



A-Level **English Literature B**

7717/1A

Report on the Examination

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Summary

Areas where students excelled

- When they focused on the Question set through the entirety of their answer.
- When they had excellent knowledge of their texts, they engaged with the stories being told and could range around them for relevant details.
- When they made good choices of which parts of texts to use to best answer the questions.
- When they were thinking clearly and independently in the construction of their arguments.
- When they wrote tightly controlled concise responses.

Areas where students struggled

- When they had their own agendas and largely ignored the questions set.
- When textual knowledge was sketchy so that errors of fact were made and ideas couldn't be supported.
- When they included generalised external contextual material and wrote about that instead of the text itself.
- When they incorporated material that had been learned or partly learned with little regard for question relevance, for example material about race and critical views.
- When they produced overlong, loose and vague answers which often contained irrelevance.

Introductory comments

Examiners across all four papers have reported seeing some excellent work this year which suggests that students and teachers are enjoying English Literature Specification B.

Although the comments made and teaching guidance given in previous reports are still relevant, this report will focus on four key issues: i) Answering the question set: knowing what this means and what it doesn't mean; ii) knowing how to effectively deal with 'significance' questions; iii) knowing the texts in detail and responding to the texts as stories; iv) understanding the perils of including and focusing on external contextual material.

i) Answering Questions

Answering the question set is the mantra for Spec B. Although the issue has been raised in previous years, it remains the key concern of examiners. Marks can only be given for relevance to the question so students must focus exclusively on what is being asked. This means they must not subvert the question or ignore it and write about something else. However interesting the 'something else' is, students will only be given marks if their comments are relevant to the question. Teachers can help their students by telling them clearly during teaching and practice essay writing that only relevance to the question will be rewarded.

In the 'To what extent questions', a debate is set up for students to think about - and 'thinking' is vital. Before they start writing, students need to ascertain what exactly they need to focus on, what debate is set up and, importantly, what the question isn't inviting them to do. The premise of the question is never a trick; there will always be a genuine line of argument students can pursue whether they agree or disagree with the given view. Question-setters have ensured that there is plenty of material in the text to support the given view and plenty too for a counter argument. When students choose to disagree, some careful thinking is needed to make certain that what they write is still on task. They need to be sure that their challenge is legitimate in terms of the grammatical structure of the given argument. For example, in the question on *Othello*: 'Othello is presented as having no moderation: he loves and hates with the full force of his emotions', the counter argument is that Othello does have moderation. A viable counter argument isn't that Othello's emotions are a result of his insecurity or his race or Iago. Neither is it valid to argue that it is Iago who has no moderation and not Othello and then write about Iago.

During revision time in centres, it would be useful for teachers to spend time with their students looking at a variety of past questions (even those on texts their students are not studying) and asking students to think about what precisely is being asked, where the debate is and importantly what isn't being asked. For many students, particularly those who are less confident in countering arguments, it would be sensible to advise them to agree with the given view as there will always be plenty to say and if they agree, then at least they will not produce writing which is unfocused and irrelevant - providing they keep to the question.

The most successful answers on the 'To what extent questions' this year seen were from those students who pinned down what the question was asking, then went straight into the

debate set up by question, stated their view and supported their ideas with close reference to well-chosen and specific parts of the texts. These students engaged with the text as a developing story and linked their references and quotations to events in the story's narrative trajectory.

When they construct their arguments, students should be reminded not to spend precious exam time writing ineffective introductions and repetitive conclusions. Neither should they complicate questions by adding additional clauses. For example, in the *Othello* question cited above, some students added something in their introduction like, 'Othello is presented as having no moderation: he loves and hates with the full force of his emotions,' *and this is linked to his insecurity*. Over-complicating arguments usually got students into a muddle.

ii) Dealing effectively with 'significance' questions

Significance questions offer a different way for students to explore meanings in texts.

Significance is a key word in several questions and it is followed by either an extract from a Shakespeare play, an unseen extract or an aspect of tragedy, comedy, crime writing or political and social protest writing or a topic that students need to explore in relation to the genre: for example 'Explore the significance of prejudice in two political and social protest texts you have studied.' Significance is about what is signified - what meanings arise in terms of values and ideas and how these meanings are produced by what writers do and the methods they use. Significance invites students to think about the narrative; it also invites them to think about the characters, as well as the cultural, moral and social contexts that arise from the texts.

The most successful answers to the significance questions were by those students who, at the start of their answers, pinned down what they were asked to explore the significance of. So, in the Shakespeare extract questions on Paper 1, they pinned down the story of the extract from its beginning to its end; in Paper 2 Q1, they gave a clear sense of what takes place in the extract, seeing its trajectory from the start to the end and in other significance questions, they pinned down the specific topic they were asked to write about (for example 'secrets' in *Atonement* or 'murder and killing' in *King Lear* and *Othello*). The mark schemes give precise details of the trajectories of the Shakespeare extracts and the unseen extracts for Paper 2 and if students pinned these down, they were rewarded. Similarly in the other 'significance' questions, there are precise examples in the mark scheme to suggest what students might have focused on.

A good strategy for students answering significance questions in Sections B and C, is to begin by immediately identifying an example of the topic and then developing ideas about it. Having done this, they can then move on to another example and write about that and continue in this way to the end of their answer. If they do this, students can easily accumulate marks. So, for example, in Question 7 Paper 2B ('Explore the significance of Falstaff to the political and social protest writing in *Henry IV Part I*'), they could pin down, at the start of paragraphs, Falstaff as a representation of those who reject authority; his being an agent in transforming Prince Hal into a capable future monarch; and his challenging authority by mocking the king and taking the credit for the death of Hotspur. After establishing some precise significances

of Falstaff, students could then develop detailed ideas about them and in this way shape their writing.

