Week 2 Comprehension A Letter from C.S Lewis (Non-fiction - letter) by C.S Lewis

Pupils may know C.S Lewis as the author of The Chronicles of Narnia, which are still widely read and have been adapted for television, radio, stage and film. In this letter, Lewis draws on his many years of experience as an author to offer one of his young fans some helpful advice on how to write well.

Section 1:
1a) Look at the summary. Who is C.S Lewis?
1b) When was the letter written?
1c) Why is C.S Lewis writing a letter to a fan?
1d) Why does C.S Lewis tell Joan to never use abstract nouns?
1e) What does C.S Lewis thank the writer for?

Section 2:
2a) What is Wordsworth’s Prelude full of?
2b) What is the name of the punctuation used on lines 6 and 7 around the extra information in the sentence?
2c) Find and copy a phrase that tells the reader that Joan has just moved house.
2d) Do you think Lewis finds describing “the thing itself” easy or difficult? Explain your answer fully.
2e) Look at the sentence starting ‘If you become a writer…’. What does C.S Lewis suggest will happen if you become a writer?

Section 3:
3a) What does the word “infinite” (line 26) mean? You can use the dictionary.
3b) What metaphor does Lewis use to comment on the way Joan described her “Wonderful Night”?
3c) In your own words, explain why Lewis tells Joan not to read Wordsworth’s Prelude until she is older.
3d) In lines 12-13, Lewis advises Joan to avoid (choose one):
   - repetition - contradictions - exaggeration - ambiguity
3e) Look at the word you chose from above. What does it mean? You can use a dictionary.
3f) Why does C.S Lewis tell Joan to never use abstract nouns?
3g) What does the letter tell you about how you should use adjectives in your writing?
3h) In your own words, summarise the advice that Lewis offers about writing in lines 12-26.
**Extension activities:**

- Discuss the advice offered in C.S Lewis’s letter. How does Lewis’ advice compare with the guidelines that the pupils suggested before reading the letter?
  Are you surprised by any of his suggestions? Do you agree or disagree with his advice?
- Write a letter to Lewis, following his advice, to vividly describe your own “Wonderful Night”.

**Answers**

**Section 1:**

1a) A British author and academic.
1b) 26th June 1956
1c) He is offering advice on how to write well.
1d) He says that concrete ones will do.
1e) the photos

**Section 2:**

2a) moments in which everything except the thing itself is described
2b) brackets
2c) I hope you’ll like your new home.
2d) E.g. he finds it difficult. He says that, as a writer, you very rarely manage to describe “the thing itself”, even if you write lots of books.
2e) You’ll try to describe the thing all of your life

**Section 3:**

3a) E.g. unlimited; never-ending; boundless
3b) “the setting but not the jewel”
3c) E.g. Because he thinks that Joan’s too young to enjoy it at the moment and if she reads it now, it will stop her enjoying when she is older.
3d) ambiguity
3e) E.g. being open to more than one interpretation
3f) He says that concrete ones will do.
3g) E.g. It tells you that you should use adjectives to make the reader feel a certain way, rather than tell the reader how they ought to feel.
3h) E.g. When writing, writers should avoid ambiguity; use simple language; use concrete nouns rather than abstract ones where possible and they shouldn’t exaggerate or tell the reader how they ought to feel.
Dear Joan--

Thanks for your letter of the 3rd. You describe your Wonderful Night v. well. That is, you describe the place and the people and the night and the feeling of it all, very well — but not the thing itself — the setting but not the jewel. And no wonder! Wordsworth often does just the same. His Prelude (you’re bound to read it about 10 years hence. Don’t try it now, or you’ll only spoil it for later reading) is full of moments in which everything except the thing itself is described. If you become a writer you’ll be trying to describe the thing all your life: and lucky if, out of dozens of books, one or two sentences, just for a moment, come near to getting it across.

[...]

What really matters is—

1. Always try to use the language so as to make quite clear what you mean and make sure your sentence couldn’t mean anything else.

2. Always prefer the plain direct word to the long, vague one. Don’t implement promises, but keep them.

3. Never use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. If you mean “More people died” don’t say “Mortality rose.”

4. In writing. Don’t use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was “terrible,” describe it so that we’ll be terrified. Don’t say it was “delightful”; make us say “delightful” when we’ve read the description. You see, all those words (terrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers, “Please will you do my job for me.”

5. Don’t use words too big for the subject. Don’t say “infinitely” when you mean “very”; otherwise you’ll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.

Thanks for the photos. You and Aslan both look v. well. I hope you’ll like your new home.

With love,

yours

C.S. Lewis