

WRITING IN A UNIQUE STYLE – THE TEXT-RESPONSE

There are many obstacles that arise when you sit down to write an essay. Foremost among these can be that you suddenly forget all that you know about the text and how to structure an essay. Perhaps your mind goes blank and you spend five minutes deliberating whether to begin with “The text...” or “In the text...”. This is a phenomenon many people experience, but it needs to be stressed that memorising a standard essay (or sections of an essay) that you try to adjust to answer each new prompt is not the solution. VCAA assessors are adept at recognising when a student is using prepared material and it rarely, if ever, reflects well on your performance.

Instead of adopting such a formulaic approach, it is worth realising that in the same way each author you encounter in VCE English has a different style so should each student respond to an essay prompt with their own unique interpretation and form of expression. The process of developing your individual style takes time as it involves a constant exchange of you writing practise essays and receiving feedback regarding the clarity of your expression. To encourage you in exploring this aspect of your writing, first consider these different samples of student written introductions for the texts *Rear Window* and *Women of Troy*. Note that all student responses have not been corrected for grammar, spelling, or factual accuracy.

Alfred Hitchcock’s Rear Window explores the ability of physical appearances to effortlessly deceive, whether the cast or the audience. Lisa Fremont, the female lead, gradually transcends the universally ingrained notion that women were solely a passive object of beauty, culminating in her physical and heroic endeavor which exceeds the feminine stereotypes of the 1950s. Moreover, detective Tom Doyle provides a voice for Hitchcock to expound on the logical fallacies of jumping to conclusions based on shallow evidence, while chastising Jeff for his accusations with only glimpses of Thorwald’s life as proof. However, it is ultimately Jeff’s diligent observations which expose Thorwald as a murderer despite the disapproval of his theory by both Lisa and Doyle, who both have reasoned counterarguments. As a result, while Hitchcock cautions against shallow inferences based on appearance, sometimes those who caution against observation as evidence are ultimately in the wrong, showing how easy it is to be deceived by appearances.

This introduction, which was written in response to the prompt “In Rear Window, it is easy to be deceived by appearances. Discuss.”, utilises a clear structure of contention – signposting – linking sentence, focusing on characters for each idea. Re-read the paragraph and answer the following questions:

- Does the introduction answer the essay prompt clearly?
- After reading the introduction, do you understand what the rest of the essay will discuss? If necessary, could you write the following body paragraphs?
- Is there any room for improvement? E.g. does it use too much detail or not enough?

Evaluate the following three introductions with the given questions. Remember that the aim of this exercise is not to pick an introduction that you think is the “best”, reword it slightly and then replicate it in every text-response essay. Instead, reflect on the rich variety of styles that are used and seek to embody this diversity in your writing. At the end of the document, you can find comments relating to the questions on each given response.

INTRODUCTIONS

Topic: 'In 'Rear Window' Jeff's physical immobility is merely an outward manifestation of his emotional immobility. Discuss.

1. *The film 'Rear Window' (1954), set in post World War II Manhattan, New York, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, follows injured photographer L.B. 'Jeff' Jefferies as he pries into the lives of his neighbours through their rear apartment windows, where each opens a new and unique narrative he can follow. Throughout the film, although Hitchcock does use Jeff's physical invalidity to serve as a symbolism for his emotional insecurity, selfishness and detachment with regards to his relationships, it is also used as a plot device by the director to build suspense.*

Topic: *Rear Window* visually presents a negative portrayal of American society in the 1950s. To what extent do you agree?

2. *The 1950's in the United States can be referred to as a crucial turning point in American history, as world events began to influence the morals and values of American citizens, leading to both detrimental and beneficial outcomes for society. In fact, in Alfred Hitchcock's renowned psychological thriller Rear Window, Hitchcock negatively depicts the ways in which ideas of the 1950's impacted the attitudes of American citizens, by demonstrating how societal expectations concerning marital relations promoted feelings of confinement and how the pursuit of the unattainable "American Dream" led to the inevitable creation of a dispassionate society. However, through his exploration of gender roles and in particular, the changes in the viewing of women, Hitchcock portrays to his viewers a positive aspect of American society in this era.*

Topic: "Euripides condemns the exploitation of the men who have power over them" Discuss.

