Writing Task (WT)

The Writing Task complements the other subtests by testing students’ ability to produce a piece of continuous English prose of about 600 words in length. Students write in response to written and visual stimulus material on an overall concept or theme. Each piece of stimulus material evokes a different aspect of the overall concept. Students respond in any form or style other than poetry to this concept and to as many stimulus pieces as they wish.

This section describes the 2008 testpaper and comments on the writing that students produced in response to it. The comments are based on an analysis of a statistically significant sample of students’ responses. The marking guide used to grade responses is included here, together with graphs showing the distribution of grades awarded in each of the five substantive criteria. Finally, a selection of student responses has been included to exemplify successful writing as defined by the task criteria.

Testpaper

The diagram below represents the 2008 testpaper. Its 13 stimulus pieces are numbered for reference. All pieces relate to the overall concept of the testpaper.

Overall concept: Circle

The overall concept or topic of the 2008 testpaper was Circle. Students come across real and conceptual circles constantly, both in their everyday lives and in their study, whatever subject choices they make.

Students who have a quantitative or technical turn of mind should recognise the circle as a concept that is fundamental to mathematics, the sciences and industry. For those with an artistic inclination, the circle is a rich source of inspiration and form in visual art, music, dance, drama and stories. Circles are used in games and sports as suggested by the Olympic Games logo. However, to avoid excessive focus on the (then-topical) Olympics, the testpaper design merely hinted at the shape of the interlocking-rings of the logo.

The sun and moon, bodies with circular shapes and orbits, are objects of the physical world that people observe early in their lives and the cycles of days and months influence aspects of the natural
world. The past and present have cyclical connections (shown in one student script, in a metaphor of cogs of the past turning the wheels of today).

The circle has been used as a symbol of beliefs for rituals and ceremonies in religious and philosophical systems. It can represent the closeness and strength of a group of colleagues, friends or family. With such wide application of the concept of circle, it seems unlikely that students would be unable to respond to the testpaper.

**Response patterns**

*Student choice of genre (form or style) and stimulus pieces*

**Genres used by students**

- exposition 34.1%
- fiction 33.3%
- reflective 11.5%
- reporting 6.0%
- speech 5.7%
- argument 4.8%
- diary 2.0%
- letter 2.6%

**Popularity of stimulus pieces**

- 1 13.7%
- 2 2.8%
- 3 5.8%
- 4 4.3%
- 5 3.3%
- 6 16.5%
- 7 4.4%
- 8 1.7%
- 9 3.7%
- 10 7.4%
- 11 7.2%
- 12 16.6%
- 13 12.6%
Overview

Many students responded to the 2008 testpaper by writing narratives, expositions or reflections based on stimulus piece 6 (Wedding bands) or piece 13 (Hands). These stimulus pieces cued students to write stories by suggesting romantic or dramatic plots. They also raised issues for abstract reflection, a mode of writing modelled in a number of stimulus pieces on the testpaper.

The overall concept was itself the focus of many expository or reflective student responses. Students who produced more successful responses were able to respond to several stimulus pieces and maintain a clear focus on circle. Similarly, a number of students who based their responses on piece 10 (Atlas) maintained focus by writing about global travel to destinations suggested by a number of the stimulus pieces.

A significant number of argumentative and expository responses were based on piece 11 (Water ripples) and there were narrative and expository responses to piece 2 (Fairy ring) and piece 3 (Stone circle).

The popularity of piece 1 (Dog) and piece 12 (Thrill ride) is misleading. These pieces, along with piece 9 (Quote), contain proverbial sayings; many students were able to use these sayings in passing while responding primarily to a different piece.

Stimulus piece 8 (Camels) proved to be the least popular. More responses to piece 5 (Saturn) might have been expected also, as it contains strong cues for science fiction or for the exposition of astronomical issues.

Specific stimulus pieces and their response patterns

1. Dog

This piece contains a simple image of a playful dog unsuccessfully chasing its tail, together with an associated commonplace saying: “I seem to be going round and round in circles”. As mentioned previously, many students responded only in passing to this piece while focusing mostly on another.

Scripts that responded primarily to this piece varied in quality, depending on how precisely and purposefully the students interpreted the idea behind the common saying. Few seemed to ponder the difference, for example, between the ideas of “coming full circle” from piece 9 (Quote) and “going round in circles” from this piece. Such differences could have been explored and exploited in the stage of brainstorming ideas and analysing the writing cues on the testpaper. The study of words should also alert students to the distinctions between these ideas.

