

EXAMINER TIPS FOR AS and A Level Literature in English (9695)

How to Use These Tips

These tips highlight some common mistakes made by students, together with some ideas suggested by the Principal Examiners for each paper, in order to help you prepare for your examination more confidently, and to answer the set questions more successfully. They are collected under various subheadings to help you when you revise for a particular topic.

General Advice

- Know each of your set texts *thoroughly and in great detail*; this is obvious, but very important.
- Use plenty of quotation and/or reference to exactly what is written.
- 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.”
- Show some knowledge and understanding of the writer’s background, and possibly his/her life – but only if it helps your answer; write about what the writer says, and how s/he says it.
- 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!

Spelling

- This is an examination about *literature*, but spelling, punctuation and the use of conventional English syntax will be noted. If your writing is inaccurate, and particularly if it is unclear what you mean, you will lose marks.

General Tips

- Each section below begins with some general remarks about each paper; they are mostly the same for each paper, but you should read them all carefully as there are some variations. Follow their advice, and if you know your set books well you should achieve higher marks.
- Read the questions fully and carefully.
- Think about the key words in each question you choose, and what the examiners want you to do.
- Answer the question – do not wander away from it, however much you want to.
- Make a plan, and keep to it.
- 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.

Paper 3 Tips: Poetry and Prose

- As with every paper, the most important tip 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!).
- 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

question set, specifically and directly”.

- Use and refer to background information *only if it helps your answer*; you will get no marks just for knowledge by itself.
- Don't waste time “telling the story” – the examiner knows it!

(a) 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 focussed on what it asks.

(b) questions

- Read the question carefully, and make sure you know what it is asking you.
- 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.
- 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.
- Good answers “concentrate in detail on the language of the poem/passage”, and “show a good sense of its context”.

Paper 4 Tips: Drama

- Re-read the general tips and those for Paper 3 – they all apply 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.
- 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?
- Don't waste time on biographical or background information unless it is clearly central to the question and your answer.

(a) questions

- Read the question carefully, and make sure you understand what the question is asking.

- Plan what you are going to say before you start to write.
- Don't just tell the story – the examiner knows it, and it will waste your time.
- Use brief quotations and references to exact moments in the play, but make sure that these are helpful and relevant to your argument.
- Avoid general comments and “anchor points firmly into the detail of particular scenes or moments”.
- Good answers “get close to the detail of the play”.
- If the question is about a character, do *not* just write a character study or description; talk about how he/she is presented by quoting what he/she says and does, what other characters say about them, how an audience might react to them etc.
- If appropriate, think about the *pace* of the play, i.e. how the writer speeds up the action, or slows it down, and what effects this creates for an audience.
- Some questions will encourage you to consider general *themes* – if so, illustrate and support what you say with close reference to the text itself.

(b) questions

- Read the extract very carefully before you start.
- Make sure that it is one you recognise and understand – do not try to do it “unseen”.
- Make sure that you understand exactly what the question is asking you to do; it will *not* ask simply for an explanation of the extract.
- If the question asks how the writer creates humour, do not just “tell the story” of the extract and simply say it is funny – show *how* it is and support your answer with reference to the extract.
- Whatever the question, make the extract the centre and focus of your answer. Don't wander into general discussion of the whole play, except to show how the extract is linked to other parts.
- Always remember that you are writing about a play, with characters and actions that are meant to be *seen and heard*. Think about what the extract will look like, and sound like, on stage.

Paper 5 Tips: Shakespeare and Other Pre-Twentieth Century Texts

- Re-read the general tips and those for Paper 3 – they all apply to this paper as well.
- Time your work very carefully – make sure that you leave enough time for your second answer.
- Answer only two questions, one from each section of the paper.
- Read the questions on your text very carefully, and *answer only what is asked*; if you consider the wording of the question and select material to the specific demands of the task you will do well.
- Support what you say with brief but apt quotation from each text.
- You may refer to other texts, *but only very briefly*; the focus of your answers *must* be on your set texts.
- Don't waste time writing about biographical or other background, unless it really helps your answer.
- Brief comment on critical ideas from other books or websites *may* be helpful, but it must be brief and relevant – do not waste time away from what the question is asking.

