

Section 3: Examination advice

- Use plenty of quotation and/or reference to exactly what is written. Start to deal with particular examples or moments as soon as you possibly can. Don't write vague introductory paragraphs. Get straight in.
- Answer exactly what the question asks you and not what you think it asks, or worse still what you wish it had asked!
- Try to show that you have enjoyed what you have read – the best answers show 'thorough knowledge of the texts, often accompanied by engagement and enjoyment.'
- Try to write about what the writer says, and how they say it. No matter how much research you have done and how much you think a writer's life is relevant to the question, try not to write at length on matters which are outside the text.
- Don't just 'tell the story' of your set texts.
- Write in good, clear and accurate English – use technical language when it is helpful to do so, but do not try to show off your knowledge of lots of 'difficult' words.
- Time yourself carefully so that you give roughly the same amount of time to each of your answers, and allow about five or ten minutes at the end to check and correct what you have written.
- Don't answer more – or fewer – questions than you should!
- Don't write too much: brief, clear, substantiated argument is more successful than work where the examiner has to seek out the line of discussion. Selection of relevant examples is a key skill.
- Read around the subject by all means – particularly at A Level it's good to explore what others think about your texts. But don't forget that it is your own response (not even your teacher's) that counts most highly. Feel free to tell the examiner what YOU think in order to best show your skill in giving a personal response.
- There is no need to say everything. Selection of relevant examples is better than trying to put down everything you can think of.
- Show that you know each of your set texts thoroughly and in great detail; this is obvious, but very important.
- If you have access to the internet, you can go onto the Cambridge International Examinations website www.cie.org.uk and have a look at past papers and the mark schemes for yourself.
- Try taking one of your essays that you have written in class and either mark it for yourself or ask a friend in the same class group to do it for you. Once you know what is being looked for, you will tighten up your writing a lot!

Before the examination

Whenever you write an essay:

- Read the questions fully and carefully.
- Think about the key words in each question you choose, and what the examiners want you to do. Questions often have a significant word in them (in drama it's often 'presented') and this usually pushes you towards needing to think about how an author is shaping the material in order to get a reader/audience to respond.
- Answer the question – do not wander away from it, however much you want to.
- Make a plan: keep it brief and keep to it. You do not get any marks for a plan, no matter how good it is or how ambitious. Practise this so that your plan is an appropriate length for you. Perhaps each word or phrase in your plan should represent a paragraph that you intend to write.
- Check what you have written at the end, and correct any mistakes you find.
- Use quotations – short, not long – to support and illustrate what you say. Don't just put them in and move on. If they are there, say something about why they are relevant: pick on a word, or the tone, for example

Poetry and Prose questions

- As with every paper, the most important advice here is to know your texts thoroughly.
- Learn something – it need not be much – about each writer, so that you can at least use the term “he” or “she” correctly (Stevie Smith was a woman!). However, you need to remember that even though it may be tempting to do so, writing about the links between the set texts and a writer’s life is not rewarded. So avoid comments about this. Focus instead on the text and its effects.
- Make sure that you answer what the question asks you. According to the Principal Examiner, ‘successful candidates selected carefully from their knowledge to answer the questions set, specifically and directly’.
- Use background information only if it is directly helpful to what you say, and if the need for it emerges from the text and the case that you are making. It is very easy to think that filling in context is what the exam is all about. It isn’t.
- Never tell the story of a novel or a play. The examiner already knows the book and it’s very easy to spend time filling in background information without actually analysing a text in literary terms. This is a mistake.
- Don’t use paraphrase in the place of analysis. So don’t put a poet’s ideas ‘in other words’ or announce that ‘what the poet is trying to say is...’ They are saying it like that for a reason, and that’s what you have been asked to talk about.

Drama questions

Re-read the general advice about poetry and prose – it applies to this paper as well.

