

### Section 1:

**#1: "The message came on a Sunday, which always seemed like a graveyard day to me. Not the end of the week, not the beginning, just a stillness in between."**

#### Strengths:

- Your opening creates a quiet, lonely feeling that matches the story's mood perfectly
- The comparison of Sunday to a graveyard day helps readers understand the narrator's emotions

**Vague Time Reference** → The phrase "graveyard day" is interesting, but your writing doesn't explain clearly enough what makes Sunday feel this way to the answering machine. Readers might wonder why this specific day matters or what past events on Sundays made it feel so empty. You could strengthen this by adding a brief memory or reason that connects Sunday to the machine's loneliness, perhaps mentioning when people used to record messages most often or when the machine was last used on a Sunday.

**Exemplar:** *"The message came on a Sunday, which always seemed like a graveyard day to me—the day when everyone was too busy with family to leave messages, leaving me in silence."*

**#2: "I didn't recognize the voice at first. It had been two decades, after all. Voices shift with age, get gravelly or smooth over, depending on what life has squeezed out of them. But the way she said 'hello,' like it was a window opening instead of a greeting, that was Sarah."**

#### Strengths:

- The description of how voices change over time shows good understanding of how people age
- Your comparison of "hello" to a window opening is creative and helps readers imagine the sound

**Underdeveloped Character Connection** → Whilst you tell readers that the narrator recognised Sarah through her greeting, your writing doesn't show enough about their past relationship or why this matters so much. The emotional weight of recognising someone after twenty years needs more detail. What specific memories does this "hello" trigger? What made their relationship special enough that the answering machine remembers her voice pattern after so long? Adding these details would help readers care more about Sarah's return.

**Exemplar:** *"But the way she said 'hello,' like it was a window opening instead of a greeting—the same hopeful tone she used when recording birthday messages for her mum—that was Sarah."*

**#3: "Sarah, who used to laugh right into my microphone. Sarah, who vanished mid-sentence one night. She thought she'd wronged them. But I remember. They stopped listening first."**

**Strengths:**

- Your repetition of "Sarah, who" creates a rhythm that emphasises the machine's memories
- The final revelation that "they stopped listening first" adds an unexpected twist to the story

**Unclear Pronoun Reference** → The shift between "them," "they," and "I" in these final lines becomes confusing. Your writing doesn't make it clear who "them" refers to—is it Sarah's family, friends, or the machine's owner? The line "She thought she'd wronged them" introduces people we haven't met in the story, which leaves readers puzzled. You need to clarify earlier in your piece who owns this answering machine and what their relationship with Sarah was, so this ending makes sense.

**Exemplar:** *"Sarah, who used to laugh right into my microphone. Sarah, who vanished mid-sentence one night. She thought she'd wronged my owner, Marcus. But I remember. Marcus stopped listening first."*

■ Your piece shows creative thinking by choosing an answering machine as your narrator, which is an unusual and interesting choice. The emotional core of your story—about people who stop listening to each other—is powerful and meaningful. However, your writing would benefit from adding more concrete details about the relationships between characters. Right now, readers can feel that something sad happened, but they don't fully understand what went wrong or why it matters. You could improve your piece by weaving in small memories throughout the story that show specific moments between Sarah and the machine's owner. For example, instead of just saying Sarah "vanished mid-sentence one night," you could include what she was saying or why she stopped. Additionally, your opening paragraphs spend quite a bit of time on setting the scene, but the middle section rushes through important information about Sarah's illness and apology. Try balancing these sections better—perhaps shortening the description of the attic and Sunday, whilst expanding the part where Sarah explains why she's calling. This would give your story more substance and help readers connect emotionally with the characters. Also, consider adding one or two sentences that explain who owns the answering machine and what their daily life is like now, so the ending revelation about who stopped listening has more impact.

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**Section 2:**

#1 The message came on a Sunday, which always seemed like a graveyard day to me. Not the end of the week, not the beginning, just a stillness in between. My reels groaned as I spooled the tape. I hadn't been used in years, not since smartphones took over. But someone had pressed play.

#2 I didn't ~~recognize~~ [recognise] the voice at first. It had been two decades, after all. Voices shift with age, get gravelly or smooth over, depending on what life has squeezed out of them. But the way she said "hello," like it was a window opening instead of a greeting, that was Sarah. No mistaking it.

#3 "I'm dying," she said, without hesitation. Just those words, like she was dropping them off at the kerb. "Six months, maybe. I'm calling people I've wronged. You're at the top of the list."

The attic hummed. Dust swirled. A mouse sneezed in the insulation. Below, someone shuffled through boxes. I wanted to play the message again. Not for them. For me.

Sarah, who used to laugh right into my microphone. Sarah, who vanished mid-sentence one night. She thought she'd wronged them. But I remember. They stopped listening first.

I remember everything.