

WHERE IT ALL STARTS

Exam success in Literature begins with a thorough working knowledge of your texts. To resource any convincing response, you must have developed a clear understanding of all the elements that constitute a text such as exposition, characterisation, setting, literary style and views and values.

The final phase of your exam preparation should be a time when all of the groundwork you have done allows you to become increasingly clear about and confident in your own interpretive stance, as well as your ability to apply it to a topic or in response to several passages.

Characteristically, high-performing students read their texts numerous times and re-visit them regularly so as to remain constantly in touch with them. They learn quotes, write character summaries, organise their notes thematically and read scholarly articles which present them with increasingly more sophisticated ideas and viewpoints. Serious Literature students should end up as experts on their texts, prepared for any challenges an exam might throw at them.

In some schools, students form their own study and discussion groups outside normal hours and follow through on what has been covered in class that day, or cover extra essay topics and close analysis passages. This can extend to group discussions on Facebook or via Snapchat.

It's very rare to find a highly successful Literature student who hasn't used some or all of the above strategies.

SECTION A – LITERARY PERSPECTIVES: THE TASK

The instructions for this task which VCAA provided in their sample exam are as follows:

You are required to complete **one** piece of writing in response to the topic set for **one** text. Your selected text must be used as the basis for your response to the topic. You are required to produce an interpretation of the text using one literary perspective to inform your view.

Your selected text for Section A must be from a different category than your selected text for Section B. In the answer book, indicate which section you are responding to and the text number of your selected text. Your response will be assessed according to the assessment criteria set out on the last page of the examination booklet. Section A is worth 20 marks. Apart from knowing your chosen text thoroughly, you also need to be able to understand what a question is asking of you as well as what it may have left unsaid. Questions can be framed in a variety of ways, although the intention in every instance is to provide students with the opportunity to answer in detail and to apply their textual knowledge effectively. Examine the types of question listed below so as to make sure that you understand the different approaches VCAA may use to setting the exam topics.

TYPES OF LITERARY PERSPECTIVES QUESTIONS

Here are some of the different ways in which Literary Perspectives questions can be framed:

1. With the instruction to “consider”, “reflect on”, or “discuss” a concept:
Consider the extent to which the characters in *Persuasion* are oppressed by society’s rules and expectations.
2. By giving a non-textual quote with the direction to “discuss”.
In the French Lieutenant’s Woman, Fowles opens up new ways of examining society’s values. Discuss.
3. By making a statement about the text and asking, “To what extent do you agree?”.
Despite its fantasy elements, *Love in the Time of Cholera* is pervaded by a sense of death and decay. To what extent do you agree?
4. By asking a direct question:
In what ways does McCarthy conform to or depart from the genre of the American Western in *All the Pretty Horses*?
5. By asking you to base your response on the passages set in Section B:
In what ways do the set poems from Blake’s *Poetry and Designs* invite us to condemn hypocrisy and social inequality?

HOW QUESTIONS VARY

Use this space to make notes on the different demands of the various types of question listed above.

USING TEXTUAL QUOTES

For Section A, you will need to use a number of quotes throughout your response. This means putting an effort into memorising a good range of them, while keeping a focus on those which relate to the perspective you will be using.

In reading time, you should have a look over the passages set in Section B for your chosen Section A text to see if there is anything useful in them by way of quotes.

However, be warned!

There is a genuine risk involved in doing this! Don't let what you read in the selected passages provided in Section B dictate how you will respond to your topic in Section A. Depending on which passages are provided, they may have much to do with your topic or very little at all. You should be prepared to write your response to Section A without any help from Section B. If you then find the Section B passages helpful, that will be a bonus but don't bank on it turning out that way!

TYPES OF TEXTUAL QUOTES

(a) Incidental Quotes.

These are short quotes or single words which are used while the sentence is in progress, and which help you to "talk the talk" of the text about which you are writing.

Scrooge sets off home in the "*fog and darkness*", as the cold becomes "*intense*".

As Scrooge engages the ghost of Marley in conversation, the "*phantom*" holds up his chain "*at arm's length*" before flinging it heavily upon the ground.

Scrooge is initially frustrated at the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come which gives him "*no reply*", but points "*onward with its hand*".