3. *Performed in 415BC 'The Women of Troy' by playwright Euripides is a pertinent portrayal of the futile and brutal nature of war through the plight of the Trojan women. Whilst Euripides does condemn the exploitation of women by men who have power over them, he also explores the role of the Gods and the men who do not use their power to exploit the Trojan women. This is seen through the inability of the Gods to act when the women are being exploited, the perverse and callous acts of the "bloodthirst" Greeks and the way Euripides uses Talthybius to defy the conventional notion of Greek tragedy.*

Topic: 'The Women of Troy condemns the actions of men.' Do you agree?

4. *Euripides' Greek tragedy The Women of Troy highlights the atrocities of war through the suffering and agony of the survivors – the women, who are completely disregarded in society. The war, as the consequence of one man, Paris, who was driven by desire and irrational thinking, and the abduction of Helen, is representative of the illogical motivations behind conflict that Euripides criticises. Although the play is critical of the actions of men, it simultaneously discloses the uselessness of religious worship. Both the hubristic behaviour of men in their treatment of women and the valour they attain due to the glorification of war is denounced by Euripides, whilst he reveals the futility of devotion to gods. Through the suffering of women, he ultimately advocates for hope and human dignity. Thus, despite the tragic outcomes for the female characters, the audience retains a sense of sanguinity as Euripides suggests that 'the living at least have hope. To be dead is to be nothing'.*

BODY PARAGRAPHS

This same critical approach can be used when reading other students' body paragraphs. However, the tools you use to unpack the style will be different. Ask-

- Can I identify the main idea of the paragraph from the topic sentence?
- Does the idea respond to the essay prompt or does it digress?
- Is there evidence given in support of the idea? Are the examples explained?
- Are the quotes embedded? Is this done in a way that both strengthens the argument and does not disrupt the flow of the paragraph?
- How does this writer analyse the director/playwright's creation of the text?
- Is there a linking sentence? How does this connect to the overall essay?
- Is there any room for improvement?

Topic: "In Rear Window, it is easy to be deceived by appearances. Discuss."

5. *Through Lisa's evolution from a passive symbol of beauty towards an unlikely heroine, Hitchcock argues that there is more to individuals than meets the eye, and that it is easy to be tricked into believing otherwise. Through Lisa's initial portrayal as a passive object of beauty, represented by her expensive Parisian dress and seductive poses, both Jeff and the audience are led to believe that Lisa's life is centered around self-glamour. This is reinforced through her stereotypically feminine job as a magazine model, further leading cast and audience to view Lisa as nothing more than an object of male desire, where her function is essentially decorative, who Jeff calls "too perfect". Her actions around Jeff also affirm to this presumption, with her attention fully focused on pleasing Jeff, complete with traditional female symbols such as exquisite jewellery and serving dinner. At this point, viewers and Jeff both believe Lisa to be incapable of actions outside what is typically female realm, evident when Jeff mocks Lisa for her "high heels which would be a lot of use in the jungle", to emphasize her incapability to live a male lifestyle of physicality and adventure. However, in the denouement of the film, we suddenly see a reversal of roles where Lisa, when at Thorwald's apartment, is plunged in the forefront of both the incapacitated and helpless Jeff's vision and the window, relegating him towards the safe and passive jobs typical of women in the 1950s. This bluntly opposes previous events where Lisa was physically secondary and characteristically like an assistant to Jeff, and in a stark contrast to previous events show Lisa's capability of engaging in physical espionage, surprising both Jeff and the audience in a quick turn of events. Her contribution to further Jeff's case for murder results in him admirably appreciating and praising Lisa, "gee I'm proud of you" and finally seeing her as more than merely a pretty face, having exceeded his expectations as just a glamorous, passive woman. Through Lisa's evident capabilities in adventurous and physical actions, Hitchcock shows how easy it is to believe that individual capabilities are linked to appearances.*

Topic: *Rear Window* visually presents a negative portrayal of American society in the 1950s. To what extent do you agree?

