
A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2A Texts and Genres: Elements of crime writing
Report on the Examination

7717
2017

Version: 1.0

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Introductory Comments

This is the first year of the new A-level examinations for LITB and it is very pleasing to report that the papers were well received and some interesting and insightful responses were seen on all four papers. Students had clearly engaged well with their studies of texts which had been read through the lenses of both traditional and cultural genres. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively in responding to the three required questions, though for some there were issues of time management; and some students seemed to think that they needed to write for the full three or two and a half hours that were allotted to the examinations regardless of whether they had anything new to say. Students need to think about the questions and what they are saying rather than just writing.

It is appropriate to focus on the four papers together at the start of this report since they are so closely connected and to an extent are interdependent (just as the four papers are in AS). They share the same philosophy, the same mark scheme and the same structure. The marks available for each question are also the same and all the assessment objectives (AOs) are tested in all questions in the same ways. In terms of marking, all answers are marked holistically with the AOs seen as fluid and interactive. The only difference is that Paper 1 is a two and a half hour examination and Paper 2 is three hours.

The texts on this specification are grouped together through aspects of genre, so when students write about the particular aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are set up in the questions, they are automatically connecting with the wider genre. This means they do not need to compare texts. Given the interconnectedness of the papers, their identical philosophies and methods of assessment, the strengths and weaknesses in student performance across the four papers were, understandably, very similar.

The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details

In all AQA courses for Specification B, in all official communications and in all our support materials on the website, it is clearly stated that in order to be successful students must answer the questions set in all their details. Answering the question is our mantra and is the single most important thing that teachers need to tell their students. There are no hidden requirements that students have to try to guess. When they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of tragedy and comedy or elements of crime and political and social protest writing that are not required by the question. Although students are studying the genres of tragedy and comedy, the tasks do not require them to write everything or anything known about the genre including what Aristotle, Hegel and other theorists have said. They have to write about the specific aspects or elements of the genre that are set up in the questions or those which are evident in the passages in Section A. If students subvert questions they get into a muddle. What they need to do is construct meaningful and fresh arguments, thinking for themselves about the specific features of the genre they are writing about.

In the Section A questions of all four papers, students were asked to explore extracts and passages from texts in terms of the genre. This meant they had to read the passages and see what specific features emerged and which opened up meanings. In Section B and Section C the specific aspects and elements that should have been focused upon and debated were made clear in the questions, for example Iago's villainy in *Othello*, marriage in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the process of detection in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The importance of students knowing their texts and then reading them through the lens of genre

Students need to know that they are looking at their texts *through* the lens of genre and not *at* the lens of genre itself. The text, its story and the narrative arc must have priority before other work can begin. Although Papers 1 are closed book exams and Papers 2 open book, there is an expectation on both papers that students have secure textual knowledge. Although this might seem obvious, they need to know what happens and how the story ends. They also need to be able to write relevantly about specific parts of the text and have ideas about what can be analysed in terms of the genre. Knowing texts is not the same as knowing quotations, though knowing quotations and using them judiciously always helps. Students who had a secure understanding of the chronology and characters of their stories could make good choices. They could focus on particular events, use appropriate details and write in an informed way. Making good choices is crucial.

The student's selection of material is often a good indicator to examiners of whether the question has been understood. Having secure textual knowledge gives students confidence; it is the base from which all else springs. Some students made poor choices that led them away from the task. These poor choices were often made because of inadequate textual knowledge and this resulted in students struggling with the tasks, often writing in a general, vague and inaccurate way. Several students tried to disguise their lack of knowledge by making things up, particularly quotations, and they then wrote about their invented words as if the words belonged to the authors. Inaccurate and made up quotations and textual details are often so glaring that they detract from students' arguments. If students do not know quotations then they would be best advised to simply explain their ideas using their own words and, providing that their explanation and discussion is relevant to the question, they will be credited.

