

Section 1

#1: "A girl approached, her steps hesitant. She stopped beside the bench but didn't sit. 'You still make those?' she asked. He didn't look up. 'You still come here?' She sat, leaving space between them. 'Not often.'"

Strengths:

- Your dialogue feels natural and realistic, showing how people speak when there's tension between them
- The physical actions (sitting with space between them) help show their emotional distance without stating it directly

Unresolved tension: → The conversation moves too quickly from standing to sitting without giving readers time to feel the weight of their reunion. After not seeing each other for what seems like a long time, their first exchange feels rushed. The phrase "She sat, leaving space between them" comes immediately after "didn't sit," which happens very fast. This moment deserves more breathing room—perhaps a pause where she considers whether to sit, or a description of how carefully she lowers herself onto the bench, still unsure if she's welcome.

Exemplar: *She stopped beside the bench but didn't sit. For a moment, she just stood there, fingers curling around the strap of her bag. Then, slowly, she lowered herself onto the far edge, leaving space between them.*

#2: "'You stopped replying.' 'You stopped asking.' He paused. 'You stopped showing up.' She didn't answer."

Strengths:

- The back-and-forth structure creates a sense of rhythm that shows both characters are equally hurt
- The repetition of "you stopped" emphasises that they're blaming each other

Missing emotional foundation: → Your dialogue tells us they hurt each other, but we don't understand why this matters so much to them. The swans are mentioned as "promises," but what were they promising? Were they best friends, a couple, siblings, or something else? Without knowing what they once meant to each other, the accusations feel hollow. When he says "You stopped replying" and she counters "You stopped asking," readers need context about what kind of messages or questions these were to feel the full weight of their loss.

Exemplar: *"You stopped replying to my messages about the art project." "You stopped asking after you found new friends."*

#3: "He picked up the old swan, unfolded it slowly. Inside, faint pencil lines: a date, a name, a tiny heart—and a second name, crossed out. He refolded it, placed it gently on top of the pile. Then he folded another."

Strengths:

- The crossed-out name creates a powerful image that suggests someone was removed from their relationship
- Ending with "Then he folded another" shows the boy continuing his ritual despite the pain, which feels true to how people cope

Unclear symbolism: → The crossed-out name raises more questions than it answers. Whose name was crossed out—hers, his, or someone else's entirely? Did he cross it out, or did she? When did this happen? The swan reveals what should be your story's most important clue, but it's too vague to give readers a satisfying understanding. The phrase "a second name" doesn't tell us whose second name or why two names were there together. This moment should provide clarity about what broke their relationship, but instead it adds more mystery.

Exemplar: *Inside, faint pencil lines: a date from two years ago, her name in his handwriting, a tiny heart—and his own name, crossed out in angry strokes.*

■ Your piece has lovely, quiet moments that show rather than tell emotions, particularly in how the characters move around each other. The physical details—like the space between them on the bench and the breeze lifting the swan's wing—create atmosphere effectively. However, your story struggles with giving readers enough information to care deeply about these characters. We see that they're sad

and that something broke between them, but we don't understand what they lost or why it mattered. The swans are meant to be important symbols, but without knowing what they represented specifically (friendship promises? romantic commitment? shared dreams?), they remain just pretty paper objects. Additionally, your ending would be much stronger if you showed us how the boy feels after unfolding the swan and discovering what's inside—does he feel regret, anger, sadness, or something else? Right now, he simply refolds it and continues making more, which feels emotionally flat. Also, consider expanding the moment when she pulls out the old swan from her bag. This is a significant action that shows she's carried his gift all this time, but it happens in just one sentence. Give that moment more weight by describing her hesitation, how worn the swan looks, or what it means to her that she kept it. Your writing would benefit from adding one or two sentences that tell us clearly what type of relationship these characters had (best friends since childhood? A couple who broke up? Siblings?) so readers can understand the stakes of their conflict.

Score: 41/50

Section 2:

The Paper Swan

The park was nearly empty. A boy sat on the bench, folding paper with slow, deliberate hands. His pile of swans was smaller than usual—just three, each creased with care.

#1 A girl approached, her steps hesitant. She stopped beside the bench but didn't sit.

"You still make those?" she asked.

He didn't look up. "You still come here?"

She sat, leaving space between them. "Not often."

He handed her a swan. She turned it over. "You used to give these out like lollies."

"I used to think they meant something."

She placed it on the bench between them. "They did."

#2 He folded another. "You stopped replying."

"You stopped asking."

He paused. "You stopped showing up."

She didn't answer.

A breeze lifted the edge of the swan's wing. She caught it before it blew away.

"You always hated when they got dirty," she said.

He shrugged. "They're just paper."

She held it to her chest. "You said they were promises."

He didn't respond.

A child ran past, laughing. The boy watched him disappear down the path.

"You still fold them the same way," she said.

He nodded. "Muscle memory."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a faded swan—creased, yellowed, edges soft. She placed it beside the others.

He stared at it. "That one was yours."

"I know."

He reached for it, then stopped. "You kept it?"

"I didn't know what else to do with it."

They sat in silence. The wind rustled the trees. A dog barked in the distance.

She stood. "I should go."

He didn't look up. "You always leave before the sun sets."

She hesitated. "You always stay."

She walked away, her footsteps soft on the gravel.

#3 He picked up the old swan, unfolded it slowly. Inside, faint pencil lines: a date, a name, a tiny heart—and a second name, crossed out.

He refolded it, placed it gently on top of the pile.

Then he folded another.