

**Worksheets
1-10**

1. From *Touching the Void*

Aims

This worksheet should help you to

- carry out a close reading of the text
- understand the wider context of the extract
- understand the content, including unusual vocabulary in the text
- analyse the structure of the text
- analyse the author's style
- understand the theme(s) the author is writing about
- prepare for writing about the text in your exam

Context

This extract is from a true account of a climbing accident and its aftermath. Joe and Simon are 19,000 feet up a mountain covered with snow and ice at the time, roped together for protection. Most of the story is told by Joe, who has the accident. After the point in the extract, Simon tries hard to get Joe down the mountain, and almost succeeds before lowering him on a 300 foot rope over what turns out to be a sheer drop. The climax of the book is when Simon cuts the rope between them to save himself from being pulled off the mountain after Joe.



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Content

Some of the book from which this extract is taken is quite technical, with few explanations being given for non-climbers. This makes it slightly hard to follow at times. This extract is relatively easy to follow because its subject matter is clear: a bad accident and the reactions of the victim and his climbing partner. However, some sections include slightly technical concepts.

- In the table below, match the quotes with their explanations.

Quote from extract	Explanation
1 He couldn't hold this. I ... jerked to a sudden violent stop.	A Much of the mountain face is largely vertical, a sheer drop.
2 ... if there's just two of you a broken ankle could turn into a death sentence.	B His ice axes can be dug in like moveable anchors to prevent the other man pulling him down if he falls again.
3 ... the small rise I had hoped to scale quickly	C The men are roped together. If one falls a long way, it may be hard for the other man to resist being pulled after him. The lower man will come to a halt once his partner has managed to get his ice axes to hold fast.
4 I ... was grateful to be able to follow Joe's tracks instead of breaking trail.	D It is very hard to get off the mountain with an injury, especially without a party of several climbers to help.
5 ... ready to dig my axes in at the first sign of trouble.	E The mountain slope is uneven. Even descending can involve climbing short uphill sections.
6 thousands of feet of open face	F It is easier to walk in trodden snow on a route proven to be a safe.

- What do you think are the advantages of including technical sections without any explanation?

The men's reactions

Much of the drama of the book, and of this extract, is in the changing ways in which the two men view their situation and respond emotionally to it. The writing would be far less interesting if it only described what actually happened.

- What conclusion does Joe seem to reach in lines 31–42? How do you know? How might this add to the drama of the story?
- What is meant by 'I watched him quite dispassionately' (line 69) and why does Simon feel like this? (Consider the context of the world of climbing.)

Style

The style of the extract is fairly spare. Adjectives and imagery are used with restraint. Remember that in a book of this sort, telling a true story, the author has to make the experience come alive for the reader. He has to convey what happened, and how he felt about it at the time.

5. What phrases especially convey the shocking and violent nature of the accident? (lines 1–7)
6. What effect do the phrases ‘grotesque distortion’ and ‘strange zigzag’ have? (lines 14–15)
7. Comment on the style of ‘Something terrible, something dark with dread occurred to me, and as I thought about it I felt the dark thought break into panic’ and its effect on the reader. (lines 20–1)

Structure

The obvious structural feature of this extract is that it gives separate accounts of the same incident, from the viewpoints of the two men. Just before the point at which the extract begins, their situations were very similar; now they are very different. One thinks he will die; the other secretly holds the same view, while believing that he personally will survive.

8. Comment on how effective you find the presentation of the story from two separate points of view, giving your reasons.

(n.b. There are some sample assessment questions on Touching the Void on the Edexcel website.)

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