

## WHAT THE ASSESSORS WANT: SECTION A

The following is a summary of key points from the 2017 Assessment Report relating to Section A. The full Report is available on the VCAA website at:

[https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/exams/literature/2017/literature\\_examrep17.pdf](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/exams/literature/2017/literature_examrep17.pdf)

1. Some students ignored the topic and presented a prepared response, while others answered the question but did not address a literary perspective.
2. Some spent too much time explicating the literary perspective or critique and not enough time on engaging with it or presenting their own view.
3. Students need to be able to respond to the topic, the perspective and the text at the same time, with their own reading of the text remaining the focus of their response. The underpinning idea is that by debating views with other readers we arrive at a better clarification and expression of our own responses.
4. It should be understood that the literary perspective does not have to be an identifiable school of thought; it could be, for instance, a review or the introduction to the edition of the text students used for study.
5. Moreover, students do not need to name the authors or titles of the critiques they are using. Some students were very specific about the literary articles they had chosen (for example, naming Chinua Achebe or Edward Said on *Heart of Darkness*), but others adopted a more general stance, naming 'a Freudian perspective', 'queer reading' or a 'post-colonial lens', or merely using the discourse of feminism, class inequality (not necessarily Marxism) or psychosocial development as examples. No single approach was prescribed or expected.
6. It is important to understand that there can be multiple ways of reading a text and many nuances within a particular school of thought. The words 'to what extent', 'discuss', 'reflect on' and 'consider' in the questions signal the opportunity to challenge the ideas put forward in the topics, acknowledging the point made but offering another equally valid and substantiated perspective.
7. The essays included later in this report will illustrate different approaches. The following is an example of an introduction to an essay that is clearly drawing on the discourse of class and, to a lesser extent, feminism, without naming a particular writer or even announcing the perspective. Yet it is evident that the student is both addressing the topic ('failure to recognise the potential') and addressing ideas of entrenched class and gender discrimination.

*Through a comically-disguised critique of the social structures of Edwardian England, Bernard Shaw's views on the failure of society to identify the potential within women and members of lower social classes is a testament to his disgust with the systematic oppression of women and the fundamental dysfunction of trickle-down economics. Higgins, a member of the wealthy upper class, embodies these ideals as he equates education to schooling and holds himself with a supercilious purpose of pompous intellectualism—whilst demonstrating an entrenched inability to recognise potential in women or members of the lower class. Shaw's egalitarian views and his fabian recommendations for a meritocracy are interspersed through the comedy, and the false pretence of a stockstandard love story allows the playwright to desecrate these opinions to a huge audience.*

8. Students were asked to use only one literary perspective, even though their coursework will have addressed two or more. Most students understood that this limitation implied that the examination task was not a replication of the coursework task and was more circumscribed.
9. Several students did, however, introduce a second perspective. However, unless it was an integrated perspective, as in the above extract on Pygmalion (in which women are seen as an embodiment of a lower class), the addition of a second perspective did not always help the student as it often detracted from a more detailed account of the initial perspective or from the discussion of the text or topic.
10. Responses in the upper range showed a detailed and sophisticated understanding of a chosen literary perspective, named or not, and were able to debate it in relation to the text, using appropriate discourse, to offer a considered and relevant response to the topic.

## **WHERE IT ALL STARTS**

Exam success in Literature begins with a thorough working knowledge of your texts. To resource any convincing response, you must have developed a clear understanding of all the elements that constitute a text such as exposition, characterisation, setting, literary style and views and values.

The final phase of your exam preparation should be a time when all of the groundwork you have done allows you to become increasingly clear about and confident in your own interpretive stance, as well as your ability to apply it to a topic or in response to several passages.

Characteristically, high-performing students read their texts numerous times and re-visit them regularly so as to remain constantly in touch with them. They learn quotes, write character summaries, organise their notes thematically and read scholarly articles which present them with increasingly more sophisticated ideas and viewpoints. Serious Literature students should end up as experts on their texts, prepared for any challenges an exam might throw at them.