When students were less successful on significance questions, they either didn't engage with the story of the extract, or they wrote vaguely and generally about the question topic without being specific. Sometimes they subverted the topic altogether and claimed that what was asked wasn't significant and then they wrote about something else. The significance questions do not invite students to say that the extract or topic is not significant.

iii) Knowing texts and stories

The most successful responses were seen by students who knew their texts and the stories of those texts very well and then selected appropriate details. When students engage with stories, plots, events and characters they naturally connect with genre and tragic, comedic, crime writing and political and social protest writing narratives (in drama, prose and poetry). When they engage with the stories of their texts, they also find it easy to respond to the set questions and authorial methods. The text and its story are the body of knowledge that English Literature student need to have; it is the foundation for assessment. There is nothing outside the text that students must know. So, they cannot sidestep the text and if they do not know it in a detailed way then they are seriously disadvantaged when it comes to answering questions.

Students struggle when they only know bits of the text or random quotations, with no sense of where the quotations occur in the story. Students need to see that in texts and stories writers construct events to happen in a particular order with characters operating and developing in tandem with those events. The speech they are given reflects the developing situation and what one character says affects how other characters speak and how they behave. In stories, most writers represent interactional dialogue. Speech is rarely random (unless the writer has a purpose in doing this). What Othello says when he is confessing his love for Desdemona to the Senate in Act 1 ('She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/ And I loved her, that she did pity them./ This only is the witchcraft I have used') is dependent on the contextual situation at this point in the play (he has been accused by Brabantio of practising upon her with 'spells and medicines'). Shakespeare shows Othello as alert to the circumstances he is in. Othello is keenly aware of his onstage audience; his words have a particular purpose. It is therefore ineffective for students to quote Othello's words without providing their dramatic context. Othello could not speak in this way at the end of the play. It is also the case that in extracts, what a character says at the start of an extract could only happen at that point in the story; 50 lines later and the same things could not be said because the story has moved forward.

In all stories, the situations and the characters at the end are not the same as they are at the start. Stories involve change and in drama texts, that change takes place as we watch since we are imagining the stories as operating in real time: in the here and now with the potential for a variety of outcomes. And, just as characters change and develop, so too do the reactions and feelings of readers and audiences.

In the light of the above, it is clearly unhelpful for students to learn a bank of decontextualised quotations said by Iago or Emma or Daisy or Nora or Claudius which they churn out when

writing about a character as if the characters are fixed and unchanging and could say what they say at any point in the story. References and quotations must be contextualised if they are to be meaningful and if they are to support meanings in students' arguments. Students need to be taught to contextualise briefly and succinctly.

If students have sound textual knowledge, then they are in the best position to answer the questions in the ways outlined above. When students have insecure textual knowledge then their chances in the exam are significantly impaired. Insecure knowledge leads students to write in a generalised and vague way.

iv) Understanding the perils of including external contexts

One reason perhaps why students do not know their texts in sufficient detail is because they think they need to know other things instead of the text, for example external contextual material and the random views of critics, particularly 'feminist critics' about which much is asserted. This is a mistake for those doing Spec B. We are only interested in contexts that arise from the text itself and critical views if they are specifically used in arguments related to questions. But we are more interested in what students think.

Examiners frequently note that when students move away from the text and write about external contexts, they lose focus on the questions and write irrelevantly. No credit is given for generalised and sweeping contextual material which often takes the place of any engagement with the text itself.

As has been pointed out before, it is irrelevant for students to include biographical information about the authors' lives or to include generalised (and often made up) material about historical periods. Teachers should tell students not to write about Aristotle, or the 16th century or the 19th century or the Romantics or the 1980s or patriarchies in the real world. Writers might well represent patriarchy in their stories, and it might be relevant for students to write about the representation. But it is not relevant to write about the patriarchal situation of the 16th century as if there is a single view that applies to the whole century and to the whole of any particular country. The 16th and 19th centuries, of course, span a hundred years and one play or novel or poem can hardly be claimed to speak for an entire century - or even a bit of it, and for students to draw conclusions about 16th century society (or Elizabethan England) or people's attitudes from one play of Shakespeare or one Hardy novel is clearly unwise.

It is even more unwise to impose loose contextual material onto texts. One play of Shakespeare's might well - and often does - contradict what is said in another. The same Shakespeare who created Desdemona, also created Regan and Gertrude and Bianca, so it makes little sense for students to claim that in the 16th century women were all passive or submissive or dependent on men, or that men were all misogynistic. The texts themselves tell us that there were dissenting voices to such views and plenty of political debate too. Hardy, for example, foregrounds this dissent in the creation of Angel Clare who challenges conservative views and Bolingbroke clearly does not believe in the Divine Rights of Kings.

It reduces the power of the text if Desdemona is discussed just a representative of 16th century passive women. She is a character in a play created by Shakespeare for dramatic

purposes. She interests us because her character changes. She may be submissive at her death (but even then, she begs to live another day), but she is not submissive when she defies her father, when she insists to the Duke and her husband that she goes to the war zone of Cyprus or when she repeatedly appeals for Cassio's reinstatement. In his saner musing during Iago's manipulation of him, even Othello refers to her depth of character ('O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear! Of so high and plenteous wit and invention').

Students need to think about the subtleties of their texts and the subtleties of character creation. Desdemona and Emilia are created with nuance; they are characters who change as events develop. Some students were all too ready to claim that Emilia and Desdemona, like 'all women' of the time, have no power, have to obey men and have no agency. While it is relevant in response to the *Othello* extract question, for example, to say that at this point in the play Desdemona is subdued and desperate not to displease her husband, it is because of the dramatic situation that Shakespeare has created. Othello has just hit her in public; his behaviour is unfathomable to her; she is young and terrified. Her response is a very human one and to shift the argument to one about 16th century women is a reductive way to respond to the intense dramatic scene in front of us.

