



A-Level **English Literature B**

7717/2A

Report on the Examination

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Contents

The below table is interactive. You can press the control button click on the title of the question to go directly to that page.

Contents	Page
Summary	3
Introductory comments	4
Open Book	10
Further support	13

Summary

Overall performance

The overall performance this year was fairly similar to last year but if anything, slightly better with fewer answers in the lower two bands.

Areas where students excelled

- A strong sense of personal response to the texts and the tasks.
- A sense of enthusiasm for the texts and the debate offered by the questions.
- Generally good overall time management with fewer unfinished answers.
- Good knowledge of generic elements.
- We are looking forward to reading equally strongly personal and enthusiastic responses to the new, exciting text which is being introduced onto the paper for first examination in 2027, *Kala* by Colin Walsh.

Areas where students struggled

- Students in the lower bands struggled to keep focus on the question and to address its terms precisely.
- Some students still came to the texts and tasks with a set of generic expectations which they tried to impose artificially instead of working from the texts outwards.
- A tendency to make sweeping generalisations about texts and contexts.
- Less successful answers lacked effective planning and organisation, leading to writing which was often confused, digressive, and too long.

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 waste precious exam time writing empty 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, Emma, Daisy, 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 on 7717/2A

This year's paper proved to be successful overall, allowing students of all abilities to engage with the questions and to demonstrate successfully the results of their studies. If anything, the general standard of answers this year seemed slightly higher than last year, and examiners felt they saw fewer responses in band 2 and very few in band 1. There was a sense of the students' enthusiasm for the topic and their chosen texts in their writing and some lively personal engagement with the critical premises in the questions. Students demonstrated a good knowledge of the elements of crime writing and generic expectations. However, there are still several points to make with an aim to improvement in certain areas.

As stated in the report every year, focus on the question is always essential. The questions are designed so that, in answering them, students will successfully address all the assessment objectives. It is therefore in their own interests to answer the question asked and not to drift away from their topic, pursuing their own agenda. In answering the question, AO4, requiring knowledge of genre, will inevitably be addressed meaning there is no need to try to refer to Golden Age crime writing, Hard-boiled detective fiction or any other sub-genre to gain credit. In fact, such references were usually a futile waste of time with little critical impact. There is no requirement in this specification to make comparisons to other texts in the genre and so this was equally a waste of time. Nor is there a requirement to reference other critical

opinions in order to engage in a sense of debate. Students who forced references to attributed critical opinions into their answers rarely added much to a focused debate.

In the highest-scoring answers, contextual references arising from the texts were seamlessly part of the argument of the answer. Students who produced less successful answers attempted to impose contexts (particularly those of class and gender) artificially into the writing or to make sweeping generalisations about context based on unconvincing broad assumptions from outside the texts which were forced into the argument.

It is also worth making a comment at this point about length and use of time. Overall, this year, students seemed to organise their time well and examiners felt there were fewer incomplete answers because time had run out. Time-organisation for this examination is quite straightforward, with an hour for each of the three questions. It is expected, however, that within that hour, students will spend at least ten minutes thinking and planning, and fifty or so minutes writing up their answer. Those students who just set off to write without taking time to think first and organise their ideas usually ended up writing far too much. Such material was frequently irrelevant, and the ideas were often difficult to follow. Answers which were clear, well-organised and on topic were the answers which scored highly. Quite often, a three-page answer can score more than seven pages because it is clearer and more precise. Those students who have been awarded extra time should also use most of that extra time for thinking and planning. It is not intended that extra time should just enable students to produce longer answers.

Rubric Infringements

Examiners thought that they saw more rubric infringements this year than in previous years. A number of students answered more than one question in Section B which was not to their advantage. Although examiners read all the answers, they can only award marks for the best one so if students do more than one question they are wasting precious time. A handful of students used the same text in Sections B and C and so that text could only be credited once. Occasionally there was simply no Section C answer at all. It is obviously essential that students observe the rubric in order to get the highest score.

AO1

As always, those answers which were well-written with coherently structured, focused arguments scored marks in the top bands. Good answers used appropriate terminology as tools and did not try to use terminology just to impress. Students should be aware that using terms such as stichomythia, heterodiegetic and intradiegetic narrators does not automatically gain them credit.

Open Book

The fact that this examination is open book, clearly has certain implications. With the texts there on the desk, it is expected that students will use them and therefore textual support for arguments was often a key feature of high scoring answers. Quotations should be used and they should be accurate as the students are not relying on memory. Having the texts in the examination is not, however, a substitute for knowledge of those texts. Top band answers were written by students who had excellent textual knowledge and knew where to find the parts of the story and the quotations they wanted instantly (and sometimes they had memorised them anyway). It was obvious when students just opened the texts anywhere and scabbled around for a quotation which was meaningful. This approach was rarely successful.

Section A

This year's extract seemed to engage the students' interest and give them plenty of opportunities to write about elements of crime. Successful answers often started with a neat overview of the extract and then focused on key selected details. Students who produced less successful answers often spent too long on one minute detail and lost sight of the bigger picture. It was surprising how it was sometimes possible, for example, to write a whole page on the crime implications of a room having a low ceiling.