Clearly it is imperative in this specification that students also have an understanding of how genre works in their set texts, both in terms of how the texts connect with a traditional pattern and how they may disconnect as seen when writers consciously play with and subvert genre. Several students seemed to think that there are generic absolutes or templates which writers are always trying to model. Genre is a loose set of conventions which are modified or reinforced with every text produced.

The importance of students understanding question format and understanding that all questions invite debate

In Section B, all four papers have the same kind of question format in that a debate is set up around key aspects of tragedy or comedy where students are invited to explore a view. This is also the case with Section C of Paper 1. The word 'significance' is used in the Shakespeare passage based question, the unseen questions and Section C of Paper 2 and is the trigger that tells students that they need to consider potential meanings.

All questions are framed around AO5 and AO4 so that students can engage with what is really interesting about literature – considering how different meanings arise, thinking and debating different interpretations of their literature texts, having views, expressing opinions, understanding that their own interpretations are valid. Those students who embraced this performed very well. Those who took ownership and argued independently and relevantly were particularly impressive. Several students cited critical opinions or wrote about critical positions, often using the Critical Anthology, and this worked for students who understood the task and who used critical voices relevantly. For some, however, it did not. Some students used critical material that was not clearly

understood and tacked it on to arguments. The message here is that unless critical ideas can be used to specifically further the student's argument, they are best left alone.

The passage based questions

All four papers have one question in which students are required to work with a passage from either their Shakespeare play or an unseen text. These passages have been carefully chosen and the reason for their being printed is that students are expected to explore them in some detail.

Passages in the Shakespeare questions are provided to enable students to demonstrate their skills of responding to a section of text in a tight and detailed way and then relate their observations about aspects of tragedy or comedy to the wider play. On Paper 2, students are given unseen extracts so that they can show their understanding of the crime writing or political and social protest writing genres, applying their knowledge to extracts that are new to them. In all cases students need to read – or reread - the extracts carefully ensuring that they see its narrative, dramatic and tragic or comedic trajectory. They need to see that it is telling a part of a story, which has its own mini narrative, while belonging at the same time to a much bigger whole, a known story on Paper 1 and an unknown story on Paper 2. Students need to engage with the narrative that is taking place. As they construct their arguments, they have to work with specific details that are in the passages. This is made clear in the questions.

In the Shakespeare passage based question, it is important that students establish an overview of the extract and that they see its shape and the dramatic and narrative development within it. Fundamentally they need to see it as drama – part of a story that is written to be performed on stage. They need to think about how the passage begins and ends, whether it contains a crisis or critical moment and how the extract contributes to the overall dramatic tragedy or dramatic comedy. Centres could profitably spend time helping students to develop the skills to construct overviews in brief and telling ways that will give them an anchor for their responses to the bullets. Clearly students need to know the play well so that they can see the structural relationship between the extract and the parts of the dramatic narrative that come before and after it. This is not to recommend a formulaic approach overall as students should engage naturally with the passages and be autonomous readers and writers. As long as the passage is the central focus of the writing there is no directive as to how much time and attention is given to other parts of the play though, of course, other parts of the play do need to be discussed.

When writing about the tragic or comedic aspects set up in the question, students have to be mindful of the playwright's dramatic construction. They have to think about the interplay between the actions that are taking place as audiences watch and, in its broadest sense, the speech that is being heard. This means the dialogue, the asides and soliloquies, the kinds of exchanges between characters; it does not mean a discussion of single words which is rarely productive and invariably take students away from tragic and comedic drama. All comments about dramatic method should be integrated seamlessly into the students' arguments.

In the unseen passages of Paper 2A and 2B, again students need to have a secure sense of what is actually happening in the extract and although they do not know what happens in the rest of the text, they do know the genre and they are given some information in the question which they can work with as they think about what is being revealed.