Another reason why students' incorporating external contextual material into answers should be avoided is that it is a sign that they are leaving the text - and the question is invariably left behind too. So, the solution is easy. Teachers must tell students to focus on the story itself and the characters within it who are often created as multidimensional and whose fates engage and interest readers and audiences.

The above advice needs to be heeded as it directly relates to how scripts are marked. Marks are awarded for ideas (as required by the question) about the texts and the story-worlds within them. The ideas need to be directly related to the questions set and the ideas should be developed by students using detailed knowledge of the text and its story.

Specific Comments about 1A

Overall student performance on this paper was very pleasing, and there were many superb responses to all questions. Many students focused well on what they were asked to do and there was plenty of evidence of students really thinking about texts, the relationship of those texts with the tragic genre and the questions being asked. The strongest answers were seen by those students who had been taught to prioritise reading and understanding the texts in and of themselves and then to show that they were thinking in a natural and uncluttered way about them. Those students who had the most secure and thorough textual knowledge and who had been encouraged to think independently were able to make excellent choices of material on which to base their responses to the questions.

Two of the three texts that students are required to write about in Paper 1 are drama texts (and some centres chose to do three). Two of the three questions have to be on a Shakespeare tragedy, so students really do need to know how drama works. They need to see that what happens on stage has an immediacy and that, as audiences buy into the illusion, at all points of the drama there are a number of possibilities of what might happen.

All three question types demand sound textual knowledge which students need to draw upon in different ways. While Section B questions are traditional essay type questions where students have time to develop ideas about a question on a single text, Section A is very different, requiring close interrogation of and engagement with a printed extract and Section C requires students to answer a question using two texts (one of which has to be a drama text) which they might respond to in very different ways and where they have to fine tune their selections of material since they don't have much time to write about each text.

When students did not perform successfully, it was often because they did not see the three questions as requiring different skills and there were some whose textual knowledge was so insecure, that they were unable to locate parts of stories to support ideas. Given that this paper is closed book, students needed to have spent time beforehand understanding how tragic stories develop; they needed to have acquired 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 Section B and accounts for two thirds of the marks for this paper.

It is important that when texts are read and studied in the classroom that even the most challenging parts of the text are read and understood. To spend time on the whole text will be rewarding, open up its story and open it up to meanings. If students only have a sketchy outline of the easiest parts of a text, a single way of looking at it, some character studies that they think can be used for any question and a bank of quotations, their responses seldom fare well.

As pointed out in the general introductory comments, there are real perils for students if they go down the route of writing about external context. Most of the contextual material that students use is unevidenced and asserted. Many students assume that the 16th (or 17th) century is a single one-dimensional time period where ideas were fixed and universal. These students seem to believe that all Jacobean were of the same mindset, and all had the same political views and had all read the same things. If such students were encouraged to think outside of their English Literature texts and were asked to apply such assertions to their own time (their portion of the 21st century) those assertions would soon fall apart. This is why thinking is so important and why students should be taught how to think and how to interrogate ideas and then to have evidenced opinions.

A good starting point for students would be to explore the worlds of their texts and see that they contain a variety of ideas about gender, sexuality, race, power, religion, family, duty, identity and justice. The plays, in particular, tell us that there were clearly many differences of opinions; people did not all think the same then any more than they do now.

When students were thinking they explored what is actually taking place in texts, what values characters stand for, what principles are at stake for them and how characters evolve and change. These students saw the plays and their other texts as dynamic rather than static. These students often produced the most interesting responses.

Sections A and B (Shakespeare)

Othello was by far the most popular choice, but more centres offered *King Lear* this year. Excellent answers were seen in the responses to both plays. Overall, there was less baggage carried by the students who wrote on *King Lear* than those who wrote on *Othello* though there was still some. Whereas *Othello* answers were beset with assertions about 16th century women and race, the answers on *King Lear* had a fair bit of unhelpful material on the Divine Right of Kings and the Great Chain of Being and in *Lear* there was often a more heavy-handed use of Aristotelian terminology that impeded communication.

A point has been made earlier about the problems that arise when students have learned a bank of quotations as a substitute for knowing the text. Several examiners have commented on the way that some students seem to work their arguments around quotations that they know and want to use rather than writing an answer that is driven by fresh thinking where students make incisive points supported by appropriate close references.

It is unhelpful if students shoehorn quotations into their writing just because they have learned them. In this year's *Othello* questions there was no way that Iago's words to Brabantio about an 'old black ram tupp'ing his 'white ewe' could have been relevant to any of the questions. Yet still it appeared. Teachers need to tell students not to organise their writing around learned quotations that do not support ideas about the questions. This particular quotation needs to carry a health warning anyway. It is often quoted as evidence of how racist Venetian (or Jacobean) society was and how racist the characters in the play-world are too. During teaching, when discussing this part of the play, it would be worth asking students to think about what is actually taking place when Iago utters the repulsive words. Who does he say them to? Why does he say them? Who else hears them? Why are they being used at this particular juncture? What effect do they have on those who hear? Students might also be asked to think about Iago's attitudes to race elsewhere. When does he make, what we now consider to be, offensive comments? Does he make such comments in soliloquy? Does he hate Othello because he is black? Which other characters make such comments? Is there any evidence of any character not being concerned about the colour of Othello's skin? These questions would lead to thoughtful discussion and be more productive to students' understanding than just learning to quote the words as evidence of widespread racism. But more importantly for assessment, ideas about race should only be discussed if the question invites them to do so and this year's questions did not.

Section A

In the extract questions students produced good answers when they worked with the dramatic story that was printed on the exam paper. Those who carefully tracked through the extract's trajectory and then developed ideas that arise from within it usually scored marks in the top two bands.

