel worse. Gratitude and sadness can occupy the same space, but I thought one cancelled the other. So I said I was fine. I stopped watching matches with Dad. Without training, my evenings opened into hours I did not know how to fill. I had lost more than a sport; I had lost the future self who made the present feel purposeful.

The hardest moment came when my younger brother asked to try out for his school team. He stood in my doorway pretending it meant nothing, while hope



leaked through every word. Jealousy rose so quickly that it embarrassed me. His knees worked; his future was unwritten. I wanted to warn him that football could take back everything it gave, but that would have been my fear speaking through his life. I told him to go.

On the morning of his trial, he appeared wearing trainers with soles almost polished smooth. "They'll be fine," he said, in the tone of a younger brother who knew they would not. I thought of the boots beneath my bed. If I gave them away, I would be admitting the dream was over. Yet keeping them hidden was not preserving the dream. It was preserving the moment it broke.

I knelt and reached into the shadows. Dust had settled across the white stripe, but the old mud remained. Holding the boots again, I expected the familiar bitterness. Instead, I noticed how small they looked. They had once seemed large enough to contain my entire future; now they were simply scuffed leather, worn laces and plastic studs. The meaning had never lived inside them. I had put it there.

I cleaned them at the kitchen sink. The mud resisted, lodged in every seam as though the final match refused to end. Dad came in, picked up a cloth and sat beside me. We worked in the silence we had always understood. When the dirt circled the drain, the boots did not look new. The creases remained. I did not want to erase them. They proved the dream had been real, even if it had changed.

I placed the boots in my brother's waiting hands and watched as he tightened the laces around a dream that had once belonged to me. They were slightly too big, so he wore two pairs of socks and claimed they fitted perfectly. At the door, he turned and asked if I was coming. I nearly said no. Then I followed him to the pitch.

Standing at the touchline felt strange. Acceptance, I discovered, was not a clean ending in which disappointment disappeared. It was the decision to stop treating one closed door as the end of the building. I had believed giving up the boots meant giving up the person I had been. Watching my brother chase his first pass, I understood that an injury could take football from my timetable, but not what football had built in me. Those qualities were mine to carry elsewhere.



The boots returned after the trial with fresh mud on their studs. This time, I did not see damage or failure. I saw movement. My brother dropped them by the back door, breathless with the news that he had made the team, and Dad gave him the same small nod he had once given me. I expected that to hurt. It did, a little. But pride was there too, quietly making room beside it.

I used to think growing up meant holding on to a dream with enough determination that it had no choice but to happen. Now I think it also means knowing when determination has turned into a refusal to move. Some dreams are not achieved; they are outgrown, interrupted or passed from one pair of hands to another. That does not make the effort wasted. The boots had promised me the footballer I might become. In the end, they taught me something harder: I could become someone else and still remain myself.

Essay Feedback

This is a powerful and carefully crafted personal essay. It does much more than tell the story of a football injury. It explores ambition, family, identity, disappointment and learning how to move forward. Overall mark: 15/15.

What works particularly well?

1. The essay has a deeper message

The essay is not simply about giving up football. It explores what happens when something you love becomes your entire identity:

“Belonging gives you somewhere to stand; identity can convince you that you are nothing without it.”

This shows mature reflection. The writer is thinking carefully about what the experience taught them, rather than only explaining what happened.



2. The football boots are developed successfully

The meaning of the boots changes throughout the essay:

At first, they represent ambition and possibility. When they become muddy, they represent hard work and belonging. Under the bed, they represent injury, disappointment and lost identity. When passed to the younger brother, they represent acceptance and moving forward.

When they return with fresh mud, they represent a new beginning.

This is exactly what a successful motif should do. The boots do not merely reappear—their meaning develops.

3. The feelings seem honest

The writer admits to feeling jealous when the younger brother gets an opportunity to play:

“His knees worked; his future was unwritten.”

This is a brave and believable admission. It prevents the ending from feeling too perfect or predictable.

The writer also recognises that two different feelings can exist together:

“Gratitude and sadness can occupy the same space.”

That demonstrates maturity and self-awareness.

4. The relationship with Dad adds emotional depth

Football is described as:

“the language we spoke most easily.”

This short sentence communicates a great deal. The reader understands that football connects the writer and his dad, even if they do not always express their feelings openly.



The scene where they quietly clean the boots together is especially effective because their relationship is shown through actions rather than explained directly.

5. The language creates a strong effect

There are several memorable expressions:

“Ambition can become a room with only one door.”

“Hope leaked through every word.”

“It was preserving the moment it broke.”

“Pride was there too, quietly making room beside it.”

These images are original, controlled and connected to the writer’s feelings. They do not feel like techniques that have been added simply to impress the marker.

6. The structure is carefully controlled

The essay moves clearly through:

- Receiving the new boots
- Finding confidence through football
- Experiencing the injury
- Losing a sense of identity
- Passing the boots to the younger brother
- Developing a more mature understanding

The ending also echoes the beginning. At first, the boots contain the promise of **“the footballer I might one day become.”** By the end, the writer understands:

“I could become someone else and still remain myself.”

This gives the essay a satisfying sense of completion.



Why would this reach the top range?

It demonstrates:

- ✓ A clear and meaningful purpose.
- ✓ Convincing personal voice.
- ✓ Honest and thoughtful reflection
- ✓ A well-developed central idea.
- ✓ skilful structure.
- ✓ Carefully chosen language.
- ✓ Varied sentence construction.
- ✓ Strong technical accuracy.
- ✓ A motif that changes meaning.
- ✓ An ending that transforms the opening.



Even better if...

There is very little requiring improvement. However, pupils should notice that some of the reflective lines are extremely polished. In their own writing, they should avoid filling every paragraph with dramatic statements or complicated metaphors.

The strongest images in this essay work because they are surrounded by straightforward, believable details. A top-quality essay needs control—not a metaphor competition.

Overall

This is a confident, thoughtful and skilfully structured personal essay. The writer transforms an ordinary pair of football boots into a powerful symbol of ambition, loss and acceptance.

The most important lesson to take from it is:

The experience tells us what happened. The reflection and developing motif help us understand what it meant.

Suggested mark: 15/15