By Stave Five, Scrooge's vocabulary exuberantly embraces adjectives such as "*giddy*", "*merry*" and "*happy*", and Dickens tells us that his "*own heart laughed*" even in response to those who doubted the "*alteration*" in him.

(b) Evidential Quotes.

These support your key points by coming after your discussion and elaboration. They are usually more substantial than incidental quotes. An appropriate evidential quote, delivered decisively and authoritatively, is worth its weight in gold! You should still include incidental quotes where appropriate on your way to delivering the knockout blow, as all of this quoting adds up to making you more authoritative and convincing.

Ultimately, it is the vision of his own headstone that brings Scrooge to a climactic moment of terror, conversion and self-recognition. In the graveyard which is "overrun by grass and weeds" he reads his own name, and clutching at the Spirit's robe, he proclaims himself as no longer the man he was.

With this comes a promise which is both a personal undertaking on the part of Scrooge, and also a recapitulation of the part of Dickens of the novel's three-fold meta-structure:

"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the past, the present, and the future. The Spirits of all three shall strive within me."

INTERROGATING THE QUESTION

To begin with, you must treat every word of your chosen essay topic with the utmost respect while you discern which are the ones which count the most.

Then, you need to take the question on by interrogating it vigorously, and asking some of your own questions as well. A good interrogation process will help lead you to a good structure: if you really understand what the question is asking you, you will know what to give back in response.

In addition to practice questions your teachers give you and questions from commercial practice exams, try creating some of your own so that you gain a sense of being able to respond to whatever may be asked of you.

Remember that there are no right or wrong answers: only strong or weak cases!

STRUCTURING YOUR RESPONSE

A response in Section A should have about it many of the features of a well-structured expository essay, including an introduction which sets out clearly the scope of your response and signals to the assessor that you have understood both the topic and the task itself. Remember that one of the exam criteria specifies “expressive, fluent and coherent use of language and development of ideas”. Among other things, this means writing with clearly defined paragraphs, establishing a cohesive sequence of topic sentences across the essay, and bringing your analysis to a logical conclusion.

INFORMING YOUR VIEW WITH A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

You will notice in VCAA’s directions that there is no mention of how much of your chosen literary perspective you should use or even which one it should be. These are your own choices which, ideally, will have been worked out with your teacher well in advance of the exam.

Let’s look again at the criterion related to this dimension of the task:

- Analysis and evaluation of the views and values foregrounded in the topic and underlying one literary perspective of the text, and awareness of how these views and values relate to the text.

The bottom line here is that the perspective on which you draw is both related to the views and values presented in the text and also assists you in responding to your topic.

QUOTING A SPECIFIC LITERARY CRITIC

You should also be aware of the scholarship surrounding your text, especially those critics whose perspective aligns with the one you have chosen to explore. This may mean that you also memorise a relevant quote or two from the writings of a particular critic. However, remember that the text itself should remain your principal focus and that any quoting of a literary critic must reinforce what you are saying about your text.

SAMPLE LITERARY PERSPECTIVES TOPICS

1. In what ways does Shaw's *Pygmalion* challenge the notion of social equality?
2. Voltaire's *Candide* may be humorous at one level, but at another it espouses a pessimistic view of the world. Discuss.
3. Discuss how *Buried Child* exposes the various ways in which the American dream has failed.
4. Reflect on how appearances prove to be misleading in *A Doll's House*.
5. Consider how *Twelfth Night* uses deceptions, masks and tensions between appearance and reality to challenge social assumptions.
6. In Gaskell's *North and South*, some are trapped by class prejudice while others transcend it. Discuss.
7. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the undermining of Big Daddy's dominance allows Williams to reveal a new set of insights. Discuss.
8. Coriolanus is ultimately the architect of his own demise. To what extent do you agree?
9. Reflect on the ways in which Robert Browning's poetry speaks truthfully of the human condition.
10. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* challenges the very concept of civilisation. Discuss.
11. Reflect on the ways in which *My Brilliant Career* shows that we are not masters of our own fate.
12. In *The Man Who Loved Children*, Stead is relentlessly honest in her depiction of how the family unit works. Discuss.
13. Consider the various ways in which Szymborska's poetry reflects the particular concerns of her times.
14. In *The Leopard*, everything is in a state of decline. To what extent do you agree?
15. In *That Deadman Dance*, how does Bobby respond to the tyranny of the Europeans?