- Remember that you are writing about *drama* in this paper.
- Drama is intended for performance, not just private reading, so do think about how the play will be *seen and experienced by an audience* (this may be a TV or video audience, not just one in a theatre, of course).
- However, don’t rely upon a TV or video version you have seen – keep your eye firmly on the text.
- Read the questions carefully and pick out some of the phrases used – ‘dramatic significance’ or ‘dramatic presentation’, for example. Try to ‘see’ the action in your mind’s eye. How would you yourself present the drama?
- Explore *how* the play is written, not just tell its story.
- Discuss the characters as dramatic creations; they are not real people, so how has the writer made them convincing, attractive or perhaps unattractive to you?

Specific A Level demands

At A Level remember that there is one very specific addition to the skills you are expected to demonstrate. You have to be prepared to talk about texts as being open to a variety of different interpretations.

You can do this by:

- discussing the work of a critic in relation to your text
- writing, perhaps about a director’s interpretation of a drama text that you have read
- setting up possibilities in your own mind: ‘character X might represent the past in the novel, but he could also be a symbol for regret ...’

In the examination

Essay questions

- Focus quickly but thoughtfully on what the question asks you to do.
- Plan some thoughts before you start to write.
- Make sure that your answer is organised, and really answers what the question asks.
- Make sure that every sentence adds something to your argument. Don't waste time saying things that do not directly answer the question.
- Don't repeat yourself.
- Use short quotations and/or references to your text to support what you say, but do not waste time 'translating' or explaining each quotation.
- Keep looking back at the question, to make you sure that your answer stays focused on what it asks.

Passage-based questions

- If you are going to do a passage-based question, you must be confident that you know the passage concerned in great detail. Many candidates assume that because it's printed on the paper, this is an easy option. It isn't. It's demanding because you have to look at aspects of structure, form and language. You are not being asked to remember vaguely what was said in class, you are being asked to consider in detail and you have no excuse because the material is there and waiting for you.
- Read the question carefully, and make sure you know what it is asking you to do. Think hard about the 'trigger' words like 'presentation': these are there to point you towards discussing the writer's techniques and away from general unsupported points
- Read the poem/passage very carefully before you start to write. Make sure that it is one you recognise and understand – do not attempt to do it 'unseen'.
- Focus all the time on the passage/poem that is set. Work outwards from the detail of the passage, not in from some grand, big idea that you have had.
- Discuss *how* the writer is creating effects in the poem/passage.
- Don't waste time simply identifying and listing literary devices: it is how they work, and the effects they create, that matter.
- If the question asks for this, look for how the poem/passage seems characteristic of other things in the whole text.
- Keep a sensible balance – your answer must be mostly based on the poem/passage; don't just tell the whole story or try to write about all the poems in your selection.
- Good answers 'concentrate in detail on the language of the poem/passage', and 'show a good sense of its context'.

Section 5: Words and phrases that examinations use

There is of course no way of forecasting what any examination question will be about, nor how it will be worded. People who believe that they can ‘question-spot’ by looking through past papers may sometimes be lucky, but it is very unwise indeed to rely upon such guesswork. What you can be reasonably certain about, however, is that many questions will contain some of the following expressions; they are very commonly used by Examiners, and it is worth doing two things:

- ensure that you know what these terms mean, and how you should write in response to them if they appear in your exam paper;
- look for them when you see the paper itself, and feel confident that you know how you should react to them. When you open your examination question paper, you may find it helpful to underline these terms, so that they are firmly in your mind as you write your answers.

The list is not exhaustive, and you may find that not all these terms (or possibly even none of them at all) will in fact appear in your examination, but the chances are high that at least some of them will.

Some question words and phrases

Comment on ...

Compare ...

Consider ...

Discuss ...

Discuss the importance of ...

Discuss the effects of ...

Discuss the writer’s treatment of ...

Discuss your response to ...

How does ...?

How effective is ...?

How far do you agree that ...?

Show how ...

What does this extract contribute to ...?

What is the significance of ...?

What might be the thoughts of an audience ...?

What uses does the writer make of ...?

Write about ...

Write a comparison of ...

Write a critical appreciation of ...

Write an essay on ...