It is important that students read the extracts as both a mini story and as part of the wider tragic narrative. They also need to engage with an imagined present which is happening in real time - in the here and now - when a number of different outcomes are possible. Students need to engage with the fact that the characters are involved in highly charged situations where they are represented as human beings relating to other human beings, reacting to

things that happen, solving - or trying to solve problems that have arisen or arise. What characters say to each other and the ways they say them have the semblance of real-life interactions. For example, there is turn-taking, jostling for dominance, exchanges of information, co-operation, listening, interruption, questioning, sympathetic and angry reactions. There may also be actions which are happening alongside the speech. Students need to see and write about how the characters behave at the point in the drama where the extract occurs.

Too many students try to impose on the extract some general thoughts about characters without looking at what actually happens in the extract, without seeing the complexity of characters who are operating and negotiating in highly charged situations. Students need to see that characters are not fixed but are nuanced and often in a state of flux; they are representations of human beings that change, respond like this at one time and like that at another. This is why character studies can be unhelpful. Students have to be alert to subtleties, uncertainties, unpredictability and change within characters' behaviours and speech.

Students also have to read the extract carefully and not gloss over difficult bits. Although they have studied the play and should recognise where the extract is from, it is essential that they read it carefully again to be absolutely clear about what is actually happening and not try to impose on it something that happens elsewhere. Students have to see too that at the point of the drama which they are given, any number of other things could potentially happen.

The students who produced the best responses wrote an overview tracking the extract carefully. They saw the extract as a script intended for theatrical performance. They engaged with the story in its entirety, noting its progression. They focused tightly and explored the story in detail always thinking about the situation of what is actually taking place on stage at this time and bearing in mind what characters know at this point and don't know. The students who scored the highest marks recognised that at the end of the extract the story has moved on - if only ever so slightly; the audience is in a different place from the place they were at the beginning. The same is true of the characters.

When students struggled, they often just dived in and picked out bits of things to say in a disconnected way. Sometimes it was single words or images, sometimes a 'theme' or an aspect, sometimes it was something that was factually inaccurate. The students who just picked out aspects of tragedy or homed in on a character who is in the extract (or sometimes characters who are not in the extract) and wrote about them in a fixed way, often got boxed in. These students ignored the observable evidence that was in front of them.

As always, where students wrote about the play as an imagined performance on stage rather than the page, responses were engaging, for example, when they focused on the dynamics between Desdemona and Emilia or the visual impact of Lear's curse on his daughter. Students need to see that a text written for the theatre is there to be interpreted by real life actors who will make different choices about the words they deliver; those actors and directors - as well as A-level students - will see a range of possible meanings.

Question 1

The extract from *Othello* is from Act 4 scene 3. Othello has told his wife to dismiss her attendant as he will shortly return. Before this he has publicly humiliated Desdemona and struck her and Desdemona in her distress and confusion has opened her heart to both Iago and Emilia and appealed to Iago to tell her what to do to win back Othello's favour.

This part of the play begins with the physical exit of Othello and Lodovico, leaving Emilia and Desdemona alone on the stage. The moment is intimate and emotionally charged. Emilia, Desdemona's maid and social inferior, tries to calm her utterly dejected mistress. She offers words of comfort saying that Othello looks gentler than he did, though whether this is an honest observation or just some words of comfort is for the director of the play to decide. Desdemona repeats the words Othello has said to her - that he will shortly return and that Emilia must leave. Emilia is astounded - and alarmed, questioning: 'Dismiss me?' Desdemona seems rather trance-like and says that this is what Othello has said, and they must not displease him.

She breaks off her speech to tell Emilia to give her night clothes (a stage direction indicating that Desdemona is preparing herself for bed). At this point Emilia speaks out beyond her social role and voices her concerns for Desdemona by saying she wishes that Desdemona had never seen Othello. Despite the opportunity Emilia provides for Desdemona to denounce her husband, Desdemona does not do so. Perhaps she is mindful of the class boundary between herself and her maidservant. What she does do is demonstrate her loyalty and her unwavering love for her husband. Rather than focusing on Othello's violence and abuse, she focuses on his more insignificant imperfections (his frowns and stubbornness) which she claims have grace and favour in them, some sort of twisted beauty perhaps. During her words she breaks off to give another instruction to Emilia to 'unpin' her clothing as she prepares to go to bed on which Emilia has now laid Desdemona's wedding sheets. Desdemona is clearly distracted and in her terrified musings she speaks of her foolishness and then says that if she dies before Emilia, she wants to be wrapped in her wedding sheets. Emilia tries to shift Desdemona from her despondency by suggesting that what Desdemona says is just words, but Desdemona will not be shaken from her thoughts of death. She then tells the tragic story of her mother's maid Barbary who, having been forsaken by her mad lover, sang 'a song of willow' which she 'died singing'. This song, Desdemona says, will not leave her mind. Acting now a friend, more than a subordinate, Emilia tries further distractions. She asks if she should fetch her night-gown. Desdemona says no but unpin her clothes here. She then speaks distractedly of Lodovico, the man who has just left with her husband. Rather randomly she says that he is a proper (handsome) man. It seems as if Desdemona is saying anything to keep Emilia with her and to keep talking. Emilia seems glad of the chance to talk more. She clearly does not want to leave, and she comments on how a woman in Venice would have given anything to kiss Lodovico. Desdemona does not respond to Emilia's comments but returns to her morbid thinking. She sings the willow song. Her emotions are clearly heightened, and her fear is palpable. When she hears the wind, she is agitated. Emilia again tries to calm her but there is no consolation. Desdemona asks if her itching eyes bode weeping. Emilia seems again at a loss as to what to say: 'Tis neither here nor there.' At this point the extract ends. It is important to note that although Desdemona tells Emilia several times during the extract that Emilia must leave, Emilia doesn't and in fact stays for another fifty lines after the extract.