SECTION B - CLOSE ANALYSIS: THE TASK

Unlike Section A, Section B does not require you to answer questions or discuss topics.

The instruction for every examination text is the same.

The examination instructs you to 'Use two or more of the passages selected as the basis for a discussion of (name of text).'

The only unknown of the examination is the passages selected for discussion. If you know your texts, then the passages will be familiar.

The task is not asking you to share everything you know and understand about the text. The objective is to draw on the passages and the text in a selective way in order to construct an interpretation that reveals a detailed knowledge and complex understanding of an aspect of the text. Your ability to do this in a correct and confident way will impress the examiner.

Unlike responses that you will write for your other subjects, there is no magic formula, no set organisation, no preferred essay shape. The instruction is broad enough to allow you to decide what your 'discussion' will involve. This can some time to master because it places significant responsibility on the student to select the best material from the set passages and to respond in a form which allows for optimal analysis.

While it is wise to frame a main contention, use topic sentences in the body of your response and offer a point of resolution, writing a topic at the beginning of your response is unwise. This can tie you into a monothematic approach that ends up looking more like a Text Response essay in VCE English than a close analysis piece in Literature.

Better answers take the form of one or more arguments that use the passages to substantiate an interpretation.

So, although a close analysis response may contain elements of extract analysis, a views and values essay, or and an expository essay, it should not be completely any one of these forms.

Strong close analysis responses evolve across key ideas generated by the passages and tend to be like a discussion that matures and expands as it progresses.

THE CRITERIA

RELEVANT AND PLAUSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

- Is your reading of the passages sensible?
- Is your reading of the passages reasonable?
- Is your argument logical?
- Can your interpretation be supported by credible and relevant evidence?
- Is what you have written consistent with the contexts and facts of the text?

A range of plausible interpretations exist. There isn't one definitive answer. What you are after is a convincing case for the interpretation you have formed which is built solidly on the text itself.

Remaining relevant is often a matter of leaving out material that will not advance an interpretation of the text.

WRITING EXPRESSIVELY AND COHERENTLY

Your vocabulary should be wide and varied. You are expected to use language that is precise and apt. Your sentences should vary in length. Many of the most successful students compile their own spelling and vocabulary lists in order to strengthen and control their written expression.

Better answers take the form of an argument or arguments that use the selected passages to substantiate or defend an interpretation of the text. Such arguments should be structured into paragraphs that are logically ordered and are linked. Sentences within paragraphs should be logically sequenced.

Avoid using first person – 'I think...' and 'I believe...' type statements are unwise. This is not to say that you should avoid disclosing your voice as a writer. Depending on 'one', 'we', 'us' and 'readers' can become tedious. Be conscious of the audience as well. For instance, a play's live audience will be appealed to in a particular way by a playwright that is different from how a novelistic might approach his or her readership.

Don't divorce analysis and evidence. Quotations should be incorporated into the discussion in a seamless way. Excessive use of quotations and very long quotations may compromise rather than enhance your response.

Remember that this is a close analysis task and that means at least two important things: first, that you remain close to the text itself by quoting frequently; and second, that you analyse some points in fine detail, even down to the significance of single words.

Don't be afraid to convey what you have felt as you studied the text. Don't gush or write hyperbolically! Acknowledge when, how and why the writer brings a reader to feel despair, joy, anger, regret, or melancholy but maintain a scholarly objectivity in your writing that demonstrates sound judgement and competent writing skills.

VIEWS AND VALUES

The three passages will provide an insight into the views and values of the text. Identifying the views and values raised by the passage will allow you to discuss the purpose of the text.

What views and values are evident in the selected passages? Discriminate between the viewpoints assigned to characters and the views and values of the writer. How are these views and values made evident in the specific details of the passages? What comment is each passage and the passages combined making about the views and values of individuals and the societies of which they are part? Make connections between the views and values of the passages and your views and values as a contemporary reader. Your understanding of authorial perspective and the ways in which a text conveys it will be central to the substance of your response.