2. Fairy ring

Pictured in this stimulus piece is a stand of mushrooms. The accompanying text mentions fairy rings in European folklore. The piece was expected to stimulate ideas about the scientific reasons for this growth pattern or about the general phenomenon of circles that occur in nature and to prompt some responses with fairy or folklore themes.

This piece was not chosen by many students, but it formed the basis for some higher quality responses. Some responses exploited the suggested links between the legendary aspect of the piece and the archaeological ideas in piece 3 (Stone circle).
3. **Stone circle**

Although the function of ancient stone circles is open to conjecture, many believe that they may have served astronomical or religious purposes. The written text and the image of a prehistoric stone circle provided an opportunity for students to imagine fictional scenarios or to speculate on aspects of pre-historic societies and make connections with the present.

This piece was quite popular, although some students merely mentioned it in passing. The more substantial responses were much as expected. At least one student wrote on King Arthur’s Round Table but more such responses might have been expected given the cues from this piece and also from piece 13 on cliques.

4. **Definition**

This piece consists of a short algebraic definition of the circle as a line drawn through points equidistant from a centre point. It allows for a wide range of possible responses, from procedural texts on constructing accurate circles to theoretical or historical accounts of applications of the circle.

The piece was used by a number of students who achieved highly and who made it the basis for an exposition of the testpaper’s central concept. At least one script contained an informative discussion of the geometrical shape itself. In a different approach, one of the selected student responses included at the end of this section used the notion of constant distance as a metaphor for a relationship in which the estranged lovers cannot get closer to each other.

5. **Saturn**

The planet Saturn and its rings have fascinated astronomers for centuries. The image of the gas giant is accompanied by a text that could be the cue either for an astronomical exposition or for a space-travel story.

Although it was selected by only a small proportion of students, it succeeded as an option that suited that sub-group of students. One of the selected responses at the end of this section used this piece together with piece 10 (Atlas) as inspiration for a pseudo-classical myth.

6. **Wedding bands**

In this piece, the familiar words, “With this ring ... [I thee wed]”, serve as the caption for a picture of two rings (bride’s and groom’s). In wedding symbolism, the rings represent unending love and commitment. This piece was clearly intended to prompt some students to write romances or reflections on the strength and support provided by the family circle.

An example of a love story is included among the selected student responses at the end of this section. This was the piece most often chosen for responses that used only one stimulus piece. As the caption quotes from the spoken words of the traditional wedding service, some students took the cue to write an original speech that might be delivered by a wedding celebrant. Many more, unfortunately, wrote a purposeless and vague “speech to the class”.

7. Stormy sky

The landscape image in this piece is a simple and unspecific one. The written text cues students to write a story about a community caught in “cycles of bad weather”. More generally, it suggests that all aspects of life are affected by the weather. Although the text is clearly extracted from a narrative, it was hoped that the focus on the weather might stimulate some to write an information text on long-term climate change and its possible causes and effects.

8. Camels

The written text, about cameleers in the north of Australia and their descendants, introduces the idea of the circular nature of the connections that exist across time and place. It was intended to provide material for reflections or expositions about the contributions by immigrants to this country, the continuities between past and present and the links between generations.

This was the stimulus piece chosen least often. The piece has student-friendly features. It offers raw materials for a fictional or journalistic re-telling of a story. For example, it supplies to student writers a central character (Abdul or his grandson), the structure (two mirrored journeys from Pakistan to Australia), the theme (rejoining a broken family circle) and some facts and terms that could be used to add verisimilitude.

9. Quote

The text is a quote from Shakespeare’s King Lear. It deals with the notion that one’s endeavours may pass through phases of success only to return to the starting point. The words are spoken by Edmund, who believes his fall back to the bottom of the “wheel of fortune” is inevitable since he rose to the top through treachery. Students were not expected to recognise the origin of the words.

Students were expected to note and use the implied structure of the phrase “full circle”, which suggests a movement from a beginning point and an ultimate return to the same point. However, this precise interpretation of the words was not often observed. Even the response on “circular history”, included as one of the selected student responses at the end of this section, does not control this metaphorical “full-circle” very convincingly.

Like the other short texts on the testpaper, this one was used by many students in connection with other stimulus pieces. The piece was used in responses about the phases of a human life — childhood, adulthood and old age. There were also responses describing the self-destructive cycles that people can become trapped in.

10. Atlas

The bronze statue of Atlas holding the world on his shoulders is a reminder of how dependent on the circle were the early navigators of the globe. The accompanying text introduces the concept of globalisation, a culmination of the process of linking together the people and places of the Earth.