Most students engaged well with the extract, and nearly all had something valid to say about Desdemona, Emilia and the willow song. When students scored high marks, they were often noticing the delicate intimacy of the scene, with Emilia and Desdemona saying anything to delay Emilia's leaving. In the best answers, students were also alert to Desdemona's confused state of mind which is anything but clear. They focused on the disconnected threads in her words and commented on the dramatic actions that take place as Desdemona and Emilia are talking. While many good answers were focused on Desdemona's loyalty and her love for her husband, some students suggested she might just be trying to convince herself here, one or two remembering that after the extract she says 'O, these men, these men!' While most students were sympathetic towards Desdemona, some commented on what they considered her frustrating naivety and passivity. Although many students wrote about the foreshadowing of Desdemona's death, the students who were really thinking questioned whether Desdemona 'knows' she is going to die. The best responses also contained insightful comments on Emilia. Although she speaks less than Desdemona, her stage presence is significant. She is carefully observing, working out what to say and how to try to calm her mistress; she is busily doing things, trying to distract and cheer Desdemona up, trying to make the mood less solemn.

In the less successful answers, students generally just picked things out in a random way, not always understanding what is happening. Several did not read closely and said that the willow song was sung by Desdemona's mother. There was also some misreading of the discussion of Lodovico. Some picked it out and said it was evidence of Emilia's unfaithfulness. Some said that the very fact that Desdemona and Emilia were saying another man was handsome meant that they were disloyal. It would be interesting to find out if these same students would apply such conclusions to their everyday lives.

The students who produced the less successful answers, though, were those who ignored Emilia and the willow song altogether; those who wrote about Othello and Iago (who are not in the extract); and most unhelpfully, those who wrote about 'women' in general who are abused by men. Sometimes students didn't even name Desdemona and Emilia but just wrote about 'women'. In such cases there was no sense they were writing about the play as a dramatic and tragic story. These students saw the extract as a means for Shakespeare to comment on women in his society and were seemingly unaware that he was a commercial playwright writing to entertain and engage his audiences.

Question 2

The extract from *King Lear* is from Act 1 scene 4. Before the extract, Gonerill has raged at Lear about the behaviour of the Fool and Lear's knights. Lear has exploded in anger while Gonerill has coolly and authoritatively stood her ground; Lear has ordered his men to saddle their horses as he intends to leave. Albany has begged him to be patient. In this extract Lear, in the presence of his knights, Kent and Albany, is ranting at Gonerill for insulting his knights. He defends them fiercely. As his anger towards Gonerill escalates, he is triggered to think of Cordelia's fault, which he says was small in comparison to the faults of his eldest daughter. Angry, and beginning to feel regret about Cordelia, his speech is punctuated by his physically disturbing action of striking his own head. He admits that Cordelia's fault caused him emotional turmoil but that his lack of judgement was foolish. As his temper intensifies, he tells Kent and his knights to leave. Albany rather ineffectually (and perhaps even potentially

comically) declares his innocence and ignorance of why Lear is so angry. Gonerill says nothing. Lear then delivers a vitriolic curse on her. Kneeling, he appeals to the goddess Nature to intervene on his behalf and cause her to become sterile. If she must have a child, he prays that it will be a child of spleen that will torment her. He then exits. Albany and Gonerill briefly converse. Albany asks why this display of rage has happened. Gonerill says he doesn't need to know, and dismissively says it is just Lear's disposition. Lear then re-enters, raging now that fifty of his men have already been sent away. Albany says he is unaware of this. Lear directly addresses his daughter, with more anger and insults. His speech is disconnected as his emotions intensify. As his hot tears fall, he blames Gonerill for shaking his manhood. The extract ends with another curse; he wants blasts and fogs to fall upon her. After the extract, Lear's raging continues, and he says he will go to Regan who will flay Gonerill's wolfish image in defence of her father.

The students who engaged with what is happening in the course of this mini drama, produced good answers. These students were alert to what is taking place on stage: the busyness at some moments (the exits of Kent and the knights, Lear's exit and his re-entry, his angry striking of his head, his kneeling and weeping) and the contrast of stillness at others (for much of the extract Gonerill is a steely and silent presence). Some impressive discussion was made by some students who were really thinking about why Lear sends his attendants away at the point when he does. Is it because he wants to preserve some power? To avoid having an audience witness his loss of dignity? So that his curse on his daughter will be private? Some students suggested that although Lear is the one who shouts and rages, this only intensifies Gonerill's stage presence and power: she knows she has won the clash with him and so needs to say nothing (implied by her curt remarks to Albany). She certainly doesn't seem fazed though directors might well choose to show her start with horror when Lear curses her with infertility. The students who tracked the trajectory commented well on Albany with some seeing his ignorance as a sign of hope, a preparation for his later transformation onto the side of the good.

However, there were many students who did not know what the extract is about. A surprising number were unable to place the extract accurately and saw it as Lear's ranting against both Gonerill *and* Regan before he goes off into the storm. These students ignored the curse and the exchanges between Gonerill and Albany and just wrote some general comments about Lear's realisation of his errors and the terrible villainy of his 'daughters'. There was often a good dose of Aristotle in the lower-level answers, with many seeing the extract as an opportunity to throw in learned or inaccurately learned terminology. Some also wrote extensively on the Natural Order and how the Jacobean audience would have been more than outraged by a woman's power at humiliating her father - a king, no less. This writing replaced any sense of what is actually takes place on stage. For some, the extract might as well not have been there.