KEY PASSAGES AND MOMENTS

The word 'key' is used for good reason. The passages will be familiar to you. What may throw you is the combination of passages. Keep in mind that the passages will have been selected because, in combination, they illuminate significant features of the text.

Do not paraphrase the narrative moments of the three passages. Use the passages to source an exploration of the text's significant features. Be selective about the parts of the passages you use. You are not expected to deal with everything in a passage.

Assessors are expected to know the texts they are marking so don't try explaining to them either the content of a text or the meaning of any of the technical vocabulary you might use.

Do not write separate analyses of the three passages, least of all in the order in which they appear, and then expect the examiner to regard your response as an interpretation, even if you do write an introduction and conclusion. Each analysis must be linked in some way. Remember that you are dealing with ideas first which you then resource and expand on by using the passages and your broader knowledge of the text.

Stuck?

You won't be if you have looked for connections between the passages during reading time.

Explore the text from the perspective that you believe is dictated by the passages. Use the passages as a jumping off point.

You will need to draw on other moments of the text to complete your interpretation. You may take a sideways step to a related moment when you are discussing a particular detail of a passage. You may need to devote a paragraph to a moment that is crucial to the discussion that you have developed from the set passages. However, don't get carried away with additional material – you must show the assessors that you are concentrating mainly on the passages that have been set and you take them seriously. Some students rely heavily on irrelevant pre-learned paragraphs which they insert into their essays no matter what the exam passages may be. This is a recipe for disaster!

The text will need to be shown as direct and indirect evidence in your responses. You will need to quote and recall moments. Rely on the passages but be able to make connections to other parts of the text. You can sometimes frame a passage you are analysing by saying something along these lines:

- In the scene which precedes this incident...
- The moments following this episode confirm the writer's point that...
- Throughout the novel, the author re-visits this theme by...
- This is a concept which Browning explores frequently across his poetic oeuvre in poems such as...
- The broader contextualisation of this passage is essential to its impact...
- Passage one represents the sole instance in the novel story of...
- This is one of only two references in the play to...

THE FEATURES OF A TEXT

Many students get so caught up in discussing the concern of the text that is central to the passages and the text as a whole that they fail to discuss how the writer achieves meaning.

Your interpretation must draw on the literary features of the text. Analysing the writer's use of language is critical to the success of your interpretation.

Acknowledge the significance of the narrative, the narrative structure and the narrative voice. Consider how the writer creates settings, portrays characters and uses everyday objects and subjects to create images and symbols that heighten our understanding of an idea or issue.

Run through a mental checklist of the features of language.

Don't deal with meaning and language separately.

A CLOSE READING OF TEXTUAL DETAILS

Guard against generalities. Remember to support your interpretation with close textual references from both the passages and other moments in the text. Draw the examiner's attention to specific details.

USING THREE PASSAGES

Students often agonise over what passages will be used in the examination and whether or not they will use all three passages.

Why not use all three passages?

Surely doing so would not only make things easier but would allow you to better meet the criteria of the task. If you know your text, you will recognise the passages and you will know how best to use the passages to develop an interpretation of the text. The passages have been carefully selected. The combination is designed to highlight significant features of the text. You may choose to write on only two passages but the other passage will most probably provide examples to support your analysis and interpretation. In any case, there is nothing to say that all three passages should be used equally or that, by using all three, you would automatically receive a higher mark.

WRITING ABOUT DIFFERENT FORMS OF TEXTS

The Literature text list includes different forms of texts. Your interpretation should acknowledge how the writers of your examination texts use the features of a particular form of text to shape meaning. Responses in a Literature exam should always be form-specific. Some students write about a play without any sense of its intended theatrical impact before a live audience, treating it rather as you might a print text such as a novel. Make sure that you are aware of and can use analytically the form-specific vocabulary of your text.

Novels

Plays

Short Stories

Poetry

Other Literature

USING THE SACs

The examination requires you to draw on the knowledge acquired through completing the outcomes of Unit 3 and 4.

What did the following outcomes teach you about your exam texts?

What skills did you gain from completing the SAC for each outcome?