The students who chose this piece tended to produce some of the higher quality responses. As expected, many of these were stories or expositions. Some dealt with world exploration, others with travel and tourism. Many students drew their ideas for travel destinations or sites for
exploration from other stimulus pieces. The topic of globalisation was noted by at least one student who wrote about the power of communications technology to spread communal feelings.

11. Water ripples

The image of ripples emanating from a drop of water provides another example of circles that occur naturally. The accompanying text questions the value of recycling: “some claim that recycling even wastes resources”. This is a reference to the need for manufacturers to plan a lifecycle for each component of their product and to include ways to reclaim them after use. If this is not done, recycling those components may itself be wasteful. The piece challenges the reader to develop a point of view on the issue.

In response, students wrote journalistically and argumentatively on environmental issues. An example of this type of response is at the end of this section. This piece was popular, especially in the higher quality responses. Skilful writers exploited the opportunity to express opinions and explain ideas.

12. Thrill ride

The image of the rollercoaster represents a very active (and noisy) application of the use of arcs of the circle to entertain and thrill. It was hoped that students might refer to inventions like the Ferris wheel or its big brother, the observation wheel. The London Eye is probably the best known of these observation wheels, however, some students were aware of the new Wheel of Brisbane and referred to it. The text that accompanies the image is, like the texts in pieces 1 and 9, a common saying, “What goes around comes around”. Taken alone, this cues students to give a case where a good or bad deed is rewarded or punished in some way.

Many students made use of the image of a rollercoaster as a metaphor (“an emotional rollercoaster”). Many others, however, used the text alone, and some of them used it only in passing. Some of the lower quality responses were stories based on this item and item 13 (Hands) that presented shallow fantasies of revenge.

13. Hands

The image of a circle of many hands is accompanied by words of advice from writer CS Lewis, in a lecture he gave to graduands of King’s College, University of London. Although this excerpt is descriptive rather than overtly judgmental, elsewhere Lewis warned that belonging to an “inner ring” may tempt us to compromise our principles or beliefs. The desire to be accepted by a group can affect every one of us at some time and, if we are excluded from such a group, the experience of rejection can be a painful one.

This scenario is very familiar to teenage students and they responded in great numbers, basing their expositions or stories on their own experience or on popular stories aimed at their age group. There was, however, a sameness and a lack of depth in many of these responses. Most students missed the strong cue to challenge the desire to be in a clique. In these responses, characters who are excluded from a clique invariably hope for an “ugly duckling” transformation to make them “popular”; otherwise they start an alternative clique. There were refreshing exceptions to the tendency to approve of exclusive groups. One script, for instance, drew links between such groups and the social conflict depicted in the play, The Crucible.
The writer of one of the selected student responses took a productive tangent by focusing on the sense of close community suggested by the image.

**Student performance**

To be awarded a high grade, students must perform well in aspects of writing that are defined by the statements on the marking guide (see page 75). Further clarifications of the criteria follow here.

To find a pattern of student strengths and weaknesses in relation to their writing choices, the sample data were divided into three sets: lower achieving, middle achieving and higher achieving.

**Performance and prose form choice**

Expository responses outnumbered narratives in the lower achieving scripts, probably because there were many “tours of the testpaper” in that group.

Among the middle achieving responses, arguments, speeches and “newspaper articles” were common, mirroring the greater popularity of the issues-based piece 11 (Water ripples). Narrative responses also appeared.

The pattern of prose form choice in the higher achieving responses is similar to that in the middle achieving group.

Each year, the testpaper gives students writing suggestions such as an argument, literary exposition, the text of a speech, a persuasive text, a feature article, a procedural text, an interview, a scientific report, a personal reflection or a monologue. The list is intended to stimulate, not prescribe. Any form, except poetry, can be used. It is recommended that students write in a form and style with which they are comfortable in order to demonstrate how well they can write.

The responses sampled this year and in the past raise concerns about students’ understanding of “genre”. Some responses were composed formulaically around the (supposed) structural components of a genre (often printed, dutifully, as a heading to the response). In contrast to this approach, skilled writing focuses on a message, not on filling out or following a predetermined form. Skilled writers make language choices appropriate for the context, purpose and audience.

Regardless of their ability, students chose to respond to similar stimulus pieces. Some differences are discernable, and these are mentioned above in the comments on individual pieces.
Performance on specific criteria

Central idea
An effective central idea unifies the elements in a text. When evaluating the central idea of a response, markers ask, “What is this script about?” They look for clarity, deliberateness, substance and development.