(a) questions

- “Candidates who carefully consider the wording of the question and who take the time to select and shape material to the demands of the task do well”. So, read what the question says carefully, and answer only what it asks for.
- Don't waste time writing about the life or background of the writer, unless it *really* helps your answer.
- Support what you say with good and brief quotation – several short quotations are always

better than just one or two long ones.

- Don't waste time explaining or "translating" your quotations.
- Don't simply "tell the story" – the examiners know it.
- When writing about drama, look at everything that is said about Paper 4 above.
- When writing about poetry, remember to discuss *how* the poet creates his/her effects, but do not just write a list of techniques.
- Show that you *enjoyed* your reading; the Principal Examiner says "some answers positively sparkle with enthusiasm, always a welcoming sign".

(b) questions

- Read the poem/extract with great care before you start.
- Make sure that you really know it, and exactly where it comes in the text you are writing about.
- Focus on the poem/extract, but also place it very exactly within the whole text. If you do not do this, your answer will be much weaker; if you can do this, you can talk about the importance of the poem/extract with proper confidence and authority.
- Don't waste time giving too much background about the poem/extract – your answer must be focused tightly on the information given in the extract.
- Focus on the poem/passage and move out briefly to the wider text, rather than the other way round.
- Be sure that you know and understand what the question asks you to do, and stick to that.
- Look closely at the language of the poem/extract and its style of writing – how do these things work here, and how characteristic are they of the whole text?
- Think about the genre of your text – if it is drama, use the tips for Paper 4 given above; if it is poetry, discuss the effects of rhyme, rhythm, imagery and other techniques.

Paper 6 Tips: Twentieth Century Texts

- Re-read all the general tips and those for Paper 3 – they all apply to this paper as well.
- Too many candidates rely upon "telling the story" - don't do this!
- Remember that your set texts belong to a particular genre (poetry, prose, or drama). Write about specific characteristics of these in your answer, especially if the genre is poetry or drama.
- Use technical literary terms *if they help your answer*, but make sure that you really understand them!

(a) questions

- As in other papers, read the question carefully so that you are quite certain what it is asking you.
- Plan what you are going to write before you start – look for key words in the question, and keep referring back to these in your answer.
- Don't waste time writing about the life or background of the writer, unless it *really* helps your answer.
- Refer to background ideas but make sure that they are really relevant, and that you *really* understand what you say about them.
- Support what you say with good and brief quotation – several short quotations are always better than just one or two long ones.
- Don't waste time explaining or "translating" your quotations.
- Don't simply "tell the story" – the examiners know it!
- When writing about drama, look at everything that is said about Paper 4 above. When writing about poetry, remember that you must discuss *how* the poet creates his/her effects, but do not just write a list of techniques – discuss how they work.
- Show that you *enjoyed* your reading.

(b) questions

- Read the poem/extract with great care before you start.
- Make sure that you really do know it, and exactly where it comes in the text you are writing about. Do not do it “unseen”.
- Focus on the poem/extract, but also place it very exactly within the whole text. If you cannot do this, your answer will be much weaker; if you can do this, you can talk about the importance of the poem/extract with proper confidence and authority.
- Don’t waste time giving too much background about the poem/extract – your answer must be focused tightly on the information given in the extract.
- Focus on the poem/passage and move out briefly to the wider text, rather than the other way round.
- Be sure that you know and understand what the question asks you to do, and stick to that.
- Look closely at the language of the poem/extract and its style of writing – how do these things work here, and how characteristic are they of the whole text?
- Think about the genre of your text – if it is drama, read the tips for Paper 4 above; if it is poetry, discuss the effects of rhyme, rhythm, imagery and other techniques

