

Death in the Dojo

Aims

- To stimulate students to read the book.
- To draw students' attention to some elements of narrative style, characterisation and to ways of describing character.
- To give students the opportunity to practise some specific writing skills.

- 1 Elicit different genres of books from students and write up on board. Make sure that 'thriller' is there.
- 2 Ask students to think of thrillers they have read. How would they expect a thriller to begin? Elicit ideas.
- 3 Read Extract 1 (next page) to them, or play the CD if you have it. Ask 'Is this a thriller?'
- 4 Ask students to read the two beginnings, both taken from thrillers, in Extracts 1 and 2. Ask which is nearer to how they think a thriller usually begins.
- 5 Ask students in what ways the beginnings are similar. In what ways are they different? Then put them into small groups to share their ideas.

Possible answers: Similarities: both have a death, both are intriguing. Differences: Extract 1 is longer; Extract 2 is more like poetry; in Extract 1 we know about the death immediately, we get more information, we are introduced to more characters, there is dialogue, etc.

Discuss which they find more intriguing or exciting. Point out that both books are thrillers and the extracts are two examples of different beginnings or 'effective openings'.

- 6 Ask students to write down what they now know about Kate Jensen (the narrator) in *Death in the Dojo*. Ask them to read Extract 3, which is some more of Chapter 1 of *Death in the Dojo*, and write notes on what else we find out about Kate. Check and discuss students' notes in a whole group.
Suggested answers: journalist (reporter), works for bad-tempered boss, works with Rick, used to train in karate, has a friend called Sanjay, drinks beer, etc.
- 7 Ask students to imagine what Kate looks like, her age, etc. and to take notes. Then to imagine that they are the writer and to write a very brief writer's 'thumbnail sketch' of Kate Jensen from their notes. They should try to make her as interesting as possible.
- 8 Put students into groups and get them to read their sketches to each other and to comment on each others' descriptions.
- 9 Show students the Thumbnail Sketch of Kate Jensen written by the author. How do their descriptions compare to this one? Discuss as a whole group.

- 10 Ask students to read the initial physical and character descriptions taken from various Cambridge Readers in Extracts 4–8. Are they effective? Why? Why not? What features make descriptions effective?

Possible discussion points:

Extract 4 Balzano is introduced by the way he speaks to Kate. He is shown through her eyes and through her sense of humour. It's quite a physical description; we 'feel' him as well as see his directness and bad temper.

Extract 5 We see Stephen through his own eyes but also get some key factual features – his age and his hair. We also learn what's going on inside.

Extract 6 Again, we see a character through Kate's eyes. We judge his ties as she does. The description of the pink pigs on the tie is graphic and humorous.

Extract 7 In a few words the writer tells us a lot about Stavros. The way he looks, his job and his character are all economically described.

Extract 8 We see Elly as much through her sport as through the description. We find out a lot about her in very few words.

General points to bring out:

- a Good descriptions are economical. We get to know quite a lot in a few words.
 - b They focus on a few characteristics, possibly even just one thing. You don't have to describe every single thing about a person.
 - c The writer makes the person sound interesting, intriguing.
 - d Good descriptions focus on what makes the person different from other people.
- 11 Ask students to think of a person they know well, a friend or relative, and to make a few notes about that person. Then, using their notes, get them to write a brief description focusing on one or two characteristics. They should try to make the person sound interesting *for the reader*. They can use dialogue; they can also choose who is describing the person.
 - 12 Ask students to share their descriptions with the group. Other students make comments and suggestions for improvement.
 - 13 Refer briefly back to Extract 1. Ask students what they think happens next. If you have the books, start reading and find out!
- Optional extra:** Students can write the beginning of their own thriller, using ideas from their discussion. The aim should be to hook the reader as quickly as possible. A word limit might be helpful.

Death in the Dojo

Extract 1

'You kill the guy with a karate punch to the left kidney. Yaku zuki – reverse punch. You step over the body lying on the wooden floor, take one last look at the face, eyes still open in an expression of surprise, and move quickly through the door of the dojo to the lift. Then down and into the cold night air. You almost allow yourself to smile as you walk towards the Underground station, your right hand still aware of the contact with Kawaguchi-sensei's body. Then you get a train to safety.'

'Cut the poetry, Jensen. This is a newspaper for the twenty-first century – we want facts, not fantasy.' This was the sweet voice of my boss, Dave Balzano, editor of the *Daily Echo*, as he looked over my shoulder at my computer screen.

'Yes, sir,' I said under my breath as he moved on towards his office. Balzano was a fat, sweaty man with a bad temper. I had learnt from bitter experience that there was no point in arguing with him. I looked again at what I had written.

'Pity,' I whispered to my colleague, Rick. 'I quite like it.' Rick smiled but carried on looking at his screen.

Rick and I were both news reporters on the *Daily Echo*. I had been working there for about three years and Rick joined about a year after me. Like me, he had started off on a less well-known newspaper outside London, in a small town in Scotland to be exact. All we wrote about were new babies and marriages. I studied journalism in Manchester and, after finishing my studies, got a job with the *Manchester Evening News*. That was a bit more exciting, but not much.

We had now finally arrived in the big city and both enjoyed our work.

We were working in the *Daily Echo* main office on Malvern Street in central London. Our desks were side by side. The only real problem with the job was Dave Balzano. He was a great editor but he had the worst temper in the world. In the three years I had been at the *Daily Echo* I'd never heard him talk quietly.

'Jensen! Get the latest news from Scotland Yard and get down to that damn karate place and get an inside story!' shouted Balzano loudly as he went into his office. I smiled sweetly but under my breath I said, 'Go to hell.'

