

Touching the Void: FCE Preparation Material

Task 1 Before reading

- 1 Look at the cover and title of the book. What does the cover tell you about the story? Does it make you want to read the book? Why/Why not?
- 2 Do you think people are more or less interested in the book when they know it is a true story? Why?

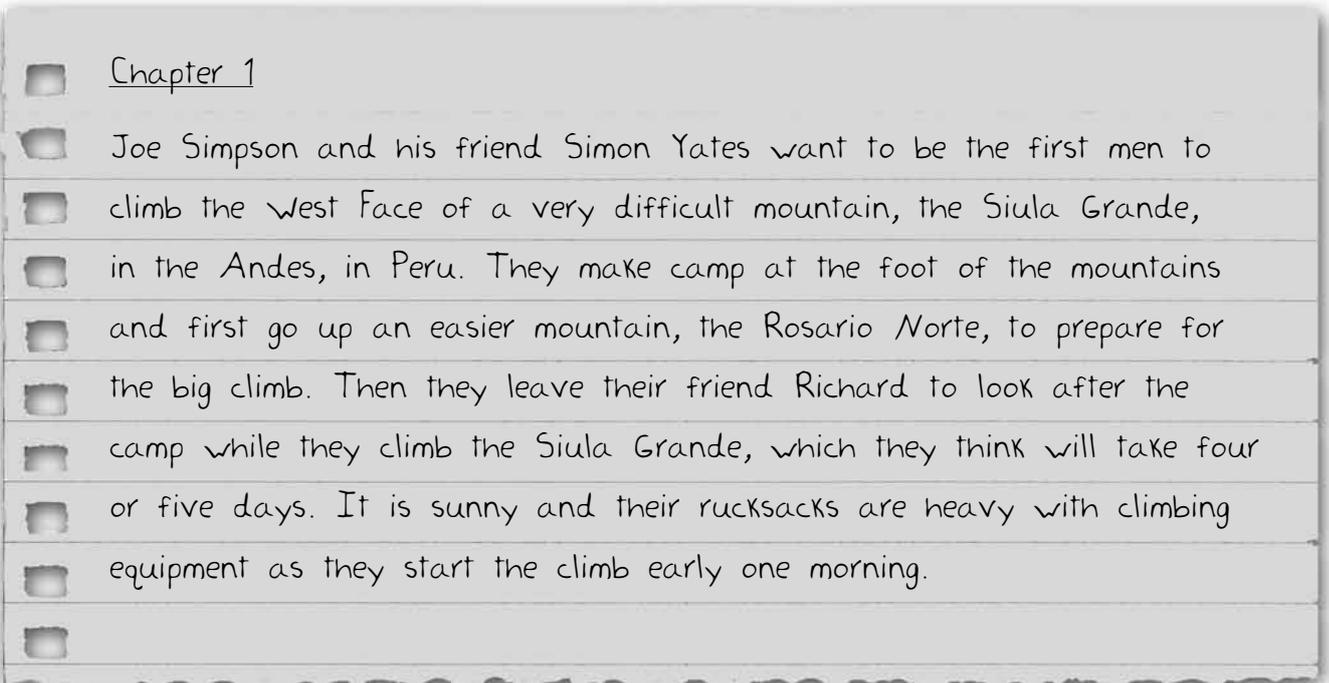
Task 2 Knowing the background

- 1 Read the notes about the author and the story. What sort of person do you think Joe Simpson is?
- 2 Write a short paragraph about the background to the story. Think about the questions below.
 - 1 What do you learn about Joe Simpson's life?
 - 2 Why has he been successful as an author?
 - 3 Why did he write this book?
 - 4 Why do people enjoy the book and the film?
 - 5 Why did he choose the title 'Touching the Void'?

Task 3 Summarizing the plot

- 1 When you finish reading each chapter, write three or four sentences to summarize the action in that chapter. Later you can reread the summaries to remind yourself of the sequence of events.

Example



 **Tips**

- A** When writing a summary, try not to look back at the chapter. You will usually find that the events that you can remember are the most important ones and these are what you should include in your summary.
- B** Use words and phrases to link your sentences and show the sequence of events, e.g. *first, after this, when, while, then, because* etc.
- C** When telling a story of a book or a film, we usually use the present tense, e.g. *he visits, they go, she sees*.

- 2 Put the titles of the chapters in the correct order.

A Terrible Decision	Out of the Darkness	Up the Ice Field
Preparing for Siula Grande	The Return	Into the Crevasse
The Long Crawl	Accident on the Ridge	Storm at the Summit

- 3 Test your partner (or yourself). Choose the title of one chapter at random and, without looking at your notes, say what that chapter is about.
- 4 Read a sentence from your chapter summaries to your partner. Can he/she guess which chapter it is from?
- 5 Write a short paragraph to describe what you think happened before the story begins. Think about the points below.
- 1 Choosing which mountain to climb.
 - 2 Getting into good physical shape.
 - 3 Travelling to Peru and organizing the equipment.
 - 4 Meeting Richard and making food arrangements.