Those students who achieved well overall in their writing did so, to a large extent, by achieving more highly in Central idea than did those whose responses were judged as middle achieving. In the higher achieving responses, Vocabulary was nearly outstripped by Central idea as the criterion contributing most to the overall score.

Vocabulary
Markers look for words that are appropriate to their location and purpose. Precise words and phrases can convey meaning with efficiency and authority. The language that is used in special fields and disciplines is part of the construction of the associated meanings. For this reason, students’ studies typically include the study of subject-specific language.

Responses in the lower achieving group earned the lion’s share of their total grade from their achievement in Vocabulary. In the middle achieving responses, Vocabulary still dwarfed the contribution to the overall achievement made by the other criteria. This is not an indicator of mastery of vocabulary but of lack of mastery of the more elaborate aspects of extended prose. In fact, examination of the sample responses showed that, amongst the higher achieving responses, significant lapses in word knowledge were indicated. This was shown not only in spelling errors caused by a lack of knowledge of word origins but also in the many malapropisms used by otherwise mature writers. There is, then, a need for explicit teaching of word knowledge at all stages of learning.

Some students seemed to have a store of challenging words but they can only improve their achievement in Vocabulary if the words are well used. Generally speaking, it is better to choose simple words for effect than to use complex vocabulary in an unwieldy manner, as in the response that claimed “… one needs to apprehend a diffusive, promulgating culture” or in the one that referred to “society’s disposition toward advocating”. Undisciplined language can often undermine the text’s intended meaning, tone and authorial stance.

Responsiveness
A requirement to write to a testpaper concept and its related stimulus material ensures that all students respond to the Writing Task on an equal footing. Writing on demand closely resembles many authentic writing situations. The requirement to be responsive is similar to the general duty of writers to give a focused and nuanced exploration of a topic. Responsiveness cannot be achieved by simply repeating the overall concept without showing purpose or development.

The generally poor performance of the total cohort on the criterion of Responsiveness is consistent with a trend seen over several years. Even in the highest achieving responses, the criterion of Responsiveness contributed least to the grades. It is important that students are conscious of the need to follow the two-step process of responding to the overall concept of the testpaper (step 1),
using one or more stimulus pieces as starting points (step 2). Students should not approach the test with preconceived notions that may prevent them from focusing upon the testpaper concept.

Interpretations of the stimulus material must make sense. For example, one student wrote about a two-person friendship and attempted to make the script responsive by asserting that “the friendship between the two was a circle”. This means nothing unless features of the friendship are shown to have circle-like properties.

**Grammar, punctuation and spelling**

Grammar, punctuation and spelling in writing must be correct to convey meaning. Confident writers go further; they vary and exploit the expressive options in grammar and punctuation.

Like Central idea, Grammar, punctuation and spelling is a criterion in which the higher achieving responses showed great superiority over the other responses. The sample showed that many errors made by students are very basic ones. It seems, for instance, that students who failed to learn punctuation of subordinate clauses in earlier years simply tried to get by without it. This suggests that an effort is needed to lift the general standard of student writing in this aspect. A lack of mastery of Grammar, punctuation and spelling hinders writers in communicating their own ideas and reduces readers’ comprehension of sophisticated texts.

**Structure and sequencing**

The arrangement of a text’s component parts should be planned and deliberate. Students who wrote the higher achieving responses were better at structuring their writing than were the students who wrote middle achieving responses. This suggests that students at all levels need to build confidence in planning and shaping their writing.

**Length**

Markers take note of whether a response has conformed to the length prescription. The ability to write to a specific length is part of the skill of organising and writing prose.

Students are asked to write approximately 600 words of continuous English prose and must write within the range of 500 to 750 words to avoid a penalty. The majority of students in the sample group were able to write within these limits.
## Writing Task

### Marking guide: Criteria and standards

#### Contribution to the holistic grade made by...

**CENTRAL IDEA**
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates the clear, deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).
- For a 1+, the writing shows sensitivities to nuances of the concept and stimulus material on the test paper.
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a use of words exactly fitted to their location and effect in the response (the right words in the right places).
- For a 1+, the writing consistently demonstrates a command of: the principal conventions of the written language, as evidenced by mastery of rules related to subject/verb agreement, participle use, antecedent agreement, pronoun choice, tense etc.; correct punctuation; correct spelling.

**RESPONSIVENESS**
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a planned structuring of extended written text and deliberate sequencing of ideas for effect.
- For a 1+, the writing shows identifiable for intended audience; direction and resolution revealed.
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a creditable connection to the concept and stimulus material.
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).