The students producing successful answers also recognised that this was an extract and they did not waste time on unknowable elements such as speculating what had happened before the extract or what might happen in the future. It was also important not to make sweeping assertions or assumptions as if this were a complete text. For example, comments such as, 'Wada never escapes' or 'justice is not served' cannot be concluded from an extract and those who made them showed a limited perspective. Equally, it is not possible to make generic assumptions from a brief extract. Those students who spent time trying to find elements of Golden Age crime writing, or to force Wada into the hard-boiled sub-genre, did not gain any credit for what could not be done. There was also danger in making some sweeping assumptions about genre or critical approaches. For example, many students made the sweeping claim that Wada is unusual because she is a female detective; these students seemed to have little awareness that there is a long history of female detectives in crime writing. Similarly, just because the protagonist is female did not mean the extract is necessarily about gender, feminism and the patriarchy. Students who went down this route usually did so at the expense of focusing on elements of crime writing.

One further point to note about question 1 concerns the introductory material provided for the extract. Students should read this carefully and get the facts clear in their heads as the introduction contains helpful explanatory information. Examiners felt that some students did not read this carefully enough to establish exactly who is who. Both Wada and Martin Caldwell were frequently referred to as detectives, which is not really accurate. Wada is the secretary to a detective, and she wants to speak to Martin Caldwell to help her investigations. George Guptill is her travelling companion and friend but speculation about their relationship led students down dubious avenues.

Section B

There were many good answers to questions in this section, particularly on the canonical texts such as *Hamlet* and *Oliver Twist* even though they were not necessarily the most popular. It was particularly notable that students who wrote on *Hamlet* made good supportive use of the text. It is worth making a point, however, about the importance of making the right choice of text and question. For example, in response to question 2 on the poetry which focused on power as a motive for crime, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was not the best choice of poem to discuss. Students who chose this poem ended up writing about power generally, the power of the authorities in their treatment of prisoners, and not power as a motive for crime. Any other poem in the selection would have worked well for this topic. Examiners also noted some continued misreading of *Peter Grimes*. Some students persisted in the error of saying Grimes is abused by his father when all textual evidence is to the contrary.

As stated in the initial section, good question focus was often the key to success. Some answers to question 5, for example, failed to score marks because so much time was spent with irrelevancies such as lengthy descriptions of Briony's childhood and Robbie's wartime experiences which have nothing to do with secrecy. With *Atonement*, students often felt impelled to retell the whole story in a way which the other texts did not seem to invite. There was also a tendency to making sweeping generalisations such as, 'Robbie was expected to commit crimes because he's lower class.' Such generalisations about class, similar to those made about gender elsewhere, did not produce sharp critical comments.

The best answers also unpicked the question terms in a very precise way. Some answers overlooked parts of the question and zoomed in on just one part. For example, question 4 on Atkinson had two elements: 'not having motives' and 'evil monsters'. Some students just focused on 'evil monsters' and overlooked 'not having motives'. Similarly in response to question 3, some answers just focused on sympathy for the Mariner and did not pin down his victims and consider sympathy for them. It is important to answer the whole question to get the best score. Successful answers in this section also worked with precise definitions of the question terms.

Question 8 on Christie was on setting and some answers discussed elements which could not really be counted as elements of setting such as characters. Similarly, question 6 on *Oliver Twist*, asked whether Dickens presents a society where children are always victims of crime. The question focus is on children, yet many students wrote at length about Nancy, who is not a child during the course of the novel although some credit could be given to those who discussed Nancy's childhood grooming. This question also contained the word 'always' and students who unpicked the implication of that small word got credit for it. There are no superfluous words in the questions of this specification. All words are there for a purpose and the word 'always' here invited critical debate and those students who recognised this wrote more subtle answers. Similarly, the word 'thoroughly' was used in question 7 on *Brighton Rock* and the best answers to this question took issue with the concept of human nature as 'thoroughly' evil.

Two questions in this section, question 5 and 8, asked students to explore the significance of a particular topic in relation to crime writing. The best answers to this type of question began by actually pinning down the examples of the topic in the text, secrecy in the case of question 5 and setting in the case of question 8. They then went on to consider the significance of

those examples, constructing a fruitful answer. Where the topic was not pinned down, the writing tended to drift, and some lower-band answers just listed examples but did not consider their significance.

Section C

It was pleasing to see this year that the two questions in Section C proved equally popular and there were many good answers to both questions. Points already raised in this report similarly apply to responses to the questions in this section.

Question 10 was on the significance of suffering and the best answers pinned down some good examples of suffering in their two chosen texts. In less successful answers, the definition of suffering was less secure, and it was sometimes surprising what some students considered to be 'suffering'. Suffering surely entails intense pain, distress or hardship and some examples cited by students did not seem to fit this definition. It is problematic therefore to talk about the reader suffering when reading *Atonement*, for example.

Question 11 asked students to consider whether criminals in crime texts are presented as feeling sorry for the crimes they commit. This question prompted some good debate but again, the best answers were very precise about the question term, 'feeling sorry'. Less successful answers revolved around some rough approximations of this term which were often not quite the same thing, such as 'feeling guilty' or sometimes just 'guilty', the latter of which is quite a different thing from 'feeling sorry'.

Conclusion

Overall examiners felt this was a successful examination with some impressive performances from many students which were a delight to read. We are very excited about the new text, *Kala* by Colin Walsh which is being added to the paper for teaching beginning in September 2025. It is an engaging modern text, published in 2023 which we feel will have great appeal for students. We hope to see an extensive uptake on this alternative to *Atonement* and *When Will There Be Good News?* and we are looking forward to reading students' responses to it. Lots of support material is available from AQA for teachers on this text but it is worth remembering that it will not be possible to use it for the coursework module from now on.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [results statistics](#) page of our website.

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