Task 4 Noting vocabulary

Note down important vocabulary from each chapter.

 **Tips**

- A** Use a range of vocabulary in your writing. Divide the new vocabulary into categories:
 - 1 Technical vocabulary connected to climbing and mountains, e.g. *gullies, flutings, avalanche, crampons, helmet* etc.
 - 2 Adjectives used to describe the atmosphere, the weather, the people, feelings and places, e.g. *lonely, relaxed, silent, stormy, freezing, frosty, remote, steep* etc.
 - 3 Verbs to talk about different actions, e.g. *abseil, fall, lower, scream, shout* etc.
 - 4 Adverbs to describe actions, e.g. *calmly, excitedly, rapidly, worriedly* etc
- B** Try to record new vocabulary together with its context, e.g. *the ground was hard and frosty*.

Task 5 Describing events

- 1 Choose three events in the book to describe. Talk about their places in the story, what happens, the atmosphere (if relevant) and how the character(s) are feeling. Say why the event is important.

Example

The most significant and dramatic event in the story happens when Joe falls and breaks his leg. He and Simon are on their way down the mountain after reaching the summit. This part of the climb should be much easier than the climb up and Joe is feeling happy and confident. However, this all changes when he finds himself at the top of a steep ice cliff which he has to climb down. As Joe starts the difficult climb suddenly his ice axe comes free from the ice. He falls and hits the mountain slope heavily. He hears his bones breaking. It is a terrible sound and the pain in his leg is so bad that he cannot stand up. He knows that with a broken leg he has little chance of getting down the mountain and he feels very frightened. Everything is silent. For the first time Joe thinks about death and dying alone on the mountain. His great adventure has become a nightmare. This part of the story is important because the accident is the start of a series of incredible events that test the power of friendship and the instinct for survival.

Tips

- A Use a range of vocabulary from the words you recorded in Task 4 to describe the event.
- B Use adverbs to describe the action, e.g. *carefully, rapidly, slowly, unexpectedly* etc.

2 Read these quotes from the book and say which events they refer to.

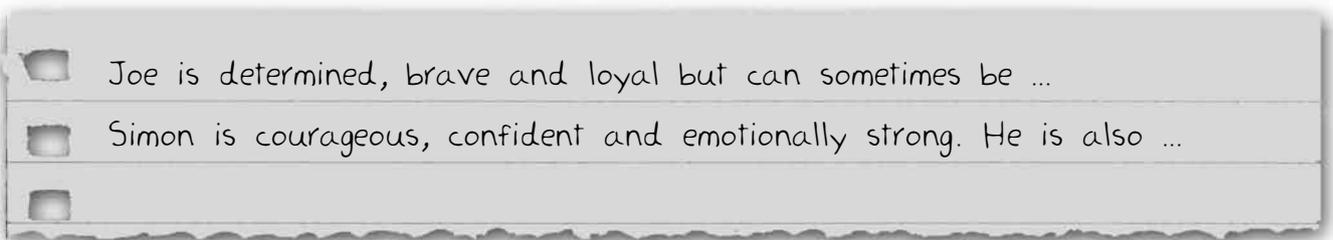
- 1 'We'll have to find a new dream.'
- 2 'We were no longer two friends working together as a team.'
- 3 'But I did not care anymore. I was not even frightened of death.'
- 4 'It was not a difficult decision to make, because I had no other choice.'
- 5 'Then I understood what had happened to Joe.'
- 6 'It was the most wonderful sight I had ever seen.'
- 7 'You did the right thing. Thanks for getting me down.'

Task 6 Describing characters

1 There are two main characters in the book. Answer these questions about them.

- 1 What are their characters like?
- 2 What are they like physically?
- 3 How are they similar?
- 4 How are they different?
- 5 Do they change during the story?
- 6 How would the story have been different if Simon, not Joe, had broken his leg?

Example



2 Which character do you admire most or least? Give reasons.

Tips

- A Briefly introduce the character.
- B Give examples to show what the person is like and why you admire/do not admire him.
- C If you don't admire the character, try to give some reasons why he might have chosen to do the things he did, or find some examples of good things he does. This gives a balanced view.

Useful language

Introducing

My favourite character in the book is ...
 The person I admire most in the book is ...
 The character I like the least is ...

Giving reasons and examples

There are several reasons why I like Joe Simpson.
 Firstly, I think he's courageous and determined. For example ... This is clear when ...
 Secondly, he's forgiving and doesn't blame his friend for ...
 I admire Joe a great deal because he's a very strong character but he's also very human and talks about his emotions openly. He shows this when ...
 In my opinion, Simon is a very cold character because he doesn't seem to be upset about ...
 I think Simon is just like all of us. For example ...