In some schools, students form their own study and discussion groups outside normal hours and follow through on what has been covered in class that day, or cover extra essay topics and close analysis passages. This can extend to group discussions on Facebook or via Snapchat.

It's very rare to find a highly successful Literature student who hasn't used some or all of the above strategies.

## SECTION A – LITERARY PERSPECTIVES: THE TASK

You are required to complete **one** piece of writing in response to the topic set for **one** text. Your selected text must be used as the basis for your response to the topic. You are required to produce an interpretation of the text using **one** literary perspective to inform your view.

Your selected text for Section A must be from a different category than your selected text for Section B. In the answer book, indicate which section you are responding to and the text number of your selected text. Your response will be assessed according to the assessment criteria set out on the last page of the examination booklet. Section A is worth 20 marks. Apart from knowing your chosen text thoroughly, you also need to be able to understand what a question is asking of you as well as what it may have left unsaid. Questions can be framed in a variety of ways, although the intention in every instance is to provide students with the opportunity to answer in detail and to apply their textual knowledge effectively. Examine the types of question listed below so as to make sure that you understand the different approaches VCAA may use to setting the exam topics.

### TYPES OF LITERARY PERSPECTIVES QUESTIONS

Here are some of the different ways in which Literary Perspectives questions can be framed:

1. **With the instruction to “consider”, “reflect on”, or “discuss” a concept:**

Consider the extent to which the characters in *Persuasion* are oppressed by society’s rules and expectations.

2. **By giving a non-textual quote with the direction to “discuss”.**

In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Fowles opens up new ways of examining society’s values. Discuss.

3. **By making a statement about the text and asking, “To what extent do you agree?”.**

Despite its fantasy elements, *Love in the Time of Cholera* is pervaded by a sense of death and decay. To what extent do you agree?

4. **By asking a direct question:**

In what ways does McCarthy conform to or depart from the genre of the American Western in *All the Pretty Horses*?

5. **By asking you to base your response on the passages set in Section B:**

In what ways do the set poems from Blake’s *Poetry and Designs* invite us to condemn hypocrisy and social inequality?

## USING TEXTUAL QUOTES

For Section A, you will need to use a number of quotes throughout your response. This means putting an effort into memorising a good range of them, while keeping a focus on those which relate to the perspective you will be using.

In reading time, you should have a look over the passages set in Section B for your chosen Section A text to see if there is anything useful in them by way of quotes.

However, be warned!

There is a genuine risk involved in doing this! Don't let what you read in the selected passages provided in Section B dictate how you will respond to your topic in Section A. Depending on which passages are provided, they may have much to do with your topic or very little at all. You should be prepared to write your response to Section A without any help from Section B. If you then find the Section B passages helpful, that will be a bonus but don't bank on it turning out that way!

## TYPES OF TEXTUAL QUOTES

### (a) Incidental Quotes.

These are short quotes or single words which are used while the sentence is in progress, and which help you to “talk the talk” of the text about which you are writing.

- Conrad highlights the moral contradiction between an ostensibly humanitarian project and the labelling of the Congolese as “ignorant” and “horrid” to subvert the Company’s stated agenda and expose their rapacious intentions.
- Conrad’s contrast of this luminescent imagery with the the “haze” and “greyness” of the Congo operates at several levels.
- Brick’s dependence on the “click” functions to disguise his “disgust” as well as to allay his anxiety.
- Maggie’s disdain of the “no-neck monsters” whom she also describes as “animals” reveals more about her own personality than it does about the targets of her invective.

(b) Evidential Quotes.

These support your key points by coming after your discussion and elaboration. They are usually more substantial than incidental quotes. An appropriate evidential quote delivered decisively and authoritatively, is worth its weight in gold! You should still include incidental quotes where appropriate on your way to delivering the knockout blow, as all of this quoting adds up to making you more authoritative and convincing.

- Conrad uses Marlow's aunt, a relative who clearly dotes on him, to represent the prevailing imperialist viewpoint on the virtues of colonial activity, having her describe it as a means of "weaning the ignorant millions from their horrid ways".
- At various points in the play, Maggie attempts to describe Brick's character, usually by referring to his placidity, and often in an attempt to break through it: "you have that rare sort of charm that usually only happens in very old or hopelessly sick people, the charm of the defeated. You look so cool, so cool, so enviably cool."