**VOCABULARY**
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a use of words exactly fitted to their location and effect in the response (the right words in the right places).
- For a 1+, the writing shows sensitivities to nuances of the concept and stimulus material on the test paper.
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates the clear, deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).

**GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, SPELLING**
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).
- For a 1+, the writing shows sensitivities to nuances of the concept and stimulus material on the test paper.
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates the clear, deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).

**STRUCTURING & SEQUENCING**
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).
- For a 1+, the writing shows sensitivities to nuances of the concept and stimulus material on the test paper.
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates the clear, deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).
- For a 1+, the writing demonstrates a deliberate and well-focused development of a central idea (explicit or implicit).

**LENGTH**
- Too short: 400-500 words
- Far too short: < 400 words
- Too long: 750-1000 words
- Far too long: > 1000 words

### Grading a response

1. Read the response as a whole.
2. Think about the holistic worth of the response.
3. Make a judgment about the contribution to the holistic worth of the response made by each aspect you are considering (CI, V, R, GPS, SS).
4. For each criterion, record your judgment as a grade and a qualifier.
5. Make a decision about the length of the response and record it (if required).
Distribution of raw grades in each criterion

Central idea

Vocabulary

Responsiveness

Grammar, punctuation and spelling

Structure and sequencing
Selected student responses

The responses to the 2008 Writing Task that follow were selected from those that met the standards for successful writing as defined by the criteria and standards for judging responses.

These complete responses appear in their original handwritten form. They may contain errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling as well as factual inaccuracies but they have been published as they were written for the sake of authenticity.

The QSA has not expressed a preference for any particular form of writing by its selection of these examples, nor are the sentiments expressed in them necessarily endorsed by the QSA. Before publication the QSA attempted to establish, but cannot guarantee, the originality of the writing in these responses.

Response 1

*How the planets came to be* is a narrative that takes the form of a legend. It draws on elements of Greek mythology in recounting the events that led to the creation of the planets and explaining the reasons for their differences. It takes a simple approach but is refreshingly different.

Response 2

*Life in the view of the Father* is a simple and appealing narrative, commenting on the reasons why a young man became a priest and following his daily activities. The reasons for people to come to him reflect the cycle of birth, life and death, and the never-ending circles of friendship, love and intimacy. This response presents an interesting take on the concept of the testpaper and uses the stimulus material well.

Response 3

*Moons, in orbit* is a slice-of-life short story that focuses on a conversation between two female friends who talk about their relationships with men, one that is long-term, complex and full of conflict, the other that is a recent betrothal, fresh and blissful. The ending is ambiguous and very effective. The storytelling demonstrates a command of quite sophisticated techniques and the response is a very sensitive piece.

Response 4

*Circle of love* is a memoir in which a woman at her husband’s graveside reflects on the love between them and recalls the day when she agreed to spend her life with him. She returns to the events of the present when she realises that the circle of their love is unbroken and continues on in her daughter. At this moment she is able to say her last good-bye. The movement between the present and the past and back again is well handled and the feelings expressed are convincing.

Response 5

This is an exposition that points out the circular nature of history, using as recent illustrations of this the nomination of Barack Obama as the Democrats’ presidential candidate in the USA and the Prime Minister’s apology in Parliament to the Stolen Generation of Indigenous children in Australia. The handwriting is difficult to read but the piece is very responsive both to the concept of the testpaper and to one of the stimulus pieces.


Response 1

**How the Planets Came to Be**

Thousands and thousands of years ago, before mortal human life existed, the Gods and Goddesses of the Universe lived peacefully in the Underworld. They watched and waited as the Universe developed, bringing more stars with each hour. From one star, seven children were born. Each child had its own personal characteristics.

Earth was the most generous, providing for everyone. Mars had a red-hot temper, always bubbling away just below the surface. Saturn was the most beautiful and wore many rings on her fingers. Uranus was the youngest, the most shy and tended to run away and hide. Jupiter was the eldest, the biggest and the most mature. Finally there were the identical twins, Pluto and Neptune, who swapped places and tricked the unsuspecting, with their love for practical jokes.

As diverse as all the children were, they had one thing in common. They all loved eating. Anything that could be eaten, from the flora in the gardens to the crumbs from their meals, was put into their great, gaping, cavernous mouths and disappeared into their seemingly bottomless pits of a stomach.
As the children grew older they ate more and more. The expand across their massive bellies increased. The food began to run out, and the people cried to their God, Zeus, to fix the problem. Each hour, each day, the people got thinner and weaker as the children got fatter and stronger, their robes now stretched tight and taut across their expansive waists. The children ate so much they had to be rolled out of their home and into the hills so they could fit, and would not squash the people.