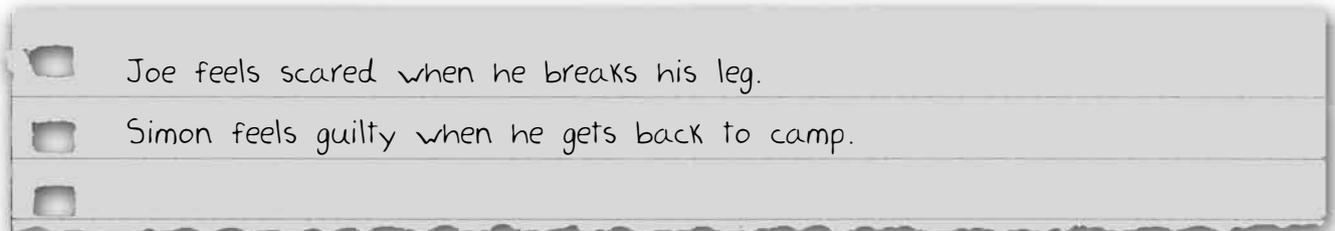
Balancing

Although I can understand why he cut the rope, I still think he was wrong.
 People expect their friends to be loyal. However, I think anyone in his situation would have ...
 I think Simon should have spent longer looking for Joe, but nevertheless he ...

- 3 Use the following adjectives to write sentences about how Joe and Simon feel at different times in the story.

angry	confident	confused	excited	exhausted	guilty
lonely	proud	relieved	scared	shocked	worried

Example



- 4 The mountain itself could be considered a 'character' in the story. Write a short description of the mountain with as many details as you can remember. Look at the photos at the beginning of the book and use the following words.

challenging	crevasse	dangerous	empty	evil	frightening	ice field
North Face	powerful	remote	silent	summit	weather	West Face

Task 7 Identifying what makes the story exciting and interesting

- 1 Read these comments from people about why they find the story exciting and interesting. Find examples from the story to support these comments. Do you agree with them? Why/Why not?

1

I think it's exciting because the story is full of action. Things happen very quickly and you want to read more to find out what happens next!

2

For me, it's like a race against time because all through the book we're reminded of what time of day it is and how soon it's going to get dark and so on. So, this builds the tension.

3

In my opinion, the story seems so exciting because, in a way, you know what's going to happen and there's a sort of inevitability about the accident.

4

I like the way the writer makes the story like a rollercoaster. One minute everything's fine – the next it's not! Things change very quickly and it holds your attention.

5

What I like about the story is how we get two viewpoints of the events. It shows us how both people were thinking and why they did things.

6

The story was interesting for me because it mixes factual information and exciting action. It was obvious that it was a real climber who was telling the story.

7

One of the most interesting parts for me was near the end when Joe obeys 'The Voice' in his head. I think it's his survival instinct and it shows how far we can push ourselves if we really want to live.

- 2 Write your own comment.

Task 8 Discussing themes

With a partner or in small groups discuss and then write answers to these questions about different themes that come up in the book.

- 1 What new things did you learn about mountain climbing from *Touching the Void*? (e.g. equipment, sleeping on a mountain, drinking and eating, climbing with a partner etc.)
- 2 What do you think makes people like Joe and Simon risk their lives doing dangerous things?
- 3 Do you think Joe and Simon were right to make this climb? Why/Why not?
- 4 How does the relationship between Joe and Simon change during the story? What do you think it will be like in the future?
- 5 What part does the weather play in the story?
- 6 Could the accident and the events on the mountain have been prevented?
- 7 What does the story tell us about the instinct of survival?
- 8 How do you think Joe and Simon's lives will be changed by the events in the story?
- 9 Do you know of any other stories of survival like this?

Task 9 Giving opinions and recommending

- 1 When you finish the book, write some sentences about your opinions on the following:
 - 1 the story
 - 2 the beginning/ending
 - 3 the writer's style

Useful language

Giving opinions

In my opinion, ...

I really enjoyed ...

For me, the story was too ...

On one hand I thought the story was good because ...

But on the other hand I got bored in a few places, for example when ...

I think the writer should have started ... /finished ...

I would have preferred a different beginning/ending ...

I like the writer's style because it's not too confusing and he can describe things very clearly, for example ...

I think the writer creates very realistic scenes such as ...

- 2 Do you agree or disagree with these statements? Why?
- 1 The writer shares very openly with the reader how he feels about the accident.
 - 2 I thought that some of the scenes were very emotional and a bit upsetting.
 - 3 I sometimes found the explanations about climbing a little complicated and confusing.
 - 4 From my point of view, the best thing about the book is that it really makes you think about important things as well as being an exciting story.
- 3 Would you recommend the book to other people?
- Yes, I would because _____.
- No, I wouldn't because _____.