### **MEMORISING QUOTES**

There are numerous techniques for memorising quotes, but the fact remains that, without a good store of them in your head, your response to Section A is likely to be significantly weakened.

The best quotes are shorter ones which can resource a range of prompts and key concepts – what might be called "utility" quotes. Often, list of quotes for texts can be found on the Internet and are sometimes accompanied by explanations of their context and significance.

Whatever the approach you wish to take, now is the time to make quotes a priority. You should soon find that they not only help to substantiate your arguments but that they also trigger other more complex ideas.

## **INTERROGATING THE QUESTION**

To begin with, you must treat every word of your chosen essay topic with the utmost respect while you discern which are the ones which count the most.

Then, you need to take the question on by interrogating it vigorously and asking some of your own questions as well. A good interrogation process will help lead you to a good structure: if you really understand what the question is asking you, you will know what to give back in response.

In addition to practice questions your teachers give you and questions from commercial practice exams, try creating some of your own so that you gain a sense of being able to respond to whatever may be asked of you.

Remember that there are no right or wrong answers: only strong or weak cases!

## **STRUCTURING YOUR RESPONSE**

A response in Section A should have about it many of the features of a well-structured expository essay, including an introduction which sets out clearly the scope of your response and signals to the assessor that you have understood both the topic and the task itself. Remember that one of the exam criteria specifies “expressive, fluent and coherent use of language and development of ideas”. Among other things, this means writing with clearly defined paragraphs, establishing a cohesive sequence of topic sentences across the essay, and bringing your analysis to a logical conclusion.

## **INFORMING YOUR VIEW WITH A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE**

You will notice in VCAA’s directions that there is no mention of how much of your chosen literary perspective you should use or even which one it should be. These are your own choices which, ideally, will have been worked out with your teacher well in advance of the exam.

Let’s look again at the criterion related to this dimension of the task:

- Analysis and evaluation of the views and values foregrounded in the topic and underlying one literary perspective of the text, and awareness of how these views and values relate to the text.

The bottom line here is that the perspective on which you draw is both related to the views and values presented in the text and also assists you in responding to your topic.

## **QUOTING A SPECIFIC LITERARY CRITIC**

You should also be aware of the scholarship surrounding your text, especially those critics whose perspective aligns with the one you have chosen to explore. This may mean that you also memorise a relevant quote or two from the writings of a particular critic. This is up to you – VCAA do not stipulate that critics be mentioned or quoted. Remember that the text itself should remain your principal focus and that any quoting of a literary critic must reinforce what you are saying about your text.

## SAMPLE LITERARY PERSPECTIVES TOPICS

1. Voltaire's *Candide* may be humorous at one level, but at another it espouses a pessimistic view of the world. Discuss.
2. Discuss how *Buried Child* exposes the various ways in which the American dream has failed.
3. Reflect on how appearances prove to be misleading in *A Doll's House*.
4. Consider how *Twelfth Night* uses deceptions, masks and tensions between appearance and reality to challenge social assumptions.
5. In Gaskell's *North and South*, some are trapped by class prejudice while others transcend it. Discuss.
6. Coriolanus is ultimately the architect of his own demise. To what extent do you agree?
7. Reflect on the ways in which Robert Browning's poetry speaks truthfully of the human condition.
8. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* challenges the very concept of civilisation. Discuss.
9. Reflect on the ways in which *My Brilliant Career* shows that we are *not* in control of our own fate.
10. In *The Man Who Loved Children*, Stead is relentlessly honest in her depiction of how the family unit works. Discuss.
11. Consider the various ways in which Szymborska's poetry reflects the particular concerns of her times.
12. In *The Leopard*, everything is in a state of decline. To what extent do you agree?
13. In *That Deadman Dance*, how does Bobby respond to the tyranny of the Europeans?
14. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, truth is the first casualty. Discuss.