Unit 3 Outcome 1

Unit 3 Outcome 2

Unit 3 Outcome 3

Unit 4 Outcome 1

Unit 4 Outcome 2

ANNOTATING A PASSAGE

This task requires you to examine key passages from the text. You are expected to analyse specific features of the key passages and relate the passages to an interpretation of the text as a whole.

Use the following approach to develop a close reading of a passage from a text.

1. What is the passage about?
2. What is the context of the passage in terms of the text as a whole?
3. Why is this passage important?
4. What is the setting of the passage?
5. What does this passage reveal about characters?
6. How is language used to create meaning?
7. Which ideas from the passage resonate most with you?

USING READING TIME

1. Read your Section A question, the set of passages on which you will write in Section B, and the set of passage in Section B connected with your Section A text.
2. Make a brief plan in your head of how you intend to approach your Section A topic.
3. Identify the context, content and purpose of each passage in Section B.
4. Identify the significant features of each passage in Section B.
5. Identify connections between the passages. Look for parallels and contrasts. Look for developments within and between the selected passages.
6. Is there a dominant idea? Setting a focus will allow you to organise your observations about the passages.

Choose a focus that will allow you to create a detailed and coherent interpretation of the passages and of the text. Establishing a viewpoint to explore will prevent you from paraphrasing the passages or lapsing into summaries of plot or characters or general discussions of theme. It will also prevent you from writing isolated discussions of the three passages.

7. Having established a focus, develop a plan that will embrace the passages and other moments from the text.

WRITING A CLOSE ANALYSIS RESPONSE

Having established a focus, your task is to develop a complex and plausible interpretation.

Link the interpretation of the passages' dominant concern to the text's overall view of this concern.

Your analysis needs to be a linked discussion. This is often referred to as 'coherence'.

THE BEGINNING

There are many ways to begin the interpretation.

It is a good idea to 'dive in'. Start with a direct reference to one of the passages selected for discussion.

You do not have to begin with passage one. The point of view that you want to explore will dictate the way you move from passage to passage and indeed the parts of the passage that you analyse in a specific and detailed way.

There is no need to state the title, writer and form of the text in the opening statement. Don't think of writing an introduction as much as writing a first paragraph.

Try using a quotation from the passage.

Draw the reader's attention to a moment in the passage that establishes a concern of the text or highlights a view endorsed by the writer.

Your opening claim could reveal your understanding of how the writer uses language by referring to an image within the passage or the words used to construct a description of a setting or character.

It may be best to make a broad and explicit statement of argument later rather than at the very start of the opening paragraph.

Do not start with a brief biography of the writer of the text. The nature of the writer's life is not your subject matter. Your task is to interpret the text not the writer's personal life. You should use the knowledge you have gained about the writer to discuss their commitment to an issue explored in the text, as this reflects the text's purpose. The writer's personal contexts may have shaped the contexts that are part of their text and in this respect, may help you to explain the meaning of the text. A knowledge of the writer's views and values will allow you to provide a more certain discussion of the views and values that are endorsed or challenged by the text. It might be pertinent to comment on how the writer's use of language is drawn from their world of experience.

Do not start with a summary of the narrative of the text.

THE MIDDLE

The body of your response should continue to develop the focus established in the opening paragraph. Think of the body of the response as the means to explore your selected focus in a logical and sequential way.

You will need to develop statements that will allow you to shift from one passage to the next and also to other related parts of the text. Avoid writing three 'mini' essays on the three passages.

While you should structure your thoughts via paragraphs, the number of paragraphs is debatable. The passages and your viewpoint will dictate the way you organise your ideas.

Select details from the passages that present opportunities for you to show your grasp of the text and give a reading. The passages are often long. It is better to show a close, detailed analysis of some sections rather than try to cover too much and risk running out of time or becoming incoherent.

The passages will suggest other aspects and parts of the text of relevance to your interpretation.

THE END

Your conclusion should finish with conviction and force. The conclusion should of course be linked to the discussion that has gone before. It should bring the ideas expressed in other parts of the response to an end.

You could incorporate a specific statement from a passage or make a specific reference to another part of the text.

It is often useful to draw on one of the final moments of the text.

Your concluding statements should acknowledge the text's message. What is it that the writer wants us to continue to consider? How has the text shaped the reader's sense of the world in which they live?