Authorial and dramatic methods

In all questions students have to incorporate comments on authorial methods. Again much has been said about AO2 in training sessions and in LITB resources. The strongest responses were seen by students who integrated relevant comments about method into their arguments and connected them to the aspects of genre set up in the question. The weakest responses were by students who ignored the part of the question about authorial method or who bolted on material – usually detached analysis of single words. A particular problem for some students is that they write about features that they do not understand. This was particularly true of iambic pentameter, blank verse and prose in questions where the text was a Shakespeare play. It was surprising how many students did not know what the terms mean and ended up writing inaccurately. Across all papers, the best responses included focused comments on structure, voices and settings and these were integrated into the students' arguments. Fortunately fewer students this year were writing about punctuation, but there were still some who tried to find meanings in commas, exclamation marks and full stops.

The significance and influence of contexts

The contexts that students need to write about are those which emerge from the texts and those which are set up in the questions. The students who understood this were able to respond to the questions crisply and in an unhampered way. Some students, unfortunately, thought they had to force in all sorts of information, ideas or assertions about historical and biographical contexts, much of which was sweeping and not well understood. In the weakest answers there were all sorts of claims and often these took up space that would have been better given to discussion of the text in relation to the argument.

'Shocking'!

Examiners across all papers reported the rather strange and prolific use by students of the word 'shocking' (or 'shocked') in relation to how students imagined audiences and readers of different times would have reacted to narrative events or language used by writers. 'Appalled' and 'horrified' were other popular words attributed gratuitously to audiences of former years. There are a number of issues to raise here. Firstly it is unwise for students to claim that audiences of any past time would have felt anything unless there is specific evidence to support the claim. Secondly, students need to think more about what they are actually saying. Would an audience (all the people in the theatre – or even any person) viewing *Othello*, for example, on any particular day – or all days – really have been 'shocked' when they heard the word 'devil' or when they heard Katherina or Gonerill speak out against men? Are students aware that literature (and particularly drama) across time has plenty of references to the diabolical, to religion, to sex and to feisty and outspoken women? Are they aware that audiences were and are different human beings with different ideas, thoughts and human appetites? Unfortunately the claim that audiences would have been 'shocked' was not just made about drama and the Elizabethans and Jacobean. There were also assertions about Victorian readers and audiences, 20th century readers and those 'enlightened' readers of today. The answer to this is simple. Students should avoid any sort of claim that cannot be evidenced and look more closely at the question to see what is being asked. At no point is there a requirement to guess what others thought or might have thought or felt. The personal pronoun in the tasks is 'you': 'To what extent do **you** agree with this view?'

Writing skills

The ability of students to construct logical and coherent arguments is of course essential in a specification which places so much emphasis on debate. Many students were able to shape their ideas and write about them impressively. Some students expressed themselves in sophisticated and accurate ways and they were duly rewarded. To write impressively does not mean to flood writing with critical, tragic and comedic terminology, often using that terminology for its own sake and not really understanding it anyway. Some students unfortunately wrote in a style that was awkward and cluttered, sometimes making little sense. Such writing was often marred by technical errors. It is important that students write in a clear, structured and accurate way and time needs to be spent working on writing skills since AO1 is tested in every question. It is also worth emphasising the importance of focusing on the task from the start and making a telling comment in the first sentence. Far too many students write introductions and conclusions which are vague, general or empty and which do not gain them marks.

Freeing students up and giving them ownership of their writing

Too often, some students were burdened with material they felt they had to include. The needless incorporation of contextual material was one such burden, but there was also the unnecessary insertion of all kinds of literary, tragic and comedic terminology which may not have been understood. This terminology often seemed to be included simply because students had learned the words and felt that they would gain marks if as many as possible appeared in their writing. It is very rare that words like anagnorisis, stichomythia, and zeugma, for example, have a place in answers, especially when their inclusion seems to be the main point of the sentence. Often English, rather than Greek or Latinate, expressions would make much more sense and be understood more by those who are using them.

