



AS

English Literature

7716/1A

Report on the Examination

June 2025

Version: 1.0

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
Individual questions	8
Further support	12

Summary

Areas where students excelled

- When students focused on the question.
- In section A, when students wrote in detail about the extract.
- In section B, students knew their chosen play well and were able to range round the text to find appropriate and precise details to support their response.
- When students' responses showed evidence of genuine engagement with the text and the task.

Areas where students struggled

- When students did not focus on the question.
- In section A, where students either neglected the extract completely or mentioned it briefly then used it as a springboard to write about other parts of the play.
- In section B, where students did not know the text well enough to choose the best evidence to create a convincing argument.
- Where students became distracted from the text and the task by generalised contextual information, irrelevant critical views, comparisons with other texts or Aristotelian terminology.

Introductory comments

Although the entry for AS English Literature B was small, some very good work was seen across all four papers. For those centres offering AS, it is clear that the students enjoyed their course and saw the value of reading texts through the lenses of Tragedy and Comedy.

All papers have the same format where students write discretely about two texts in 1 hour and 30 minutes and most students seemed to work well with this structure and managed their time sensibly.

This year's AS report will focus on four specific areas to try to help teachers in preparing students for future exams. These areas are: 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 much has been said about this 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 question relevance will be rewarded.

In the 'Explore the view 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 ensure 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 *The Great Gatsby*: Explore the view that Tom and Daisy are villains who are as bad as each other, the counter argument is that they are not as bad as each other and students might argue that either is worse than the other. A viable counter argument, however, isn't that there are alternative villains which students can choose to write about; neither is it an invitation to say that Tom and Daisy are both victims of the American Dream and then write about that.

During revision time in centres, it would be really 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 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.

The best answers on the 'Explore the view 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 specific parts of the texts and their stories. These students engaged with the text as a developing story and linked their references and quotations to events in the story's narrative trajectory.

Students should be reminded not to spend precious exam time writing ineffective introductions and repetitive conclusions.

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 or an aspect of tragedy or comedy or a topic that students need to explore in relation to tragedy or comedy; for example 'Explore the significance of places to the tragedy of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.' 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 (and in the above example, the drama); it also invites them to think about the characters, as well as the cultural, moral and social contexts that arise from the text.

The best 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 Paper 1 Section A, they pinned down the story of the extract from its beginning to its end; and in other significance questions, they pinned down the specific topic they were asked to write about (for example 'journeys' in *The Remains of the Day* or 'acting and performance' in *Wise Children*). The mark schemes give precise details of the tragic and comedic trajectories of the extracts 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 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 6 Paper 2A, they could pin down, at the start of paragraphs, Stevens' physical journey from Oxford to Cornwall, his emotional journey to realise his personal mistakes, his metaphorical journey towards understanding as he acknowledges Lord Darlington's deceit. After establishing the precise journeys, students could then develop detailed ideas about the significances of those journeys and in this way shape their writing.

When students did not respond as successfully 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. This type of question does 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 and comedic 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 little familiarity of where the quotations occur in the story. Students need to see that in texts and stories events happen and things are said, which affect how other characters behave and speak at the particular time when they are said. Speech is rarely random. What Othello says when he is confessing his love for Desdemona in the Senate in Act 1 is dependent on the contextual situation at this point in the play, so it is ineffective for students to quote Othello's words without providing their dramatic context. Othello could not speak in the same way at the end of the play.

In all stories, the situations and the characters at the end are not the same as they are at the start. In drama texts, students must imagine the stories as operating in real time: in the here and now with the potential for a variety of outcomes. In all texts, characters develop, and readers' and audiences' reactions and feelings are also altered during a story. This is true of extracts as well as whole texts. 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. So, for example, Katherina can only say 'Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun' after Petruchio has come towards the ending of his debilitating taming of her and after he has insisted that the moon she looks at is the 'blesséd sun'. Similarly, Iago can only call Emilia a 'good wench' (a term of endearment) at the point in the play when she is suggesting she has something that he wants (Desdemona's handkerchief). Once Emilia has handed it to him, she is of no further use and so he again abuses his wife, making disparaging comments towards her and instructing her to leave him alone. This is why students need to establish the tragic and comedic trajectories in the extract questions.

In the light of the above, it is therefore unhelpful for students to learn a bank of decontextualised quotations said by Iago or Emma or Daisy 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. Students need to be taught to contextualise briefly and succinctly. For example, in the *Gatsby* question, a student might say that Tom's villainous tendencies are foregrounded from Fitzgerald's first introduction of him and that when Nick first visits Tom and Daisy at their home in East Egg, Nick describes Tom's body as being 'capable of enormous leverage - a cruel body' and that when they later have dinner Daisy shows Nick her black and blue knuckles which she says were caused by Tom, the consequences of her marrying 'a brute of a man'.