In both Question 1 and 2, the most successful responses were by those students who focused tightly on the extract, saw its dramatic narrative and made brief and valid connections with the rest of the play before returning to focus on the extract again. Extracts have been chosen because there is so much going on in them. They are printed on the page so that students can work with the details and tease out the potential meanings. Students are invited to 'explore' what is going on and how the story is being moved on. This is what 'dramatic methods' is about. In the very best answers, the extract is always central.

Section B

The Section B tasks require different skills from students even though they are writing about the same play as they wrote about in Section A. Here students had to debate a given critical view about their Shakespeare play or, in the case of Questions 4 and 6, explore the significance of murder and killing to the tragedies of *Othello* and *King Lear*. Students performed well in this section when they took ownership of the debate, hit the question head on and stayed on task throughout. The key to success was careful and clear thinking beforehand.

When students wrote clearly and responded to all the terms of the question they were quickly moving through Band 3 and into Band 4. In Band 4 answers, students could support their ideas thoroughly with discussion of well selected sections of the play.

Students who organised their ideas carefully did themselves a favour. In the best writing paragraphs were connected and arguments moved forward. Some students did not think about the questions carefully though and just produced some writing about something mentioned in the question.

There was again rather a lot of students who were citing critics in Section B answers - often at length and often gratuitously. This was generally ineffective especially when for many it replaced focus on the text and question. Students should be told not to do this. It is very rare that a critical opinion will support or refute the ideas set up in questions and often the citing of critics shifts the students' thinking and takes away question focus. It is surprising to see that some students have learned a heap of things that critics say, yet do not know what happens in the texts themselves.

Question 3

This question invited students to write about Othello as having no moderation and loving and hating with the full force of his emotions. Students needed to say to what extent they agreed with the given view. The key to success was to focus on Othello in terms of his displays of emotion and then debate whether he has any moderation.

Some excellent work was seen in response to this question when the focus was sharp and students knew the play well enough to choose apt evidence for their ideas. Several students agreed with the premise set up and wrote well about Othello's having no moderation and loving and hating with all his being. When students were at their best they were citing such examples as Othello's being so overwhelmed by his love when he is reunited with Desdemona on the Cyprus shore that he says 'If it were now to die,/ 'Twere now to be most happy', and that his feelings are so intense that they 'stop [him] here; it is too much joy'. His kissing his wife in public was also referred to as evidence of his lack of moderation. Students argued that he takes no account of his status as a General at this point and that his subordinates are present and watching. Some argued that his love for Desdemona is so intense that he abandons his military duties after the destruction of the Turkish fleet, deputing Cassio so that he can enjoy the fruits of his love with Desdemona. There was also plenty of evidenced discussion of his hating with the full force of his emotions.

Several students wrote effectively about his desire to chop Desdemona into messes when he thinks she has been unfaithful and his violent reaction ('I'll tear all to pieces') when Iago recounts his dream. The text contains many examples of Othello displaying the full force of his emotions (some of which are cited in the mark scheme) and when students knew their texts well, they were using examples constructively and often sensitively. Some argued that at times the full force of Othello's love and hate work simultaneously, for example when he directly accuses Desdemona of infidelity: 'O thou weed,/ Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet/ That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst ne'er been born!'

There was also good discussion by students who argued that Othello does have moderation. References were made: to the beginning of the play when he calmly tells the men who have come to arrest him on Brabantio's behalf to keep up their 'bright swords for the dew will rust them'; to when, despite his love for Cassio, he has to dismiss him for his drunken unprofessional behaviour; to when, after Iago first sows the seeds of doubt in his mind, Othello is at a crossroads, thinking his wife is honest and thinking she is not, thinking that 'If she be false ...then heaven mocks itself'. Some students focused on the end of the play when Othello kills Desdemona and while some convincingly argued that in Act 5 scene 2 Othello's full force of love and hate are on display others convincingly argued that here, he is moderating his emotions when he thinks of why she must die even though he loves her so much. One student made a strong case for Othello's over moderating himself before his suicide where he acts as a solemn law enforcer who executes the guilty party.

The students who produced less successful answers often neglected to focus on Othello and his emotions but instead wrote about his race or his insecurity. Several students focused more on Iago than Othello and wrote at length about his plotting and his anticipating Othello's extreme emotions. While it would have been apt to comment on Iago's noticing Othello's being unfettered to Desdemona's love, it was not relevant to make the answer about Iago. Other less successful responses were when students didn't know the text well enough to cite good examples of Othello's loving with the full force of his emotions. Many students quoted the lines that he delivers to the senate about loving Desdemona because she pitied him - which is not a convincing example of his emotions being in full force. Some who quoted this line then went on to argue that Othello's love is not love at all and this took them in a most unhelpful direction and well away from the question.

Question 4

In this question students were asked to explore the significance of murder and killing to the tragedy of the play. This question was well answered by those students who realised that there are four killings and then proceeded to deal with them in a detailed way, exploring all kinds of significances that can be found in relation to them like the contribution of murder to the tragic plot, what the killings reveal of the villainy of Iago and the violent mindset of Othello, the methods used by the murderers, the reasons for the murders and the impact on the victims and on other characters who survive them as well as on the audience. Success, as was the case in other questions, very much depended on how well students knew the play and how thoughtfully they engaged with the dramatic story. If students wrote well, they could seamlessly incorporate comments on dramatic action. The best responses were by students who pinned down the four killings and then made pertinent structural points about all the

murders occurring in Act 5 with Roderigo's being the first and Othello's killing himself at the play's climactic tragic end. Some students thought about the significance of killing in a more general way and wrote about Othello's lifelong military life and the killings that he would have carried out in the broil and battle of the tented field. Some commented on how in his speech to the senate he romanticises this aspect of his life rather than focusing on brutal and bloody detail.

