

A-level ENGLISH LITERATURE B

Hub school network meeting

Resources: Preparing for the unseen extracts

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Extracts from the 2019 Report on the exam

Unseen passages

The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details

‘Answer the question’ is our mantra. There are no hidden requirements. Students need to answer questions that are set in all their details and not respond to the question they wish had been asked. Students do well when they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text. Arguments tend to lack direction and can become chaotic when students try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question.

Knowing the texts

It is better for A-level students if their ideas come from within the text rather than without. The students who knew their texts well were, of course, in the best position to tackle the questions and it was easy to see the confidence they brought to the exams because they knew their texts. The very best responses were seen from those students who were thinking about which material would best support the arguments they were making, rather than those who tried to use whatever they could remember and then shape their argument around that. Knowing the text should be the first priority of students and the first priority of teaching. The stories that writers tell are fundamental to enjoyment and knowing what happens in those stories enables students to interpret them with authority and engage in discussion about genre and authorial method. But the stories have to come first. There is no point writing about intradiegetic narrators or ‘aspects’ of genre if students haven’t got inside the stories that the narrators are telling. In the same way, although the specification places much emphasis on different ways of interpreting texts and how authors shape meanings, interpretations and discussion of authorial methods have to emerge from sound knowledge of the text. The text is ‘the thing itself’ and for students it is more important than what critics say about it and more important than what theorists have said about the genre to which the text belongs. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers – which is what English literature primarily ought to do. Readers need to be enabled to enter fictional worlds in as three-dimensional a way as possible and only when the story has worked the imagination can readers engage in critical thinking about their reading.

Know the ‘facts’ of the text

Knowing the text is essential, but perhaps something more specific that students should focus on is their knowing the facts of what happens in the stories they are studying. Facts in stories cannot be

disputed (unless the writer invites this to happen or self-consciously undermines what is presented as fact as is the case in *Atonement*). If students get the facts of the narrative right, they are in a good starting place and do not go off course in their thinking and writing because of a premise that has not been grasped. If a wrong fact becomes the basis for discussion, it is clear that everything that follows will get the student into difficulty. For readers, the facts of the stories have to be taken seriously. In stories the facts are the characters, what they say and do, what happens to them, who they speak and relate to and where things happen. There cannot be a debate about something that is palpably not evident in a text or a debate about factual inaccuracy. There has to be a responsible observation of what is written by the author and students have to be respectful of and responsive to it. An example here might help. In the *Othello* extract question on Paper 1A, a significant number of students did not know that Iago is on stage witnessing Othello's suicide, having been arrested by the Venetian officials beforehand and wounded by Othello. Those who were aware of this fact were able to comment on the silent and haunting figure, who bleeds as he watches while Cassio gets promoted and while Othello stabs himself and dies. Not knowing the factual detail of Iago's presence resulted in erroneous comments being made. Not knowing the factual details of texts was also seen in other papers, for example on Paper 1B some students thought that Emma is in love with Frank Churchill and is heartbroken when she discovers his engagement to Jane Fairfax and on the Paper 2A there were several students who did not know the facts of the story of Peter Grimes and wrote erroneously and at length about Peter's having been abused by his father when he was a child.

Specific comments about 1A: Aspects of tragedy

Overall student performance on this paper was very pleasing and there were many superb responses to the questions, showing what students can achieve after two years of studying and working with the genre of tragedy. Many students focused well on the questions and there was plenty of evidence that the advice given in previous reports and in the official AQA courses had been taken. Those students who performed less well were those who had seemingly decided beforehand what they were going to write, those who did not know their texts well enough to supply supportive material for their arguments and those who did not read the questions carefully or simply misunderstood them. Given that this paper is closed book, students needed to have spent time acquiring excellent textual knowledge to draw from effectively in the construction of their arguments. This is especially true of the Shakespeare text which is used in both Section A and B and accounts for two thirds of the marks for this paper.

Specific comments about 1B: Aspects of comedy

Examiners marking 7717/1B have reported many interesting and perceptive responses to all questions and texts. This report will draw attention to some shortcomings in student responses, but it is important to recognise the overall success enjoyed by many students and the quality of engagement and thought shown.

Specific comments about 2A: Elements of crime writing

Overall, examiners read some very successful answers to all the questions on the paper this summer. All the questions worked well, giving all students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of both the texts and the genre and to debate issues which interested them. As always, success depended on the extent to which responses focused on the question. Given that this was an open book examination, there was an expectation that students should use the text they had in front of them. The most effective responses made good use of the opportunity to include plenty of accurate, supportive quotation for their arguments and some very successful responses used detailed analysis of selected key passages to great advantage. In the least effective responses, students made little or no specific references to the text or retold the story. There were few rubric errors this year but students should remember that two texts must be addressed in Section C. Students who have studied the Selected Poems should be particularly careful to remember that this constitutes one 'text' so by writing about a Browning poem and the Crabbe poem in Section C, they are only covering one 'text' so one further text must be considered.