6. *Marriage has always been viewed as a positive progression to a relationship, intended to ameliorate an intimate connection. However, Hitchcock's depiction of marriage in the film is quite the contradiction. In the 1950's, marriage was a very significant aspect of an individual's life, as when a "man and a woman...[saw] each other...they [got] excited...and [got] married". Alas, Hitchcock's portrayal of marriage showcases how confining it actually is. For instance, in the opening scene when Jeff is conversing with his employer Gunnison about his mundane life, Gunnison suggests that perhaps "it's about time Jeff [got] married". As this conversation progresses, Hitchcock utilises the Kuleshov effect to showcase Thorwald's apartment, where Mr and Mrs Thorwald can be viewed through two different windows. Through the application of the Kuleshov effect, Hitchcock implies that these two characters are married, yet the viewing of them through different windows suggests that the characters are somewhat emotionally distant in their marriage. As he views this, Jeff claims how he would never "...do something...as drastic" as "get married", admitting that he could never "come home to a nagging wife". The accompaniment of this conversation with the Kuleshov effect implies that the marriage between the Thorwald's is failing, as it depicts how Mr Thorwald is always expected to care for his "nagging wife" and never experiences freedom in their relationship. Furthermore, the exterior shot of their apartment, which can also be seen through the Kuleshov effect, informs viewers how small their apartment is, physically embodying how confined Thorwald feels in his marriage. Moreover, Hitchcock emphasises how entrapping marriage can be during the ultimatum scene when Jeff and Lisa are "trying to change" the direction of their relationship. By filming the scene using various side-angled shots, Hitchcock foregrounds the notion that the characters are unable to have both their needs met, and their voices heard. This is further emphasised by the fact that Jeff and Lisa are never equally presented in the frame together, because when one speaks, the other cannot be fully seen. Thereby displaying their inability to set aside their differences. From this scene, it is clear that Jeff's idea of marriage as a "[nonsensical]" concept – due to it potentially intervening with his career and life choices – something that he is already prevented from doing so due to his "broken leg". Therefore, Hitchcock negatively portrays American society by demonstrating how societal expectations such as marriage can be imprisoning.*

Topic: 'Rear Window is at once critical and sympathetic of the human urge to watch.'
Discuss.

7. *Hitchcock uses the camera to develop an association between Jefferies and the viewer to show how the desire to be a voyeur is a natural human urge. The mise en scene of Jefferies apartment sets up Jefferies' rear window to be like a cinema screen which is used to see the world outside. The first scene involves the blind of Jefferies' apartment rising, symbolically representing the cinema curtain rising at the start of a movie and also most of the action of the film is seen through the window just as the viewer is able to see the world of the movie through the cinema screen. There is also the fact that Jefferies, like the audience, is immobile and is forced to be passive as he watches the events through the window creating a connection between Jefferies and the viewer which overall intrinsically makes the viewer as much of a voyeur as Jefferies. As movie watching was considered a very normal recreational activity at the time and still is, Hitchcock is therefore arguing that the desire to be a voyeur is an innate part of being human as all his viewers and many other people within America derive enjoyment from watching the lives of others through film and television. To emphasise the idea of humans being a "race of Peeping Toms", Hitchcock shows how many of the characters also become engrossed in voyeurism. Even though Stella expresses her criticism of voyeurism as she comments "any of those bikini bombshells... worth a red hot poker?" as well as Lisa who calls Jefferies' obsession a "disease", they both become heavily involved in this voyeurism. The start of the movie may have focused on only Jefferies looking out his windows but by the later parts of the film, all three characters are engrossed in being a voyeur and as Jefferies passes on his tool of voyeurism, the binoculars, to Stella and Lisa, Hitchcock is symbolically showing how they have succumbed to this "disease" of voyeurism. This is how Hitchcock contends that the desire to be a voyeur is so innate within humans that even when they may show initial disapproval, people tend to become a voyeur whether that be the characters within the film or the viewers watching Rear Window from a cinema.*

Topic: "Euripides condemns the exploitation of the men who have power over them"
Discuss.