Similarly some students seemed desperate to make comparisons with other texts, often at the expense of the question. Comparison is not required in this specification as the AO4 strand is met when students are connecting with the wider genre through focusing on the key tragic, comedic, crime and political and social protest writing aspects of the question. Too many students felt that they had to bolt on references to other texts and very rarely did the references add anything to the argument. A comparison only works when it highlights something specific about the text being discussed and the question itself, and although some students could use their wider knowledge of literature to make telling points, it is not a requirement to do so. For most students references to other texts got in the way.

It is important that students are told that they should only write about things they understand. Writing about what is not understood leads to very muddled writing.

The importance of clear and independent thinking

While content and skills clearly have to be taught, students need to be given the confidence to think and respond independently. Questions need to be looked at with fresh eyes and students need to know how to do this. They need to approach the paper and questions without any preconceptions, always taking the time to read carefully.

Those students who could think independently and creatively about questions were rewarded.

Comments specific to 2A

Overall examiners felt that students responded very positively to the genre and had enjoyed reading the texts and exploring the generic elements. There were many excellent answers to the questions which were fluently written and confident in their grasp of both texts and genre. High band answers were well-organised and used accurate paragraphing to structure the response. Students had obviously particularly enjoyed engaging with issues around criminal psychology across the paper and there was some very good work involving structural issues, particularly on *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

This is a long, three hour examination but it was felt that many students were able to sustain the quality of their writing for this amount of time. Generally the time was used well with equal amounts allocated to each of the three questions. There were very few partial or unfinished answers. There were also few rubric infringements although there were some scripts where the same text featured in both Section B and Section C. The same text could not be credited twice.

This is an open book examination and it is important that students realise the implications of this. The best answers used the texts very well and seamlessly integrated quotations and close references into supporting their arguments. At the opposite end of the scale, there were some answers where students did not seem to have used the books at all. Examiners do expect to see supportive and accurate use of the texts in open book examinations. Students should know their texts very well and know where to look for the appropriate support. The selection of apt evidence is the hallmark of a good answer so it is important to choose the right reference.

Selecting the best section of text to use for a particular answer was also an essential skill and often acted as an effective discriminator. Out of all the poems to choose for writing about motives and murder for question 2, for example, selecting *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was probably the least fruitful and made the task of answering the question harder.

Section A on the paper involves analysis of a previously unseen extract where students are asked to relate the extract to the genre. It is important to realise that the introduction to the extract contains important information for students to know in order to understand it and it should be regarded as part of the set reading and used accordingly. In this case students were told the motive for the murder in the introduction and also that the women had disposed of the body. It was therefore wrong to claim that the motive was unknown or to think that it was the body being disposed of in the passage, as opposed to the evidence. Careful reading of all the material is essential.

It is also important to understand that the passage is only an extract from a much more complete text. Students should read the whole extract to get an overarching sense of what is actually going on in the passage and not just home in on minute details and single words initially. Many answers for example contained confusion of the two central characters in this passage. Frances and Lilian were sometimes mixed up or simply conflated and it was often suggested that the murderer herself was doing the cleaning up rather than lying helpless on the sofa. This mistake might have been avoided by careful initial reading of the whole passage and getting a sense of its overarching nature. The best answers distinguished successfully between the two characters and contrasted them.

The best answers in Section A started from the extract and then made links outwards to the genre as a whole. It was entirely the wrong approach to have a mental checklist of what one would expect in crime writing and then to try to spot those features in the passage. This led to negative and entirely futile observations such as, “There is no detective in this extract which you would normally expect in crime writing.” There is no point in observing what is not in the extract as it is a critical dead-end. Long discussions of the usual conventions of crime writing similarly often led nowhere in relation to the question.

