

A teacher's response to the New Specification English Literature Exam June 2004

The important change is that for the two essays the weighting is different:

- **Section A worth 27 marks**
- **Section B worth 36 marks**

Therefore this affects how you plan your time. It might be worth tackling the poetry question first because the tendency is to write more. In general the poetry essay ends up being at least 50% longer than the prose question.

All the assessment objectives now carry equal weighting:

AO1: respond to texts critically, sensitively and in detail, using textual evidence as appropriate

AO2: explore how language, structure and forms contribute to the meaning of texts, considering different approaches to texts and alternative interpretations

AO3: explore relationships and comparisons within and between texts, selecting and evaluating relevant material.

Comparison is important and is looked for endlessly in the marking. Please note the comparative element can be further consolidated by studying the prose in the anthology. Comparison is impossible when only studying one novel!

Important considerations are as follows:

- Emphasise the need for a structured response to the question; planning, especially for Section B is crucial.
 - Links between the four poems must be sound and focus should be on the question's parameters.
 - There can be a tendency towards offering too much unassimilated evidence. This may improve once texts are no longer annotated.
 - The essays are marked using content and skills descriptors and pupils should be made aware of this. They need to be encouraged towards a more conceptualised approach to their writing (as far as possible).
 - Overview is important because themes will need to be explored across the four poems in Section B.
 - The teaching should move from the mechanics towards insightful linkage and exploration. This will help even the weakest pupil who will be able to push up their grade in this way by using even the odd pertinent phrase.
 - *Ideas / Meanings / Techniques* are important in the first instance, then build in:
 - *Analysis / Exploration / Imaginative interpretation / Evaluative comparison.*
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The reduced timing of the exam should be considered

- 45 minutes for the prose and 1 hour for the poetry. With the contracted prose timings it is important for candidates to tackle the question immediately. There is no time for lengthy introductions or background. Their focus should be on the question.

- For example Question 1 this year:

Compare how the writers of 'Chemistry' and 'Your Shoes' show relationships between adults and children.

Any background material should be contained within direct reference to the question. For example:

The mother in 'Your Shoes' is experiencing the fracturing of a mother daughter relationship as she sits in her daughter's bedroom cradling one of her shoes. Her isolation and despair show how problematic and all-consuming adult / child relationships can be.

There is no time to explain the background or offer long descriptions of the room. Any observation must be tied into the question at every opportunity. Judicious use of detail is rewarded and these skills should be reiterated throughout the course.

The shock of the question wording in Section B will not occur in future as we are all aware of this new format. It is quite helpful and students should be encouraged to use the a) and b) formatting. It enables candidates to focus on each part rather than juggling all four poems in one go. This obviously assists slightly weaker candidates and of course there may be others who prefer to write about all poems in one go, however good sense would suggest dealing with the two prescribed texts and then writing about their own choices in section b.

Alternative interpretations have perhaps taken second place in the classroom whilst teachers have grappled with the sheer number of poems taught across Literature and English. However, this is something that now needs addressing for those who have not given it sufficient focus. The 'exploratory' criterion cannot be fulfilled if they are simply regurgitating received interpretation only. Now teachers have built up sufficient resources it should be quite quick to teach the basic response to the poetry and then spend some time on more imaginative responses.

One successful approach has been to ask the pupils to prepare a lesson on one poem. The brief is to interest 'a group of disaffected Year 10s'. One group were given 'Patrolling Barnegat' and asked to discuss an approach in groups with guidelines from the teacher. Their propositions were as follows:

- watch an extract from *Perfect Storm* or *Pirates of the Caribbean* and ask the pupils to respond creatively to the storm
- choose appropriate music and ask pupils to write creatively in response
- make a number of objects contained within the poem
- ask another group to prepare a dramatic reading with visual aids
- offer a series of drawings stuck around the verbs in the poem and ask groups to link the drawing with the language under timed conditions (i.e. one minute)

These tasks were set up as a round robin and small groups moved round the room experiencing each approach. This appeals to kinaesthetic learners and everyone who is bored to tears with working through dull photocopiable sheets.

Now the first exam paper has been set, teachers can free themselves from the fear of the unknown and attempt to spice up the exploratory aspects of the syllabus. Teaching the prose section frees up time for a more creative approach to coursework. It is possible to submit poetry for the original writing coursework for English which might give some frustrated pupils a more artistic outlet...go on.....revamp the course.....you know you want to!