8. *Through the characterisation of Talthybius, Euripides defied the conventional notion of Greek tragedy. Talthybius the herald, despite working for the powerful Greeks did not use his power to elicit harm or exploit the Trojan women. Whilst he made it clear that he was to fulfil this duty of else he would "carry the can", Talthybius carried out his duties with sensitivity. This was evident when he refrained from telling Hecuba the fate of her daughter Polyxena stating that she was resting at the tomb of Achilles. He did this as a means of protecting Hecuba and attempting to lessen the stress and anxiety that she was already dealing with. Additionally, when asked to perform the duty of throwing Astyanax off the battlements, Talthybius stated that he was "not half hard enough" to do so. Thus it can be assumed that he fulfilled his role merely for self-preservation. By the inclusion of such a character, Euripides aims to show his patriarchal audience that despite being in a position where he could have easily exploited the women, messenger Talthybius held onto his moral compass and wisely chose not to do so.*

Topic: ‘Women of Troy is about the destructive power of instinct.’ Do you agree?

9. *It is not only men unable to control their lust whose heroism is brought into question by Euripides, he also condemns those leaders who willingly destroy the innocent to allay petty fears. Although he does not utter a word, the presence of Astyanax on the stage provides an essential vehicle for Euripides to criticise the brutalities that are committed in the name of trivial fear. Great effort is taken to highlight Astyanax’s innocence: “the softness of [his] breath, the baby smell of [his] skin” suggest he is too young to have even held a sword, as is the description of him “like a bird creeping under his mother’s wing”. Astyanax’s fate is revealed to be “callously murdered” and “thrown from the battlements of Troy”. This fate is determined by Odysseus, who is characterised as a “a man without mortality...to whom laws of gods and men mean nothing”. The murder of Astyanax is evidence of inexcusable cowardice and foolishness; these formerly fierce warriors are so fearful of reprisal for their actions they are willing to commit an “indecent” act of infanticide because “the son of such a father must not be allowed to grow up”. The portrayal of the Greeks as barbaric serves as a condemnation of those who inflict violence and suffering out of fear and provides a warning of what might befall Athens if men with power violate principles of goodness and honour in this case by slaying innocent, defenceless children.*

Topic: ‘We are loot, my son and I, soldiers’ plunder.’ Discuss how Euripides highlights the plight of women taken as slaves of war.

10. *In addition, the plight of Hecuba and Cassandra reveal the notion that life is crueler than death and the futility of hope. As both women have experienced a fall in status, either socially or religiously, they are the embodiment of suffering. In their antiphonal lament, Andromache and Hecuba mourn for their loss as ‘no grief can encompass what [Hecuba] feel[s]’ and Andromache ‘aimed at the highest...[then] lost everything’. Euripides conveys the notion that there are harsher conditions for those living compared to deceased, as Andromache believes Polyxena, Hecuba’s daughter is ‘happier dead than [she is] living’. This is followed by Andromache’s nihilistic statement that ‘to be dead is the same as never to have been born’, and how ‘to die is better than a life of agony’. She compares herself to the dead, and presents her suffering to be the worst imagined as she had ‘been prosperous and lucky, and is then overwhelmed by disasters’. Euripides highlights the destructive nature of war through the character of Andromache, as she is portrayed to be the ideal wife possessing traits of virtue and compliance yet experiences equal agony to every other woman, or arguably worse. Similarly, the duality between royalty and slavery is displayed through Hecuba’s self-pity. She mourns the loss of her status, as her feet ‘so used to deep carpets, all the luxury of Troy...belong to a slave now’, signifying her complete loss of hope as she declares ‘the lucky ones are dead’. Through the downfall of Hecuba and Cassandra, Euripides suggests ‘wealth, good fortune, it’s all worth nothing’ as the aftermath of war makes life harsher than death.*

CONCLUSIONS

The final paragraph of the essay is often the most contentious. Most students have had less practise writing conclusions and so are unsure about how to write one when it is asked of them. Read the following student samples and consider how they have approached the task of writing this paragraph. You could ask -

- Is the student still responding to the essay prompt?
- Can you identify the ideas they would have discussed in the essay?
- Does the student relate the broader scope of the essay prompt to the context or wider audience?
- Is there any room for improvement? E.g. does the student introduce new ideas?

Topic: *Rear Window* visually presents a negative portrayal of American society in the 1950s. To what extent do you agree?