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 well or the stories or details of texts is because they think they need to know other things instead of the text, for example external contextual material. This is a mistake for those doing Spec B. We are only interested in contexts that arise from the text itself.

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 Romantics or patriarchies in the real world. Writers might well represent patriarchy in their stories, and it might be relevant to write about the representation. But it is not relevant to write about the patriarchal situation of the 16th century or the 19th century as if it is one and the same thing for the whole century and in 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. One play of Shakespeare's might well - and often does - contradict what is said in another. The same Shakespeare who created Desdemona, also created Gonerill and Viola 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. It also makes little sense to claim that Desdemona is just a passive representative of 16th century women either. 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 Cyprus or when she repeatedly appeals for Cassio's reinstatement.

Students clearly 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. They are not just representative women of the 16th century. Some students too readily, and without thinking, claim that Emilia and Desdemona, like 'all women' of the time, have no power, must obey men and have no agency. While it might be relevant in the *Othello* extract question, for example, to say that at this point in the play Emilia is excited to find Desdemona's handkerchief as she wants to give it to her husband (who has a hundred times wooed her to steal it) to please him, it is not relevant to say that Emilia represents all women at the time and that no women had power and all women were abused by men.

Significantly, if Iago has wooed her a hundred times before anyway, it's taken her a while to comply and even now she doesn't 'steal' the handkerchief, but 'finds' it.

When students start writing generalised contextual material it is always a sign that they will leave the text - and invariably the question. So, the solution is easy. Teachers need to tell students to focus on the story itself, and the characters within it, who are often created as multidimensional and interesting and whose fates engage readers and audiences.

The above advice needs to be heeded as it directly relates to how scripts are marked. Marks are awarded for ideas about the texts (as required by the question) - 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

The entry on this paper was relatively small with about 170 students opting to write about tragedy for their drama texts. However, there were some good responses produced and evidence of real engagement with the tragic genre from students who were thinking about the stories of the plays, the characters and how they develop during the play (and during the extract in the Shakespeare questions) and the texts as drama.

In Section A, nearly all students answered on *Othello* and in Section B *Death of a Salesman* was again the most popular text, although it was very pleasing to read some responses to *A Streetcar Named Desire* for the first time on this paper.

Individual questions

Question 1

Othello

This was by far the more popular option in this section. The question was from Act 3, scene 3, where Emilia has just found Desdemona's handkerchief, which she explains in a short soliloquy before handing it to Iago. He quickly dismisses his wife and, in his own short soliloquy, explains his plans for the handkerchief.

Students who focused on the extract produced the most successful responses. There is no need to write about the rest of the play in this question – students' knowledge of the play informs their response to the extract.

The mark schemes for previous years' papers are very helpful and students should be made aware of the first two bullet points in the AO5 section of the mark scheme, as these outline a very effective way of starting a response to Section A questions. Successful responses were produced where students were aware of this and started by writing about the trajectory of the extract: what happens, which characters enter and leave the stage and, importantly, how the extract moves the tragedy on or shows a development in the characters. In this case, students who started with an overview covered the whole of the extract and saw that Iago's plan was furthered by his acquisition of the handkerchief and the tragedy had moved one

step closer to its inevitable conclusion; they were also able to comment on Emilia's early misgivings about Iago's intentions.

Students need detailed knowledge of the whole play so that they can write precisely and accurately about whichever extract is selected; knowledge of the play does not need to be shown by writing about Iago's villainy or Emilia elsewhere in the play. Less successful responses were produced by students who mentioned the extract briefly – sometimes just referring to one line or even one word – and then wrote about the bullet points in parts of the play they could remember better.

Also ineffective were responses which showed students had been distracted by context, specifically about women in Jacobean England. Those students who saw Emilia as a character who has no agency, who must obey her husband in all things and who conforms to the Jacobean expectation that all women are submissive and powerless were not reading the extract carefully enough. Emilia's emotions change through the extract from a desire to please her husband to the conflict she feels between this emotion and her loyalty to Desdemona to her (perhaps) slight suspicion of Iago's motives for wanting the token.

A number of responses were predicated entirely on a misunderstanding of the word 'wench'. Although the word can be used in a disparaging way, in the extract it is used as a term of endearment by Iago to Emilia – she has been useful to him, and he is pleased with her. It makes no sense to read it as an insult at this point in the interaction between them. However, many students saw this as the only example of Iago's villainy in the extract and a main example of Emilia's status as a downtrodden Jacobean stereotype.

Question 2

King Lear

There were very few responses to Question 2. The extract from *King Lear* was taken from Act 3 scene 4 where, after his daughters have refused to accommodate him and his knights, Lear arrives at the hovel with Kent and the Fool.

