

GCE Examiners' Report

English Literature
AS/A Level
Summer 2025

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Introduction

Our Principal Examiners' report provides valuable feedback on the recent assessment series. It has been written by our Principal Examiners and Principal Moderators after the completion of marking and moderation, and details how candidates have performed in each unit.

This report opens with a summary of candidates' performance, including the assessment objectives/skills/topics/themes being tested, and highlights the characteristics of successful performance and where performance could be improved. It then looks in detail at each unit, pinpointing aspects that proved challenging to some candidates and suggesting some reasons as to why that might be.¹

The information found in this report provides valuable insight for practitioners to support their teaching and learning activity. We would also encourage practitioners to share this document – in its entirety or in part – with their learners to help with exam preparation, to understand how to avoid pitfalls and to add to their revision toolbox.

Further support

Document	Description	Link
Professional Learning / CPD	WJEC offers an extensive programme of online and face-to-face Professional Learning events. Access interactive feedback, review example candidate responses, gain practical ideas for the classroom and put questions to our dedicated team by registering for one of our events here.	https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/professional-learning/
Past papers	Access the bank of past papers for this qualification, including the most recent assessments. Please note that we do not make past papers available on the public website until 12 months after the examination.	Portal by WJEC or on the WJEC subject page
Grade boundary information	Grade boundaries are the minimum number of marks needed to achieve each grade. For unitised specifications grade boundaries are expressed on a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS). UMS grade boundaries remain the same every year as the range of UMS mark percentages allocated to a particular grade does not change. UMS grade boundaries are published at overall subject and unit level. For linear specifications, a single grade is awarded for the subject, rather than for each unit that contributes towards the overall grade. Grade boundaries are published on results day.	For unitised specifications click here: Results, Grade Boundaries and PRS (wjec.co.uk)

¹ Please note that where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

Exam Results Analysis	WJEC provides information to examination centres via the WJEC Portal. This is restricted to centre staff only. Access is granted to centre staff by the Examinations Officer at the centre.	Portal by WJEC
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Bank of Professional Learning materials	Access our bank of Professional Learning materials from previous events from our secure website and additional pre-recorded materials available in the public domain.	Portal by WJEC or on the WJEC subject page.
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Executive Summary

The Principal Examiners noted that all candidates had found the papers accessible with some excellent responses seen across all units.

Some common points to consider in future include the following:

- Candidates should not attempt to write pre-prepared essays in the exam, or essays which they have previously written on a similar theme to the set question. The most successful responses were often those who took time to read the question, and the text when available to them, carefully and spent some time planning their answer.
- Where there is a part (i) question in an exam paper, it has been designed to be answered first as a springboard to the essay question. Candidates would be better served by not neglecting this part of the paper.
- Connected to the points made above, timed practice prior to the exam series is essential in preparing candidates well for all four examined units. Even with constraints on time at centres, every attempt should be made to build this into the teaching and learning.
- In analysing poetry, candidates should start by ensuring that they have a sound overview of the poem. Responses which analyse poetry simply through poetic techniques should be discouraged.
- Those who considered a broad range of contexts, including cultural and literary contexts, and used them to illuminate their reading of texts were invariably the most successful candidates. Candidates who made broad, sweeping generalisations about an entire period or individuals' lives were less successful.
- The use of critical views / different interpretations always needs to be relevant to the texts and to the task.
- It is good to see some good practice at centres with the NEA. All teachers need to be especially vigilant of the use of AI for this unit.
- Where candidates' handwriting is not clear, it is better for them to word process their exam responses.

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UNIT 1: PROSE AND DRAMA

Overview of the Unit

Once again, there were some outstanding responses to a variety of prose and drama texts which impressed the examiners. Indeed, many candidates demonstrated a confident understanding of their chosen texts, discussing how meaning is shaped with growing sophistication while taking into account the influence of relevant contexts and different interpretations. While, as expected, *Jane Eyre* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were the most popular choices, it was encouraging to see a marked increase in centres choosing to respond to the traditionally less popular texts such as *North and South*, *Top Girls* and *Translations*. All of these texts are rich in historical context and responses demonstrated the ease with which many candidates were able to access and explore the complexities of the relevant time periods. The quality of some responses was exceptional, especially as this is a closed-book exam: candidates are to be commended for their hard work and thorough exam preparation.

It is important to note, however, that several examiners commented on the marked increase of inaccurate textual quotations which, inevitably, affected the AO2 mark. Concerns were raised that the quotations included were inaccurately paraphrased. With this in mind, it is important that centres make candidates aware of the ways in which AI generated quotations are not necessarily accurate to the original text and are often inaccurately paraphrased.