A hallmark of the most effective responses was the construction of a clear, coherent argument in which examiners did not have to struggle to see the relevance to the question or to look for implicitly relevant points. Those essays which started with a clear overview of the argument gave the answer a sense of purpose and were more likely to be coherent, ordered and persuasive. Clear, accurate syntax was important when accurately conveying meaning and those answers where the syntax was loose, inaccurate and too long were self-penalising because meaning became obscure. Length was not synonymous with quality and some students would have been better advised to spend more time planning and structuring their responses. AO1 also requires students to use associated concepts and terminology. Where these terms were used as tools in the arguments these proved beneficial, but where complex and sophisticated terms were dropped into the argument simply to demonstrate knowledge of them, they were not used to advantage and sometimes misunderstood.

All questions contained a prompt for AO2 in the form of the reminder for students to include detailed exploration of authorial methods in their responses. In the most effective responses this exploration acted as evidence for the argument, but in less effective responses this sometimes seemed to be regarded as an end in itself and bore little relation to the task set.

Generally speaking, students seemed to realise that there is an expectation for contextual points to arise from the text itself and not to be artificially tacked on to the essay. There were a few exceptions where students were led astray into Coleridge's opium addiction or Christie's biography but these were few and far between. This suggests an improved understanding of the ways in which this specification regards AO3.

AO4 asks students to explore connections across literary texts. In the most effective responses these connections were well integrated into the arguments and generally informed and underpinned the essay without being made specifically obvious. In the least effective responses, students sometimes digressed into potted histories of a specific sub-genre or tried to pin a genre

on the text which did not really apply. Names and definitions of sub-genres rarely aided the arguments and sometimes detracted from them.

AO5 which requires students to explore interpretation and debate is at the heart of the questions on this paper. Questions in all sections included prompts for exploring meaning and interpretation. In Section B all the questions included a critical opinion which invited debate while in Section A and C, the questions asked students to 'explore the significance'. The most effective responses engaged in lively and sometimes thought-provoking debate or argued their particular case very cogently. In less effective responses, interpretation was less secure or persuasive and there was a tendency just to go along with the premise of the question without having the courage to challenge it.

Specific comments about 2B: Elements of political and social protest writing

Students and centres are commended for the commitment and engagement they have shown in studying this unit and preparing for the examination. This series many students sought to connect their thinking about the texts with relevant contemporary contexts, such as fake news, #metoo, the role of the law/institutional power in the lives of the individual and engaging animatedly with global politics. Although this is by no means a requirement of the unit, it was rewarding to see so many students thinking about their world through the ideas and literature that they had studied. The most popular texts continue to be *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *The Kite Runner*, *A Doll's House* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. An increasing number of responses were seen on *Harvest*; very little was seen on *Henry IV Part I* or *Hard Times*. Centres have clearly responded to AQA advice about tackling unseen extracts and many students focused their work well to construct relevant responses which pinned down the trajectory of the extract. In Section B, there was clear and sustained engagement with the task. In Section C, they showed their knowledge of the texts and the ability to make effective choices in questions 10 or 11 was a clear discriminator of ability.

Tracking the narrative

When starting the Shakespeare play, it might be useful for students to start tracking the story and the plot from the very beginning – even getting some ideas together before they've read anything.

'A well-respected soldier and a newly married man, Othello seems to have it all; however, when his close friend and colleague plants doubt in his mind about his wife's faithfulness and honesty, Othello is gradually consumed by lies, becoming a shadow of his former self. In this moving tragedy, innocence is destroyed and trust is shattered. Shakespeare's greatest villain manages to manipulate each and every character, driving the play to its predictable, yet heart-breaking conclusion.'

Nicola Jeffs

Annotate the summary and label it with any key thoughts and observations. The following questions may help.

1. Who do we expect to be the key characters?
2. What do we learn about these characters from this short summary?
3. What does the summary suggest are the key themes and ideas that we expect to be explored in the play?

Passage prompts

Working with genre

<p>Structure and progression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything interesting to note about the way it starts and ends? • Does the passage move through any clear stages – is there a sense of progression? • Is anything developed over the course of the passage? • Are there any contrasts being made? 	<p>Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything distinctive about the place or places described in the passage? • How is the setting presented and described to the reader? • Are any specific effects created through the choice of setting? 	<p>Characters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are characters being used as part of the passage? • Are there any character roles that are interesting because they are either what you would or would not expect? • What are the characters doing and how do you think you're meant to feel about them?
<p>Tone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the passage sound? • Are there any particular effects being created: suspense, humour, sadness, sarcasm? • Is the writer's attitude towards a certain subject coming through? 	<p>Narrative perspective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is speaking in the passage? • What is the position of the character describing the events? • Is it written in the first person? • Is the narrative from a single point of view? • Are the speaker's opinions and perspectives interesting – in what ways? 	<p>Speech</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there any direct or indirect speech? • What is being talked about and how is it being talked about? • Is the speech being used to create any specific effects?
<p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any words or groups of words that stand out as being particularly meaningful? • What do these words contribute to the passage as a whole? • Are any specific devices being used to create effects or meanings? 	<p>Key moment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does something unexpected or surprising happen in the passage? • What effect does the key moment have on the narrative? • How do the characters respond to this moment? How does the reader feel about this moment? 	<p>Sentences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything to observe about sentence lengths and effects being created? • Do you notice any patterns? • Are any sentences incomplete?

Contact us

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