11. *In its entirety, Alfred Hitchcock's psychological thriller Rear Window primarily foregrounds to its viewers a negative portrayal of American society in the 1950's, due to the fact that society's expectations of marriage created a confined way of living and that the inability to accomplish one's "American Dream" consequently led to the creation of a society that lacks passion. However, by exploring the concept of gender roles and societal expectation of women, Hitchcock positively portrays American society by showcasing the change in the misogynistic viewing of females in the 1950's.*

Topic: 'Rear Window is at once critical and sympathetic of the human urge to watch.'
Discuss.

12. *Hitchcock explores the idea of voyeurism throughout his film contending that it is a natural human urge for all humans including his characters and viewers. However, he shows how this human urge can lead to a lack of personal connection between both the viewer and viewed as well as the connection in the voyeur's relationships with others. Hitchcock contrasts this against the act of watching that happens alongside action to show how the act of looking at one's neighbours is not always a negative and encouraging his viewers to use the natural desire to look for the good of the community.*

Topic: "Euripides condemns the exploitation of the men who have power over them"
Discuss.

13. *In his dramatic rendition of a pivotal point in the lives of the Trojan women, Euripides does condemn the exploitation of the women by the men in power. He also explores the role of the Gods and the men who do not use their power to exploit the Trojan women. Essentially, Euripides condemns the acts of the Greeks to this patriarchal audience, taking on a femanistic approach and asserting that such behaviours are strongly scorned. He also challenges his audience to understand that whilst one can have power, they do not necessarily need to use it to elicit harm or exploit the vulnerable.*

Topic: ‘Women of Troy is about the destructive power of instinct.’ Do you agree?

14. *The extreme images of death and suffering in his play, leaves Euripides’ audience in no doubt the destructive power of instinct. Euripides invites his audience to consider the injustice and great suffering women, children and men are forced to endure for love and lust, fear, and ego. Euripides undermines the prevailing narrative of heroism in wartime that dominated Athens, and prompts his Athenian to feel uncomfortable, especially given that the memories of Melos a year earlier would have been fresh in their minds. Euripides’ plays often warn the audience of the detrimental effects brought on by excessive ego and pride, asserting that it is best to moderate emotions and exhibit sophrosyne. Men who give into hubris and love and lust are revealed not to be heroes but “cowards” who have allowed instinct to undermine all rational thought.*

Topic: ‘We are loot, my son and I, soldiers’ plunder.’ Discuss how Euripides highlights the plight of women taken as slaves of war.

15. *Although first performed in 415 BC during the Peloponnesian war, Euripides conveys significant messages that are still relevant to today’s society. Andromache’s bemoan that ‘we are loot, my son and I, soldiers’ plunder’, highlights the objectification and commodification of women that Euripides condemns, as their distress is suggested to be a consequence of the men’s actions and the gods’ untrustworthiness. Whilst Euripides censures the barbarity of war, he simultaneously advocates for the importance of home and family. The insignificance and mistreatment of the women is exposed, as despite their piety, the gods neglect them. Moreover, the hubristic actions of men are denounced as they brutally torture women in a cruel exercise of patriarchal power. In addition, the plight of Andromache and Hecuba all reveal the notion that life is crueller than death. Through nautical and animalistic imagery, the women of Troy are presented to be dehumanised. Ultimately, through the perspectives and distress of women, Euripides advocates for hope and human dignity, demonstrating the importance of family in everyone’s lives.*

Although these texts may not have been familiar to you, examining how other students write essays is beneficial to your own practice because it is a reminder that an idea can be expressed in a range of ways. You do not need the words or sentence structure that another person uses to score an A+; in fact, if you fall into the trap of trying to mimic someone else, you hamper your ability to respond in an original and relevant manner to the given essay prompt.

SAMPLE COMMENTS

Note that the following observations are not given by a VCAA assessor and do not reflect the score that this student may have achieved.