When students struggled it was usually because they neglected to write about the specific murders and instead wrote about Iago's plot which leads up to the murders as if Iago had planned them all from the start. Some students were mistaken in who kills whom and a fair number of students claimed that Cassio is murdered - some thinking it is by Iago and some by Roderigo. Several students were very hazy about how the victims are killed; and some gave little time to the victims at all. While many students wrote well on Othello's murder of Desdemona a surprising number thought that his killing of her was kind because it is hands-on and he does not shed her blood. It would be interesting to ask these same students if they actually thought that being smothered and gradually deprived of oxygen is in any way a romantic way to die.

Question 5

In this Question students were asked to say to what extent they agreed with the view that in *King Lear*, those who confront the powerful with the truth have to be admired. To answer this successfully, students needed to focus on a number of things: who the characters are who confront the powerful, who the powerful are who are confronted, what truth the characters confront the powerful with and then, whether or not those characters are admirable in confronting the powerful with the truth. The key here was making appropriate choices and students could only do that if their knowledge of the play was sound.

Students writing the best responses, where the argument could most convincingly be secured, focused on Cordelia who confronts Lear with the truth in the love test; Kent, who not only confronts Lear with the truth about the foolishness of Lear's division of the kingdom, but also confronts Cornwall when he tells him why he has attacked Oswald; the Fool who speaks truth to Lear in his role as jester; and Gloucester, who confronts Regan and Cornwall with the truth just before he is blinded. Some students were able to construct a valid argument around Edmund's speaking truth to power in his soliloquy when the powerful were pinned down as the audience, but generally when students wrote about Edmund their comments were not made relevant. In the best answers there was a good debate around whether speaking truth to power makes those who do it admirable. While many said it does and supported their ideas well, some said that Cordelia and Kent are more foolish than admirable as what happens as a result of speaking the truth is terrible for more than just themselves. When students were thinking, they produced some really interesting arguments.

When students performed less well, it was usually because one or more parts of the question were ignored rendering the choices inappropriate. Several students chose to write about Gloucester and Edgar but there was no sense of any truth that is spoken by them or of who the powerful are that are being addressed. Some students ignored truth and power and just wrote about characters who are admirable. Very few marks could be given for such answers.

Question 6

This question was a parallel question to the question on *Othello*, but here students were asked to explore the significance of murder and killing to the tragedy of *King Lear*. As with Question 4, this question was done very well by those students who knew their texts and pinned down murders/ killings at the start of paragraphs, wrote some details about them and then explored some meanings that arise from each one. Given that there are so many murders and killings in the play there was no shortage of material for students to work with. Some students actually commented on the high body count and related it well to the bleakness of the play. Generally, this question worked well for all students across the ability range; most could find some significances in terms of plot, the victims, the situations of the murders, the killers, the dramatic action or the impact on those left alive including the audience.

Most students were able to write well about Cordelia's murder - though not all were aware of who murders her and under whose instruction. Those who did, wrote interestingly about Edmund's villainy and his bribery of his Officer (in his thirst for power, Edmund wants no mercy to be shown to the captured Cordelia or Lear and promises his Officer 'noble fortunes' if he carries out the killings). There was good discussion of the effect of Cordelia's murder on Lear and also of how her murder contributes to the dark pessimism of the play's ending. In the best answers there was also well-developed discussion of the murder of Regan by Gonerill and Gonerill's killing of herself. Edgar's killing of Edmund was also discussed by many students and here it was argued as one of the play's positives, Edgar achieving justice after the treachery of his brother. Not many students wrote about the other murders/ killings, but some good writing was seen on the murder of Cornwall by the anonymous Servant who cannot stand by when Cornwall takes out Gloucester's eyes, but who is then subsequently stabbed to death by Regan.

When students struggled, it was usually because they didn't know the play well and didn't know who was killed and who wasn't. Many wrote about Lear's death which wasn't relevant since he isn't killed, and some claimed that Gloucester was murdered. Some students wrote meaningfully about Gloucester's attempted suicide, but for many once they had gone down the route of discussing Gloucester, they lost sight of the question and just described some things they could remember about him and Poor Tom.

Section C

In this section students had to manage two texts in relation to their chosen question. Some excellent answers were seen to both questions when students were choosing wisely, thinking about what exactly was being asked and then using their textual knowledge to construct well supported ideas and arguments. Students have two key choices to make: firstly, which of the two questions best suits their texts and knowledge and secondly, which sections of their two texts will best help them to answer the question. The choices that students made here were crucial and telling. Many low-level responses were by students who, having chosen to write about families being torn apart in tragedy largely ignored the question and instead wrote generally about families or individual misery; some chose to write about *La Belle Dame* where there are no families.

Some who chose the question on the significance of errors of judgement did not really know what an error of judgement is and ended up writing anything - often blindness or pride. Before making their choice, students really should spend time thinking about what precisely they need to write about and use the guidance set out in the Introductory Comments.

Students wrote best when they approached the questions in a direct way and did not try to over-complicate their approaches. Given that students have to manage their two texts in about 45 minutes they really do need to get to the point of the question quickly and make selections from the texts that enable them to drive their arguments forward. Here, as elsewhere, it was best when students saw the texts as narratives.

When students used Keats as one of their texts, their choice of poem(s) was always crucial. Students need to have knowledge of all four poems so that they can select which poem(s) can most appropriately be used to answer the question chosen. Some excellent writing was seen on Keats when the focus was sharp. Although some superb work was seen in responses to all set texts, students were usually clearest and most insightful when writing about *Richard II*. This was true of responses to Question 7 and Question 8.