You should not be frightened by any of the above words or phrases; nor should you worry if your examination questions introduce some other words or phrases. In a very simple sense, most of them are really just pointing you towards the same direction – they are inviting you to look closely at what the rest of the question says, and then to apply that idea or instruction to what you know about the text. You are not being asked simply to write everything you know about it – that would be far too difficult in just one hour – but to think hard and quickly about a particular aspect, and then to write with focus and detail about just this. Note, too, that there are sometimes words that are designed to push you into thinking about the literary characteristics of your text: ‘presentation’ is a good example. In this case, examiners are trying to nudge you into producing a better answer. For example, if a question simply asks you about the character X in a novel,

you could simply respond as though the character was almost a real person. If you are asked about the presentation of X in the novel, then you might want to talk about the author's voice, the way the character is made to speak, the opinions that other characters express about X during the course of the novel. In other words, some of these 'nudge' words are important because they are signalling a way to higher performance from you.

Comment on ...; Discuss ...; Consider ...

These really mean very much the same thing and are just ways of asking you to think about a particular view or angle, and to write about your own thoughts, but with careful and detailed supporting illustration from the text itself.

Discuss the importance of ...; Discuss the effects of ...; Discuss the writer's treatment of ...; Discuss your response to ...; How does ...? How effective is ...?

Each of these instructions appears to be more exact and specific, but again the thrust is similar – the Examiner is asking you to look at one particular aspect of the text, and to write about it, and about how you react to it. If it asks about 'the importance', it is really much the same as if it said 'what you think is important'.

What does this extract contribute to ...? What is the significance of ...? What might be the thoughts of an audience ...?

These expressions tend to be used in passage-based questions, where you are expected to show how well you can explore the passage in very close detail, but also how far you can then relate it and its methods and concerns to the text as a whole. In other words, what can you see in the passage that you can find elsewhere in the text? Are there things in the passage that do, or do not, appear anywhere else? Do you find the writer's style or technique in the passage to be similar to the writing elsewhere in the text, and if so where?

The last one ('**What might be the thoughts of an audience ...?**') is a little different, but again it expects you to look closely at the given passage, always of a piece of drama. This time, however, you are asked to imagine that you are part of an audience actually watching the play, and to think about how you might react to what is happening, and to the words and actions of the characters involved. Do remember at all times that a play is intended to be seen and heard, not just read. You must concentrate particularly upon the given passage, of course, but never forget that the way you are reacting now is influenced by what has happened earlier in the play – unless of course the passage is the very beginning of the play.

Write a comparison of ...; Write a critical appreciation of ...

These will almost certainly appear in passage-based questions, and in Paper 7 (Comment and Appreciation). They are asking you to explore in real and careful detail, and to show that you have the ability to understand what is written, and how effectively the writer has shaped the text in order to create a particular impression on the reader or spectator.. You will probably want in such questions to introduce your knowledge of some critical terms, but as will be said later, do not do so just to show off this knowledge – use them sensibly, appropriately, and sparingly.

Write about ...; Write an essay on ...

These are rather abrupt instructions, but they do appear from time to time. As always, do not be alarmed, and certainly do not fear that they mean something special, or something different from anything else. What the Examiner is requiring as always is that you look carefully at whatever aspect of the text is mentioned, and that you write a thoughtfully argued response to it, bringing in your own response, and supporting it with sensibly chosen references and quotations. Provided that you concentrate upon the topic selected by the Examiner, you will almost certainly be on the right track.

Phrases which might appear inside a question:

Characteristic of the text as a whole
 Concerns and methods
 Dramatic effects/effectiveness
 Style and concerns
 With close reference to

These should be fairly self-explanatory, particularly in the light of what has just been said. **'Concerns'** may be an unfamiliar word, but it simply means whatever it is that the writer is writing about in the text – his/her ideas, topics, themes, problems, interests, characters and so on. **'Methods'** and **'style'** mean much the same – they refer to *how* the work is written, and expect you to look at the language, images, structure and so on. **'Characteristic of the text as a whole'** has really been explained above. You will need to discuss how far you consider the given passage to be similar to (or possibly different from) what is written in the text generally, both in terms of its ideas and in the way it is written – obviously you will be expected to give some quite detailed illustrations here, to show how well you know the text. Which leads neatly into the last phrase – 'With close reference to ...' – which very clearly reminds you to use as much reference and quotation as you can from the passage or wider text.