Many students also wasted time trying to fit the extract into some kind of sub-genre of crime writing. To begin with, this is extremely difficult to do, given that only a small part of the whole text is printed on the paper and secondly identification of sub-genre does not really lead to anything critically interesting. Whether it is a “caper” or “cosy crime” or “hard-boiled” is both uninteresting and unproductive as there is no real virtue in being able to apply a label to something, categorise it or decide which bits match and which do not. The best answers devoted their time to analysing writer’s methods and how the writer had used the wider genre rather than trying to fit the writing into a box that would not contain it.

In addition, it is also wise to avoid making sweeping generalisations about genre – or its subversion. In order to claim generic subversion, there must be a very extensive reading knowledge upon which to base it. After a limited time of study it may be wise to be a little more tentative about making such claims as, “Waters is obviously subverting the genre by making her criminals women” or “It is a subversion of the genre for the murder to be unplanned.” Whilst it was often pleasing to see evidence of wider reading and enjoyment of crime writing, some students tried to make some very extensive and artificial links to other texts both within and outside the specification. Occasionally links were interesting and thoughtful; sometimes they were unnecessary, lengthy and unproductive.

It is important when analysing texts to understand and use correct terminology and many students were able to employ sophisticated terminology usefully and aptly. However, if terms are to be successfully used it is vital that they are understood. “Juxtaposition” was a favourite term of many students but very rarely was it used correctly. It was usually the blanket term for any type of contrast. Other key terms which caused problems for some students were “personification”, “pathetic fallacy”, “focaliser” and “free indirect discourse” all of which are admirable terms and very useful in Section A if correctly used, but impediments if not.

As on every unit in this specification, question focus is essential to success. Questions are very specifically worded and each has a trigger for debate and interpretation. In Section B, each question on this paper, had an opening critical opinion inviting students to debate the view. Failure to answer the question meant that students sometimes missed out on considering interpretations. For example there were many answers to question 5 on *Atonement* where students failed to shape their ideas to Briony as a victim which was the focus of the question. Long accounts of her misunderstanding and her upbringing rarely addressed the question topic successfully. Similarly in question 7, accounts of Ida’s character and her anatomy did not really consider her either as a force of destruction or a force of justice.

It is also essential to read questions carefully and address the exact terms. Question 10, for example, was on “places” and not “settings”. Some students used the word “settings” in their answers and wrote about the weather in *Porphyria’s Lover* and the sun and moon in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, having not read the question carefully enough. Understanding of question

terms is also vital. Question 11 focused on justice and injustice which are not the same as justification, an error made by some students.

Many answers in the top band succeeded in unpicking all the question terms very precisely. In answer to question 2, for example, good responses looked at both “motives” and “murders” to varying extents and in answer to question 5, Robbie was considered as well as Briony. It is advisable to investigate all the opportunities offered by the entire wording of the questions. Discussion of writers’ methods should always be relevant to the question. There were some answers which seemed to take a break from answering the question in order to get in some reference to the writer’s methods. A paragraph on the use of rhyme, for example, was not necessarily integrated into the question topic and therefore was irrelevant.

In a similar way the use of context should always spring naturally from the text and argument. Biographical context which was sometimes bolted on was rarely very constructive. A number of answers which included work on *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* talked about the injustice of imprisoning Wilde for homosexuality, for example. Whilst this may certainly have been an instance of injustice, the poem itself does not actually explore this particular issue and so this sort of context should be used with care. It is also important to guard against the use of over-simplified, contextual generalisations which often amount to nothing more than unconvincing assertions. Statements such as “women in the 1920s were weak” and “people in today’s society are no longer religious” are clearly untrue and show a limited understanding of context.

Both questions in Section C on the paper asked students to “explore the significance” of a particular topic. These questions were done well providing the meaning of the word “significance”, which is about exploring meanings, was understood. Some students made the mistake of thinking that “significance” meant “importance” and wrote answers on whether places were important or not or whether justice and injustice were important or not. Such answers were inevitably very limited: there is not much to say beyond either they are or are not important, whereas exploring meanings is limitless. Understanding what “significance” actually means when used in questions is vital to success in this specification.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.