The most successful responses showed an understanding of Lear's mental state and what he says in this extract, rather than just a general awareness of his misery and madness. Lear's railing against his daughters for casting him out in the storm, his awareness that dwelling on his daughters' mistreatment could make him mad, his concern for Kent and the Fool in the storm which widens out to a more general concern for his subjects who face harsh conditions, were all valid points to make in response to the first bullet point and those students who understood what Lear is saying here could follow the trajectory of his thoughts which leads him to a greater sympathy for others and point to the beginnings of a change in him.

In terms of dramatic methods, most students were able to make sensible comments about the silent presence on stage of the Fool and his lack of jokes and witty comments. Students were also able to comment on the significance of the dramatic setting, linking the storm to Lear's mental state. A few students misunderstood the stage direction 'Storm still' to mean the storm is now still rather than the storm is still raging, which led to some difficulty in interpreting Kent's words as he urges Lear to take shelter later in the extract.

Students who littered their responses with words such as ‘anagnorisis’, ‘catharsis’, ‘hubris’, and so on, generally obscured what they were trying to say, even if they had remembered the meanings of these words correctly. Students can show an understanding of the tragic genre by focusing on the aspects of dramatic tragedy highlighted in the bullet points of the question – in this case the presentation of Lear and the setting.

Question 3

Richard II

There were hardly any responses to the question on *Richard II* this year, which was a shame as the students who had studied the play were obviously engaged by it.

The students who answered this question were able to see the relevant issues and those who knew the play well could construct a coherent response, weighing up both sides of the argument. Students who were not sure who some characters were, or what they said, found it more difficult.

Question 4

Death of a Salesman

This was by far the most popular question in Section B and was attempted by nearly all students. There were some excellent answers, showing genuine engagement with the play and interesting discussions about how far Willy Loman is to blame for Linda’s suffering. Some students argued he is completely to blame, whilst others considered other contributory factors – both approaches worked well when students stayed focused and did not subvert the question by writing about, for example, Willy’s suffering rather than Linda’s.

Successful responses were by students who started by identifying Linda’s suffering in the play: for example, she suffers because she is worried Willy will harm himself; she suffers because of the financial hardship endured by the family; she suffers because of the broken relationship between Willy and Biff and so on. There was much interesting discussion of the ending of the play and whether Willy’s death alleviated or exacerbated Linda’s suffering and of the ambiguity of her final words of ‘We’re free...we’re free.’ Less successful responses mentioned ‘Linda’s suffering’ in a vague way, without identifying how exactly she suffers.

Most students were able to write effectively about dramatic methods, including the claustrophobic setting and the motif of The Woman’s laugh which echoes through the play, symbolising Willy’s guilt. Many, however, thought that Linda suffers because she finds out about Willy’s affair and some thought the affair was happening in the narrative present of the play. *Death of a Salesman* is quite a complicated play in terms of chronology and students need to understand the order of events in the twenty-four hours of the narrative present and what happens in Willy’s memories.

Sometimes students had a good understanding of the ideas related to the question but could not support them with details from the text. This led to generalised responses, or responses where quotations were either not relevant ('A man is not a piece of fruit' appeared in many essays and it was usually difficult to see what connection it had to the question) or were included without any context to explain where in the play they were taken from or what was happening at that point in the play.

As with the *Othello* question, external context was sometimes an issue, with some students writing that Linda's suffering is caused by the patriarchy and then going on to make generalisations about women's roles in the mid-20th century. This was sometimes hardly related to the play at all, and it was difficult to award these responses a mark above band 2.

Question 5

A Streetcar Named Desire

It was really pleasing to see some responses to *A Streetcar Named Desire* this year. Students engaged with the characters and the story of the play very well and there were some thoughtful responses which showed students across the mark range had enjoyed studying the play.

The question asked about the significance of places and whether students interpreted this as named places such as Belle Reve, the streetcar destinations, settings in the play such as the Kowalski's apartment or the wider setting of New Orleans, there was much interesting discussion and many students really thought about the significance of these places in terms of the ideas in the play and the tragic outcomes. Some students tried to write about every place mentioned in the play, meaning that they couldn't develop their ideas in sufficient detail but nonetheless they showed an understanding of the significance of some of these places. Students who wrote more thorough responses chose perhaps two or three significant places and explored the significance in more depth, sometimes taking a more conceptualised response whereby they compared places (for example the apartment and Belle Reve) to explore the differences between Blanche's old and new life.

In conclusion

Across both sections of the paper and all the questions, students produced their best work when they had the confidence to engage independently and creatively with the question set without feeling that they had to include extraneous or learned ideas or contextual material. Such responses were a joy to read.

Further support

Mark ranges and award of grades

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

Enhanced Results Analysis (ERA)

Use our exam results analysis tool to create and customise as many different reports for comparison as you like.

Professional development

Attend one of our feedback [courses](#) where you can review example responses from students and commentaries from our examiners.

Contact us

Our friendly team will be happy to support you between 8am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Tel: 0161 957 7504

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

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