Question 7

This question was answered well by those students who pinned down precise family relationships in their two texts and debated to what extent the families are torn apart. Many agreed with the question premise and selected evidence well to support their ideas. Students who knew their plays well found a great deal that they could write about, and the best made judicious selections. Choices which worked well were the discord between Willy and Biff in *Salesman* which bubbles over in the narrative present but has its roots in the past when Biff's idolisation of his father is shattered by his discovery of Willy's affair. There was also good discussion of Willy's guilt in relation to his family and how his attitudes and delusions create tension and dishonesty in explosive moments in the play. Some students focused on Linda's role in smoothing over the discord and these students argued that the family is not finally torn apart. There was also plenty of interesting discussion of the play's ending, with a variety of arguments being made in relation to whether the family is ultimately broken. The students answering on *Richard II* found much to discuss given that nearly all the characters are related and the civil war results from two cousins falling out over power and kingship.

Students who were insightful made interesting comments on the ways that this leads to York's family being torn apart as father and son grapple with where their loyalties lie. Some good work was seen when Richard is literally torn apart from his wife by Northumberland's telling the married couple that they must separate after which Richard is imprisoned and Isabel sent to France. Some good discussion was also seen by those students writing about *Tess*. Many commented on how her marriage to Angel is torn apart by his hypocrisy, double standards and cruelty. Those writing about *Gatsby* often chose to write about the marriage between George and Myrtle which is torn apart by her affair and her violent death. There was interesting work too on the Buchanans whose family, some argued, is broken because of violence and infidelity. Others argued that the relationship is solid in its own dreadful way since Tom and Daisy are like conspirators at the end having broken up the lives of others but keeping their marriage intact.

Much good work was also seen on Keats when the focus was on details of Isabella's relationship with her brothers (their murder of Lorenzo which leads to their guilt making them groan aloud in their dreams while Isabella gradually pines away) or the marriage of Lamia and Lycius which is torn apart on their wedding day as a result of Lycius's foolish desire to have a public celebration in which Lamia's deception is exposed by the cold philosophy of Apollonius. When students used the *Eve of St Agnes* they wrote well if they had detailed knowledge of the beginning and ending of the poem and could focus on Madeline's family and how she is torn apart from them by her dream and by her eloping with Porphyro.

Where students were less successful, it was sometimes because they just wrote anything about families and ignored the tragic element of 'torn apart' or because they could not locate sections of their texts where the family is in crisis. In *Salesman*, the least successful responses were when students just wrote vaguely about arguments and division with no sense of where they occur in terms of the story. Knowledge of the text was a real deciding factor in how well students performed and whether they make good choices. A surprising number of students chose to write about *La Belle Dame*, often prefacing their comments with something like: Although there isn't a family in *La Belle Dame*, the knight is still torn apart by the faery. There was also a lot of invention when this poem was used with claims made that the narrator is the knight's brother and the faery-child is the knight's daughter.

Question 8

The points made in the Introductory comments about 'significance questions', are certainly pertinent to the responses seen to this question. What students needed to do was clearly pin down errors of judgement and then write about their significance in a specific way in relation to the story. Some students just launched into significance with no sense of what errors of judgement are made by characters or where they occur. When students did this, their writing was vague and general, and it was difficult for them to move out of Band 2. However, many students answered this question very well and there were some excellent clear and focused responses. Examples of errors of judgement which worked really well for students were: Willy's affair, his refusing to accept Charley's offer of a job, Biff's stealing of the pen, Richard's error of taking Gaunt's plate and land, his error in believing he cannot not be removed because of he is an anointed king, Lycius' error in wanting a public display of a wedding, Isabella's error in forming a relationship with the lower class Lorenzo whom her brothers would never accept, the knight's believing that the faery loves him, Tess' error of accepting Alec's rescue at the Chaseborough fair, Angel's error in abandoning Tess after their marriage, Gatsby's error in believing he can repeat the past and Nick's error in being sucked into the world of the super-rich.

The most common error of judgement, which was written about in response to *Salesman*, was Willy's blind belief in the American Dream. Some students wrote very well about it. However, some students found it very difficult to locate any part of the text where the error is made and ended up writing very generally and often about blindness. Many students did not give a clear sense of what they understood by the American Dream and just claimed that Willy's error is believing in it because it is unattainable. While it is true that Willy cannot attain it, and doesn't know why he can't, Miller shows that it is not unattainable for Howard or Charley or Bernard or Ben or Dave Singleman. Apart from this, Miller puts into Willy's utterances many examples of real historical figures who were successful: Thomas Edison, J P Morgan, Jack Benny, etc, the

knowledge of which sharpens Willy's despair. His painful awareness of his brother's success and that of his next-door neighbour means he never gives up trying to break through and this, as some students pointed out, is his real error. As Biff observes, Willy had the wrong dreams.

Conclusion

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently and when they are not constrained by thinking they must include material (context or critical views) regardless of the question.

The most successful responses seen were by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words, stayed on task throughout and produced tight focused writing.

Such responses were a joy to read.

Looking forward

While this report focuses specifically on what happened in this year's examination, there is much in it that can help teachers as they prepare for the future. For teachers new to report reading, new to teaching, new to Specification B and those preparing for teaching in September, there is also much support available on the AQA website (Go to 'subjects' - select 'English' - select 'AS and Level Lit B') and Centre Services (use the tile for teacher support and then the filters). On the website you can look at all training materials and previous reports to help you to understand how best to support your students.

As teachers prepare for the 2026 examinations they might like to give the following quick tips to their students:

- Know your texts thoroughly.
- Focus on all the words of the question set and base your argument on the subject of the question.
- Root your arguments in details of the story itself.
- Do not write about worlds or society outside of the text
- Do not write about critical theory or critical views in a detached way.
- Think before you write.
- Make sure that your first sentence is relevant to the question - and that you never veer from it.

Further support

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Tel: 0161 957 7504

Email (GCSE): english-gcse@aqa.org.uk

Email (AS and A-level): english-gce@aqa.org.uk