Zeus decided something had to be done. He sat in his temple for seven days, pondering over the very few options he had. He eventually called for Atlas, the strongest man in the underworld, to be summoned to his temple. Atlas arrived, telling a story of how he had fallen in love with one of the seven children, Earth, and had promised to support her forever. At this, Zeus had a strike of inspiration, an idea that would make all involved happy.

He told Atlas what he wanted him to do. Atlas agreed and set out across the hills, to where the seven children were lying, devouring the food brought to them, by the sickly people.
Atlas first went up to Pluto and Neptune. Grasping them firmly by their tree trunk, he pulled them three times above his head and flung them out, deep into the Universe. He did this for each child. As they disappeared into the overwhelming blackness of space, the cosmic dusts and glitters chased them, holding tight to their flesh. It created massive spheres, enveloping each child. An orb of new land, with the child deep at its heart, its core. Giant balls, planets, hanging, suspended forever in the sky, yet each with its own characteristics. Which is why the great sphere of Earth provides food and shelter. Mars is so red, hot and fiery, why Saturn is so beautiful, with its many rings. Why Uranus tends blue and disappear? Neptune and Jupiter is so big. And why Neptune and Pluto swap positions throughout the years, tricking the unsuspecting person.

When Atlas returned to inform Zeus of his doings, Zeus told Atlas that he wanted him to return to Earth, to hold her up on his shoulders and support the great orb forever more.

For now, each planet, the great expanses of dust, matter and glitters, combined with the personalities of each child.
Providing a core to the great circles that became our magnificent solar system.
Response 2

Life In the View of the Father

***

He hadn’t ever been destined for the priesthood, to be a man of God, a shepherd, guiding his flock of hapless humans. His father wanted him to stay on their farm, remaining forever in the verdant hills with only the cows for company. His mother wanted him to make something of himself, to break the circle of poverty and insignificance his family had so long ago fallen into.

Somehow, though, he found himself a priest. It was calming, he supposed, to know that there was always at least one person he could belong to.

*** Birth ***

The baby never seemed to like being christened; he could understand it — after all, who would want someone splashing cold water all over their face at one o’clock in the morning — but it was still somewhat galling. This baby was no different: her little lungs were working overtime as he let the tiniest drops of water fall on her head, and said the appropriate prayers. Her parents smiled apologetically and then offered to let him hold her. He did, letting her tiny weight rest in his arms — a whole life in less than five kilos. You’re only at the very beginning, he thought to her. You have a whole life ahead of you now.

The parents took her back, and thanked him. They left together, their own secret circle tied together by family and love.

The father stayed in the chapel, waiting for the next people.

*** Life ***

The next people were getting married. Their families filed into the church, whispering, their hushed voices filling the chapel with a susurrate susurrus. It stopped when the bride walked in, her happiness making her beautiful in the sudden silence. The father said the needed words, and they said “I do” to each other. She had a scar on her nose, testament to a brief, piercing-related
piece of teenage rebellion. He had acne scars and a chipped tooth from a street fight. Now both of them had matching wedding rings.

He watched them go when it finished, silently wishing them luck. The couple held hands the whole time, and together they formed a ring of their own, filled with love and a sense of intimacy no outsider could penetrate.

*** Death ***

The father went to his last appointment of the day with a heavy heart, no longer uplifted with the hope of new life and young love. Outside the chapel he could feel the wind and the cold, the muddy ground beneath his feet. There was a small group of old people, standing in a ring around a freshly dug grave. The old women cried quietly, with flowered handkerchiefs to hide their despair. The old men stood as straight as they could, their eyes stubbornly dry but their faces crumpled. The Father spoke softly, his voice a soothing balm to old and broken hearts.

Afterwards, the old men and women shuffled away. Behind them they left one of their own, leaving countless secrets and shared moments to be buried in the soft brown earth, leaving their own circle forever broken.

*** Birth ***

The next morning, the Father was alone in the chapel when a young woman with a baby on her hip walked in, asking if he could christen her son. The father agreed.

***

And so the circle of life continued, day after day, year after year. The lives the Father watched ever changed, grew up, moved on, endlessly repeating the same cycle. Circles of friendship, of love, of intimacy that looped forever back onto one another, circles in circles, that all together formed
the never-ending tapestry of life.

++++
He towers over her, face hard and contorted in a painfully familiar expression. The air between them is thick and two years of angry, expelled arguments lurk in the spaces. She glares up at him furiously, refusing to be intimidated.