Useful language

Recommending

You should definitely read/not read this book.
 You would love this book because ...
 I can't recommend this book enough.
 I think you might be disappointed by this book.
 This book isn't really suitable for people who ...

FCE Writing Exam Tasks

Completing tasks 1 to 9 above will help you prepare for FCE writing exam tasks. Here are some examples of different types of tasks you might have to do on *Touching the Void* in the writing exam.

1 Letters

You may be asked to write a reply to a friend's letter or email asking you some questions about the book.

Example question

This is part of a letter from your English-speaking penfriend.

I've just finished reading 'Touching the Void' and I can't decide whether I think Simon did the right thing or not when he cut the rope! What do you think? Write and tell me.

Dave

Write a **letter** to your penfriend giving your opinion.

Here are some more examples of questions a penfriend might ask you.

- 1 I still don't understand why Joe Simpson chose the title 'Touching the Void'. Can you write and explain? Do you think it's a good title?
- 2 These days there are a lot of adventure and survival films and stories. Why do you think 'Touching the Void' is so popular? Write and tell me.
- 3 The ending of 'Touching the Void' is about Joe's explanations and feelings about the accident, and what happened later. I'm not sure if it's a good ending or a bit boring. What do you think? Write and tell me.
- 4 Help! I don't know how Joe managed to get down the mountain once he'd fallen into the crevasse. Can you explain in a letter? Thanks!

Tips

- A** In a letter or email to a friend, you can use colloquial expressions.
- B** Make sure you start and end the letter or email appropriately, e.g. *Dear ... /Hi ... , Love from/ Take care/Write soon/All the best.*

2 Essays

You may be asked to write an essay for your teacher about something you have discussed in class.

Example question

Your English teacher has given you this question for homework.

Which part of 'Touching the Void' do you think is most exciting and why?

Write your **essay**.

Here are some more examples of essay questions.

- 1 Explain why things went wrong on the mountain.
- 2 Why is the weather important in the story of *Touching the Void*?
- 3 Why do you think Joe and Simon were determined to climb this mountain?
- 4 What future do you imagine for Simon after the accident?
- 5 Do you think we should have any sympathy for Simon? Why/Why not?
- 6 Do you think Joe and Simon will ever climb together again in the future? Why/Why not?

Tip

In an essay you should write an introduction, a main paragraph or two and a conclusion.

3 Articles

You may be asked to write an article for a magazine/competition etc.

Example question

We are looking for articles about books in which people have to make difficult choices. The best articles will be published next month.

Write an **article** about the choices Simon and Joe have to make in *Touching the Void*.

Here are some more examples of article tasks.

- 1 We are looking for articles about books that have the theme of 'a race against time'. Write an article related to this theme in *Touching the Void*.
- 2 We are looking for articles about books in which people have to fight to survive against nature. Write an article about this theme in *Touching the Void*.
- 3 We are looking for articles about books in which relationships change. Write an article about how a relationship changed in *Touching the Void*.

Tip

Organize your article into different parts, including an introduction, a main paragraph or two and a conclusion, and use a semi-formal or formal style.

4 Reviews

You may be asked to write a review of the book or the film (if you have seen it) for a magazine/website etc.

Example question

Have you read a book recently that you really enjoyed? Write a review of the book for the college magazine and say why you enjoyed it and why you would recommend it to other readers.

Write a **review** of *Touching the Void* for the magazine.

Here are some more examples of review tasks.

- 1 Write a review for our Real Life Adventure website saying what the most interesting parts of the book *Touching the Void* are for people who like real life adventure stories.
- 2 Write a review of the film that has been made of the book *Touching the Void* and say what differences you noticed.

Tip

Give a general view of the book including a short summary of the plot, what is interesting about it and a recommendation.

5 Reports

You may be asked to write a report for a club or teacher.

Example question

You belong to a book club. Write a **report** for the book club about the book *Touching the Void* and say what the good and bad points of the book are and whether you would recommend it for other book clubs to read and discuss.

Here is another example of a report task.

1 Your teacher is planning to buy a set of books for one of his/her classes to read and discuss. Write a report about *Touching the Void* saying why you think he/she should or shouldn't buy a set of these books.

Tip

Divide your answer into different paragraphs with headings – story/characters/themes/recommendation.

And finally ...

Whether you are writing a letter, email, essay, article, review or report, it is important to remember that you should always:

- answer the question you are asked – don't memorize an answer you have written before.
- think about the person who is going to read your answer and decide if your language should be formal, semi-formal or informal.
- organize your answer clearly into paragraphs and join sentences with linking devices.
- use a range of vocabulary.
- check your work for mistakes when you have finished.
- try to keep to the word limit 120–180 words.