

Section 1:

#1: "The swings creaked softly in the wind, their chains sighing like tired ghosts. The sky hung low above the playground, painted in smudges of orange and violet — colours that looked too fragile to last, too beautiful to stay."

Strengths: Your opening creates a vivid sensory atmosphere through precise word choices like "creaked softly" and "sighing," which draw readers into the playground's mood immediately. The personification of the sky and chains establishes an emotional tone that carries throughout your piece.

→ **Vague spatial grounding:** Your piece doesn't clearly establish where Maya is in the playground initially. Readers know she's at a playground with swings, a slide, and a roundabout, but your writing would benefit from a clearer sense of the physical layout and her position within it. Consider anchoring her location more explicitly in your opening so readers can visualise the space alongside her.

Exemplar: "The swings creaked softly in the wind at the far edge of the playground, their chains sighing like tired ghosts. Beyond them, the sky hung low..."

#2: "She walked past the roundabout, its red paint flaking like sunburnt skin. When she pressed her hand against it, the metal was too cold, too still. Once, it had spun so fast the world blurred — dizzy laughter rising higher than the clouds. Now, it was only a circle that went nowhere."

Strengths: Your piece effectively contrasts past joy with present stillness through the roundabout's description, which deepens the nostalgic atmosphere. The phrase "a circle that went nowhere" is particularly powerful because it works both literally and symbolically.

→ **Underdeveloped connection to Maya's emotional response:** Whilst you describe the roundabout's physical state beautifully, your piece doesn't fully explore how Maya actually feels touching it or standing beside it. Does she feel sadness? Numbness? Regret? Your writing tells us what the roundabout is like, but showing us Maya's internal reaction would strengthen the emotional weight of this moment.

Exemplar: "When she pressed her hand against it, the metal was too cold, too still—so cold it made her breath catch. She remembered dizzy laughter rising higher than the clouds. Now, it was only a circle that went nowhere, and neither could she."

#3: "The wind carried the faintest rattle of the swings. They moved on their own, forward, back, forward — the rhythm of something remembered but no longer real. She could almost hear her brother's voice, bright and breathless: 'Push me higher, Maya! Higher!' But the swing hung empty. Too light, too silent."

Strengths: Your piece masterfully uses the empty swing to introduce Maya's backstory and loss, and the repetition of "forward, back, forward" mirrors the physical movement whilst reinforcing the cyclical nature of grief and memory.

→ **Sudden shift in focus without sufficient transition:** Your piece moves from general playground descriptions to this specific memory of her brother fairly abruptly. Whilst the transition isn't jarring, your writing could benefit from a moment that more deliberately signals this shift from present observation to emotional reckoning. The reader senses something significant has happened, but the piece doesn't quite prepare us for the magnitude of this loss before it's revealed.

Exemplar: "The wind carried the faintest rattle of the swings—a sound she'd been avoiding. They moved on their own, forward, back, forward — the rhythm of something remembered but no longer real. She could almost hear her brother's voice..."

■ Your piece shows strong atmospheric writing and genuine emotional depth, particularly in how you use physical spaces to explore grief and memory. The connection between the deteriorating playground and Maya's internal state feels authentic. However, your writing would improve if you gave readers clearer glimpses into Maya's thoughts and feelings as she moves through this space. Right now, your piece is quite observational—we see what Maya sees, but we don't always feel what Maya feels. Also, consider whether you want to reveal more about what happened to her brother or leave it intentionally mysterious; as it stands, readers might wonder if he's passed away or simply grown up and moved on, and clarifying this (even subtly) could strengthen your piece's emotional impact. Additionally, your piece could benefit from showing us one or two moments where Maya physically interacts with the playground in a way that reveals her emotional state—not just standing and observing, but perhaps doing something that demonstrates her connection or disconnection from this place.

Score: 41/50

Section 2:

The swings creaked softly in the wind, their chains sighing like tired ghosts. The sky hung low above the playground, painted in smudges of orange and violet — colours that looked too fragile to last, too beautiful to stay. The slide stood silver and cold, its once-shiny surface dulled by years of rain and laughter that had long stopped echoing. A single leaf skittered down it, whispering secrets to the air. The bark beneath Maya's shoes was damp, clinging to her soles as though it didn't want her to leave. She walked past the roundabout, its red paint flaking like sunburnt skin. When she pressed her hand against it, the metal was too cold, too still. Once, it had spun so fast the world blurred — dizzy laughter rising higher than the clouds. Now, it was only a circle that went nowhere. The wind carried the faintest rattle of the swings. They moved on their own, forward, back, forward — the rhythm of something remembered but no longer real. She could almost hear her brother's voice, bright and breathless: "Push me higher, Maya! Higher!" But the swing hung empty. Too light, too silent. The sun melted into the horizon, and the shadows grew longer, stretching like dark fingers across the sandpit. Everything felt slower now — even time itself seemed to hesitate here. The playground wasn't just quiet; it was listening. A streetlight flickered to life. The light was thin, uncertain, like it was afraid to interrupt. Maya stood for a moment longer, watching the swing sway once more before coming to rest. The air was heavy with memory — too

full of what once was, too empty of what still is. She turned and walked away. Behind her, the wind gave the swing one last push — gentle, almost kind — before the playground fell silent again.