"This is pointless!" he shouts. She can feel his breath brushing her face.

"Well, what did you expect?" she yells back, her nails biting viciously into her palm. Later, four crescent scars will mark this moment in her palm. He sends her a look of absolute disgust, then wheels around and storms away. The door swings shut behind him.

She is motionless for a minute, frozen between rage and despair. Her clenched fists fall limply to her sides, shoulders slumping. Slowly, she sinks to the floor, like a ship reluctantly going under.

A shadow falls across the floor and jerkily, she glances up. Emily is standing there, head rested against the door frame and hands nonchalantly in pockets.

"It's over between the two of you?" she asks, voice smooth in concern.

She shakes her head. "It's never over." A pause. "It hadn't even started, really.

Emily descends to the floor next to her, solemnly present. She rests her head on Emily's shoulder, relaxing slightly. As they sit there, light pens in from a slit in the curtain, illuminating their figures and elongating their shadows. She shivers, although she isn't cold.

"What were you fighting about?" There is a silent 'this time.'

Tagged onto the end of Emily's question, but they both pretend not to notice it.

She thinks back. If she's honest— and she rarely is nowadays — any words they'd spoken to each other has been lost in their tangle of shouted insults. All that remains is the bleak, accusing blur of conflict staining the inner recesses of her mind. So she shrugs in response, it's the most.
truthful answer she'll give.

"The two of you need to stop dancing around each other," Emily's soft voice continues. "This isn't healthy for either of you."

He's not dancing; she wants to tell Emily. In a dance a couple will move closer and further apart, back and forth and back and forth, like the tides creeping in along the beach, always aware of the impending pull backwards. She picks up the red, fraying carpet, yanking loose threads up as she goes. Somehow, the words get lost in her mouth. "We don't get any closer to each other."

No, she realizes; they don't. They are stuck instead, stuck at this impassable, that same consistent distance separating them. She reaches for her friend's hand, removing it from where it presses, white and delicate, on Emily's knee. Emily tenses for a moment - a moment where she is not expecting Emily to tense, and once again, this, too, passes. For the moment, she just can't quite squeeze through. But Emily is unlike him, unlike her, for that matter - unlike, and she is allowed - momentarily - to slip through the cracks in the barrier between them.

"You're engaged?" she asks finally, perhaps a little too zealously in her attempt to keep the incredulity out of her voice.

Emily smiles - no, Emily blushes, though Emily hasn't blushed in years. "Matt asked me last night. I was going to tell you, but - " she breaks off, an embarrassed, but pleased smile spreading across her face. "He was so sweet, and he told me the ring was a circle that would go on forever and that was how he wanted us to be!" Her tone is light, the happiness shining in her words, proud. She smiles back, but distractedly, and watches as Emily declares and swallows her gaze. "Anyway," Emily continues, in a voice that is no longer embarrassed, but pleased, though it does
remain plainly embarrassed. "I should go. M-" She catches herself. "I'm meshing... someone."

She turns to watch as her friend exits. Careful, she doesn't say, circles can be dangerous. And so, Emily has no chance to respond, with some wry roll. Yeah, you would know.

Through the glass, she sees a familiar figure approach. Slowly, she makes back on her heels and turns. By the time she completes a full circle, he is there. She looks at him, silent.

"This is pointless," he murmurs, slicing the silence in two. It shatters.

"Well," she breathes, "what did you expect?"

She smiles and he smiles back, softly, and it feels a lot like forgiveness.

Or something else.
Circle of Love

The rain pelts down as we walk in silence towards the freshly dug grave. We are a sombre group, and while tears stream down the faces of some, I have as yet been unable to cry. I can see the others thinking, "how can she be so cold, so stoic, when her husband has just passed on?"

But my grief runs far too deep for tears. My mind is filled with thoughts of him, so full of life and love. And so I dwell on memories of our most perfect day. The day that our life together really began.

I remember how the refreshing, salty air blew my hair back off my face as we walked, hand in hand, towards the beach. It was mid-October, and the last vestiges of Winter had finally gone, to be replaced by bright Spring days. Mark had arranged the day as a surprise outing, which was unexpected from the practical young man I knew.

We stepped together off the warm pavement, and onto the enticing sand. It was still early in the day, and...
dug my feet down into the deeper layers, reaching the cool sand which the sun had not yet penetrated through to.

Clear blue water washed up and down along the beach, stretching out to the horizon. Mark released my hand, and laughing, ran down towards the water. I followed, obligingly joining in his game. We wiled away the morning playing game after game, looking for all the world like kids in love. Which is precisely what we were. But the romantic day which Mark had so perfectly planned wasn’t over yet.