(From *Death in the Dojo*)

Extract 2

The roof-tile fell.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind and sun the roof-tile fell.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind and sun the roof-tile fell from its place down into the street of the old town.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind and sun the roof-tile fell from its place down into the street of the old town and hit my wife in the middle of her head.

* * *

After two or three hundred years of rain, ice, snow, wind and sun the roof-tile fell from its place down into the street of the old town and hit my wife in the middle of her head, killing her instantly. (From *A Matter of Chance* by David A. Hill)

Extract 3

I thought over what I knew about Kawaguchi, or Kawaguchi-sensei as he was known to his pupils. I first knew of him some years ago when I trained with Asano-sensei. They had both trained in Tokyo with the great master, Ohtsuka, and had both left Japan at about the same time, in the early 1960s. They were two of a number of teachers who brought the teachings of karate from Japan to Europe at that time. Some years later they had had a very public disagreement about technique and had started rival karate schools. In London, anybody who wanted to train seriously trained with one of them. Now Kawaguchi was lying dead in the Central Hospital, killed by a single punch . . .

I went over to the Asano dojo for the last half hour of training and saw a good fight among about six black belts. I stood and watched the white gi's moving quickly round the wooden floor, black belts flying. There was something beautiful about this, more like a dance rather than a fight. It made me feel sad, not to be there doing it. One of the black belts was my friend, Sanjay. While he was having a shower I went over to the Red Cow pub just behind the training hall on Clapham Common, ordered a couple of beers and waited for him. I was glad to see him; Sanjay and I had been friends for years. We started training together and took our dan grades together too. We were more like brother and sister than just friends.

Sanjay was a small delicate Indian man of about twenty-six, with the most beautiful dark eyes and long eyelashes. He came from a southern Indian family who now lived near Birmingham. His father was a surgeon in a big teaching hospital and Sanjay also qualified as a doctor two years ago. He was a gentle, charming man. You couldn't imagine him hurting a fly, but he fought like a tiger. 'The Indian tiger', I called him. We took our beers and sat in the public bar.

'Nobody can believe that Kawaguchi is dead. It seems incredible,' said Sanjay, drinking his beer thirstily.

'How many people do you think would be capable of that – killing someone with one blow to the kidney?' I asked.

'Quite a few unfortunately. Any of those guys tonight could have done it if they'd timed the punch right. There must be a hundred guys in London like that. Even I could have done it – even you, Kate!' Sanjay smiled. 'The question is, why didn't Kawaguchi stop him? He was supposed to be one of the greatest fighters ever.'

Yes, my old friend, I thought. That was exactly the question. How did some guy – if it was a man – manage to catch Kawaguchi before the great man could defend himself? Kawaguchi was known as 'the cat' and was said to be so fast that in practice he would hit you as soon as you thought of moving. These old masters got faster as they got older.

'Yes, it's a real mystery,' Sanjay continued, thoughtfully. 'And what about you, Kate, are you doing any training?' Sanjay asked the same question every time I saw him and he always got the same answer.

'No, Sanjay, no real training. I just try to keep fit, you know. A bit of swimming.'

I had trained for about ten years in all, but a number of injuries and a doctor's warning had persuaded me to give up. I missed it a lot, particularly when I was with Sanjay. He reminded me of the companionship I no longer had.

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We chatted about our karate friends for a while and drank another couple of beers. At about 10.45 we left the pub and walked towards the Underground together. The night was cold and uninviting after the warmth of the pub. Autumn was beginning to turn into winter.

‘Goodnight, Kate,’ said Sanjay. ‘Why don’t you come to practice some time? You’re getting lazy.’

Dear Sanjay, he never gave up. I suppose that’s what made him such a great fighter. He smiled his slow friendly smile as we parted to take different trains home.

(From *Death in the Dojo*)

Extract 4

This was the sweet voice of my boss, Dave Balzano, editor of the *Daily Echo* . . .

Balzano was a fat, sweaty man with a bad temper. I had learnt from bitter experience that there was no point in arguing with him.

(From *Death in the Dojo*)

Extract 5

Stephen was thirty-two with dark, curly hair. He had noticed a few grey hairs that morning when he was drying it after his shower. But he didn’t mind too much; in fact he rather liked the idea of a few which might make him look serious. But his face showed signs of stress and worry.

(From *When Summer Comes* by Helen Naylor)

Extract 6

I arranged to meet Jonty Adams, my contact at Scotland Yard, in a bar in Piccadilly . . . Jonty was a slim, nervous guy in his late thirties with a thin moustache and terrible taste in ties. He was wearing a particularly horrible grey one with little pink pigs all over it. I tried to ignore it. It wasn’t easy.

(From *Death in the Dojo*)

Extract 7

Now I lived in Greece . . . and I had a wonderful, kind boss, Stavros. Stavros looks like a big animal and has a black beard. But he’s a very good archaeologist. Sometimes I think that he can feel what is under the earth, even before he begins to look for it. And he’s very kind. I love working for him.

(From *Apollo’s Gold* by Antoinette Moses)

Extract 8

Elly was typically Dutch, if there is such a thing. She was tall and very blonde, and looked like a sportswoman. In fact, she was a very good cyclist, and when she wasn’t fighting crime in Amsterdam, was usually to be found cycling hundreds of kilometres around Holland with a number on her back.

(From *The Amsterdam Connection* by Sue Leather)

Thumbnail sketch of Kate Jensen

Kate Jensen works as a crime reporter on a London newspaper, the *Daily Echo*. She’s a confident young woman in her late twenties or early thirties. Her editor, Dave Balzano, is bad-tempered and demanding, but she can stand up to him pretty well. She trained in karate for ten years, reached black-belt standard and still misses it. She’s pretty tough, a fighter and fiercely loyal to her friends.