1. The two sentences that compose this introduction are divided into a contextual focus then indication of the ideas that will be discussed. Though there are some grammatical issues, the student gives an understandable overview of the direction that their response will take in the second sentence. A possible improvement could be to refine the first sentence to discuss contextual information that is more relevant to the essay prompt. For example, what are the “new and unique narrative[s]”? Perhaps this could be written in a way that relates to the relationship dramas Jeff is witnessing across the courtyard and his inability to process his own relational issues.
2. The student begins with an excellent opening sentence that frames the context. The following two sentences then relate this to *Rear Window*, detailing the contention and three points in a seamless manner. The final sentence, though expressing an interesting idea, could be written with more clarity, i.e. “changes in the viewing of women” is an awkward expression.
3. This is a formulaic introduction that incorporates the necessary elements of the contention and signposted ideas but could be refined. The first sentence offers a broader overview of the text before stating the contention, yet the contention is an exact copy of the essay topic, which is generally a practice best avoided.
4. The student addresses all elements of the introduction thoroughly and there is a complexity to the language used. The final sentence gives an insight into how the audience might be impacted by the play, which is a welcome addition. It is worth considering whether the student needed to go into as much detail about Paris or whether this could have been left for the body paragraphs.
5. The body paragraph is set up with strong topic and linking sentences that succinctly identify the main idea for the paragraph. There is also a richness to the evidence used with multiple embedded quotes and a continual discussion of the cinematic techniques. However, this writing could be improved by clarifying its sentence structure. Note that some sentences are attempting to convey too many ideas at once and become convoluted as exemplified in: “*At this point, viewers and Jeff both believe Lisa to be incapable of actions outside what is typically female realm, evident when Jeff mocks Lisa for her “high heels which would be a lot of use in the jungle”, to emphasize her incapability to live a male lifestyle of physicality and adventure.*”
6. Consider the difference in the topic sentences for paragraph 5 and 6. Both give clear expressions of the idea, but the first has a focus on the author while the second consists of a broad statement that is followed by an examination of Hitchcock’s work. This is not a detriment to the writing of this student as their body paragraph is filled with deep analysis into Hitchcock’s cinematic techniques and supporting quotes.
7. Each element of the standard body paragraph structure has been addressed well here, but this student could have potentially articulated the first half of the paragraph in a more concise manner.

8. Though the student has incorporated the basic elements of a body paragraph and remained focused on the key idea, this piece of writing does not stand out for its insights because the analysis is more focused on events. This student could have strengthened their discussion by also writing about the textual features that support this idea.
9. This sample demonstrates less used, but in this case well-executed, means of structuring sentences. Consider how the quotes are embedded in the third sentence or the use of a semi-colon in the sixth sentence. Knowing different ways to construct your paragraphs offers interest into your writing though there is a danger that it may become difficult to read. In this example, the student has maintained the clarity of their expression.
10. Another excellently structured, smoothly flowing paragraph. The vocabulary is sophisticated and the quotes are well incorporated. Consider how the playwright is only mentioned three times throughout the paragraph yet the discussion still offers insight into the text beyond the events. This is achieved by perceptive metalanguage, such as “embodiment” and passive verbs like “portrayed” and “displayed”, implying the playwright’s purpose without a direct mention.
11. This is a succinct conclusion that neatly summarises the key ideas of the essay in two sentences. Refer to example two, which was written by the same student, and compare how the ideas are expressed. There is a possibility that the language could be considered too similar, but overall, the small adjustments made to the wording prevent this negative association being formed.
12. The student clearly relates back to the essay topic and their contention in this conclusion. The summary of the key ideas could have been expressed in a more sophisticated fashion, but the student does identify the director’s intended effect on his audience.
13. As in this student’s introduction (see example three), the essay topic has been copied exactly, which is a practice best avoided. The ideas are summarised, but the structure of the paragraph could be improved by not positing the final sentence as an additional concept, but as the overall impact of the play, i.e. “He [therefore] challenges his audience...”.
14. The conclusion draws in relevant ideas from the play’s context, which provide a welcome support to the summary. There is a clear understanding of Euripides wanted to impact his audience as well. This student could improve the final two sentences by more explicitly mentioning that *Women of Troy* is no exception to the playwright’s repertoire in its thematic content so that the concluding statement remains relevant to the essay.
15. The student addresses some elements of the conclusion thoroughly with a detailed summary and purpose statement. Areas of concern are that the contention is not restated clearly and the extended length of the summary. Ideally, a conclusion should aim to be as concise as possible because the ideas should have been already discussed in the body paragraphs.

This resource was prepared by Rachel Bell, 2020 on behalf of TSFX.