Just after midday, he outshone all of his previous gestures by producing a spectacular picnic lunch. Delicious, mouth watering fruit, sandwiches, pasta, salad, and best of all, my favourite tiramisu for dessert. When we were finally full, we lay back and let the world roll lazily by.

I mumbled to him, "This has been the most perfect day. Thank you."

Sitting up, he whispered, "It's not over yet."

Pulling me to face him, he stared
straight into my eyes and stated calmly, "I love you. You are the most amazing woman I have ever encountered, and I never want to leave your side. Ella, I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

Tears were swimming in my eyes as I watched him take from his pocket a small, red box.

Opening it, he continued, "This ring signifies our love. It has no beginning and no end. An endless circle, it will continue going round forever. Will you marry me?"

The tears escaped from my eyes as I whispered to him, "Yes, yes, of course I will, yes!"

I am jerked violently back to the present as we stop in front of his grave. We had thirty wonderful years together. And he was right—our love just kept turning and turning, a beautiful, perfect circle, which never approached an end.

My daughter slips her hand into mine and squeezes it tight. The ring that Mark placed on my finger, on that perfect day so many years ago, presses into my hand. With that ring he bound our lives inextricably together and I can see
now, that even though he is gone, our love will still survive.

I turn to my daughter and look into her eyes. It's as if I'm gazing at Mark once again. The knowledge that the circle of our love has not been broken, and that it continues on in her, burns in my chest. Tears finally escape from my eyes and cascade down my cheeks. My daughter grasps my hand even tighter, because she knows that I've let go. I've said my last goodbye.
As a human race, our conception of history is that it is linear, a long seemingly endless chain of events that stretch behind us like a dust-bitten road, never to concern us again. We regard history as dead, a shadowy reality inhabited by dead people, and past events have crumbled away like ash in their own insignificance. Yet, this perception is fundamentally flawed. Many people fail to appreciate the continuing implication and repercussions of historical figures, struggles, and victories that affect our lives today. Indeed, the shape of history can’t be simplified to that of a straight line; instead, it is a series of turning wogs, in which an event, no matter how small, can set another wheel turning. History is a kinetic force, constantly in which wheels are constantly whirring with movement. Yet, the most significant moments in our lives happen when large wheels, moving at such agonisingly slow speeds, turns full circle, fulfilling our years of struggle and pain.

One such wheel finally turned full circle only recently, when Barack Obama accepted the Democrats’ nomination to be their presidential candidate, the first African-American to do so. His acceptance speech, made on the
40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s momentous, "I have a dream" speech, closed one circle which began with Rosa Parks and the ensuing civil rights movement. Indeed, this circle an especially slow moving wheel, witnessed race riots, widespread tension began in response to what Rosa Parks "with its perceived to be an unjust denial of basic human morals, the rule that ordered blacks to sit at the back of the bus or stand up to whites. Her refusal to adhere to such bigoted legislation triggered an uproar, but, more significantly, it acted as a catalyst for change. Martin Luther King mobilised this movement for greater equality within American society, through demands for integration and conducting protests which lubricated the moving wheel, slowly grinding towards freedom.

Indeed, Barack Obama can only dream of becoming the next president of the USA, because of the actions of his predecessors. Obama's bid for the presidency transcends colour and race - a fulfillment of King's dream to see people judged by the "content of their character" rather than the colour of their skin - due to the struggles of the past. Obama is the final part of this circle, which
connects the present with the past and allows him to stand where he is today.

Close to home, Kevin Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generation signals the closure of yet another slow moving circle. It has been around a hundred years since policies were implemented to rip Indigenous children from their families and to be placed in foster homes or missionarries. Families, emotionally wounded from such brutality, searched for some form of closure or compensation to heal their wounds. For the most part, their search and struggle for an apology came full circle when the words, "I am sorry" rang through the parliament. Indeed, these words had the effect of uniting the Australian people in a ring of solidarity and empathy.

Just as one wheel turned full circle, the apology also began another wheel turning: the journey towards true Aboriginal reconciliation. When or how this second circle will be completed is remaining unknown; yet, as a nation, we are now in a position than ever to enact change and it is an imperative that this new wheel keeps spinning towards equality, justice and happiness.
It is evident that history. These recent events illustrate how circles are inherent within the very structure of our history. We are where we spent now because of a multitude of wheels have turned full circle, thus this signaling a fusion of past and present. Indeed, history isn’t a straight line, but a series of spinning wheels, that fuse the past with the present.