Paper 7 Tips: Comment and Appreciation

- This is a rather different paper as you cannot prepare for it by revising your set books, but you *can* prepare in different ways.
- A lot of what you do in the (b) questions in your other papers, and a lot of what is said above about them, is important in Paper 7.
- Paper 7 looks for *skills*, not knowledge.
- There is no value in showing how many technical terms you know, except when you are discussing and evaluating *how the writers are using them*.
- Read all of the printed poems/passages before you decide which ones to write about, then read your chosen ones again, several times.
- Look at the exact wording of the question – it will always ask for a critical commentary or critical appreciation, but sometimes ask you to focus on some particular aspect as well.
- A critical commentary/appreciation means that you must look at what is said, but more importantly at the language and the techniques used, and at their effects on you as a reader.
- Begin your answer with a *short* outline of what the poem/passage says – no more than a few lines – to establish your understanding and your confidence. Then explore *how* the writer creates his or her effects, but do *not* just write a list of technical terms.
- Your personal response, and your understanding of how the writer has created this, matter much more than your knowledge of any terms. Technical terms are just a useful shorthand way of explaining some of your reactions.
- Don’t waste time writing about background information, biographical material, other works by the writers or indeed about other writers (even if you know this) – it will not be rewarded.
- Personal response is essential, but it must be to the poem/passage, not to its ideas – don’t be led astray into writing more generally about what is being said.
- Focus 100% upon what is printed on the question paper!
- Discuss things that are related to genre. If you are writing about a piece of drama, remember that it is written for the theatre, and for public viewing and hearing, not just reading.
- Don’t work through the poem/passage line by line – this can be very dull – but look at more general themes and methods that are used.
- If asked to compare two or more pieces, try to move between them as you write; do not write about one, then another, then another . . . Look for similarities of theme and of style, and take each similarity/difference in turn.
- Support everything you say with quotations from the printed passages – and remember, several short ones are better than a few long ones.

Paper 8 Tips: Coursework

- Coursework is in many respects very different from the examination-based papers, but most of the general tips still apply, so do re-read everything that is said above about your other papers.
- Know your texts well and in detail – the fact that you can have them in front of you as you write is helpful, but does not mean that you need not have studied them at least as thoroughly as for any other paper.
- Your knowledge of the two books used must be more exact, and supported by more accurate quotation, than for a timed examination.
- Make sure that you understand the task that is set for you, and what you are expected to do in response to it.
- You have a very limited number of words – between 2000 and 3000 words for two essays on two texts – so do focus very tightly on the task.
- Don't waste time on unhelpful background or biographical material.
- Don't waste time simply "telling the story".
- Show that you can understand and explain at least some of the ways in which your writers create characters and create particular moods and effects, and explore in some detail how the words they use do this.
- Technical terms are important in Coursework, so do use them correctly, but do not simply show that you know them – it is how they are used, and the effects that they are creating, that matter.
- Show that you understand some of the effects of genre – drama, for example, is intended to be seen and heard, as part of a shared audience experience; poetry has its own characteristics – rhyme, rhythm, stanza form and so on – all of which may need discussing.
- Coursework should be virtually perfect in presentation – do not make spelling or grammatical errors, especially if the work is word-processed.
- Coursework should be drafted, and perhaps re-drafted; what the external moderator sees will be the result of several attempts to say things in the very best possible way.
- Discuss your idea and rough drafts with your teacher, though he/she will not be able to correct your writing for you.
- Do not submit untidy work.
- Each essay should be roughly the same length: about 1000 – 1500 words. Do not write more than 3000 words; count carefully, and reduce it if you have to.
- Each essay *must* be on a different text, and of a different genre.

About the Examiner



Richard Doubleday has been a Principal A Level Examiner and Principal A Level Coursework Moderator for Cambridge International Examinations for many years; he holds similar posts with OCR, and is also an examiner for the International Baccalaureate. He has taught English at a range of secondary schools in the UK, both private and state-run, holding posts as Head of English, Deputy Head and Vice-Principal; he currently works part-time as Senior Tutor in a small international college in the city of Bath.