Comments on individual questions/sections

SECTION A: PROSE FICTION PRE-1900

Points for Consideration: Extract

AO1

- It is important that candidates clearly engage with, and track through, the given extract, avoiding irrelevant comment on context or other parts of the novel.
- Some candidates lost focus on the question and drifted away from, for example, the *relationship* between two characters to talk generally about characterisation or plot.
- As stated in the 'information for candidates' section on the front cover of the Unit 1 paper, it is advised that *20 minutes* is spent on Section A part (i). A significant minority of candidates spent too long on this question which affected the quality of their part (ii) response.

AO2

- It was pleasing to see many candidates comment on the writer's techniques, in addition to the use of language, when exploring how meaning is created. In some cases, however, candidates simply embedded quotations in order to produce a narrative re-telling of the extract with very limited analysis. It can be useful to think why a writer has used a specific word or technique and to discuss the connotations displayed.

Points for Consideration: Essay

AO1

- Effective planning is essential in order for candidates to produce a concise and clearly structured essay. There was some evidence of planning where candidates had taken time to think about their approach to answering the question. There was a balance of responses whereby some candidates chose to focus on character while others explored two separate parts of the novel: both are valid approaches.
- Centres should advise candidates that the extract should be used as a 'springboard' into their essay response: candidates should not spend too long re-visiting the extract.
- Expression raised some concerns, especially the use of a colloquial register and candidates' inability to maintain an academic discourse. Centres should also discourage candidates from using terms taken from English Language – phrases such as lexical sets, semantic field etc. – as this often led to feature-spotting and hindered literary analysis.
- Candidates should be conscious of embedding their contextual references (AO3), critical views (AO5) and their supporting comments from the text (AO2) with subtlety, clearly linking to the topic in question. Some candidates lacked both sophistication and relevance when attempting to integrate critical views and contextual information.

AO2

- As with the extract responses, a significant minority of candidates embedded quotations without discussing how meaning is created. These candidates often scored highly for concepts (AO1) but were less successful with their analysis (AO2).
- It is worth noting that some of the more successful responses used AO2 as an anchor for AO3 and AO5.

AO3

- The strongest responses remained focused on the *significance* and *influence* of contexts, using *relevant* information to construct an analytical discussion of the text.
- Due to the heavier weighting of this AO, a significant number of candidates wandered away from the question to produce lengthy paragraphs of extraneous contextual information. Contextual references, including biographical detail, cannot be rewarded for its own sake. Candidates are advised to use the formula: 'task-text-context' to ensure that context informs rather than engulfs their response.

AO5

- Similarly to AO3, candidates must use other relevant opinion to *inform* their own discussion of the text and build a *personal response*. Indeed, some candidates quoted lengthy sweeping statements from critics and did not fully integrate them into their own reading.
- There were some cases where candidates did not include any alternative readings or even any tentative vocabulary (such as 'perhaps'). These candidates can only be awarded zero marks for this AO.
- It was, however, pleasing to see more autonomous candidates take the opportunity to engage with relevant critical opinion and link it directly to their own appreciation of the text.

Notes on Texts

Jane Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*

Once again, *Sense and Sensibility* was a popular choice of text and examiners saw some strong responses to both the extract and the essay question. The majority of candidates were able to identify and explore the differences between the presentation of Mr and Mrs Dashwood's and the way in which Austen shaped the passage to set Mr Dashwood's more generous character in contrast to that of his wife. The essay also proved accessible for most candidates and examiners were particularly pleased to read responses which engaged in a debate as to whether 'promises are *always* broken' with many choosing to focus on Lucy Steele and Elinor.

Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*

Jane Eyre was, by far, the most popular choice and many candidates discussed the complexity of Rochester's character and the ways in which Brontë shaped the narrative to guide the reader towards Jane's more sympathetic and tolerant view of Bertha; indeed, most candidates were able to identify the contrast between Jane and Rochester. In the essay, candidates' answers were strongest when they analysed authorial techniques, with valid support, and then linked to contextual information or critical views to build a coherent argument. Centres should take note that bland, sweeping statements about patriarchal Victorian society did very little to allow candidates to access the top bands: candidates need to be specific when linking to the mid-Victorian context of *Jane Eyre*.

Elizabeth Gaskell: *North and South*

This text is growing in popularity and there were many excellent responses from candidates who demonstrated a confidence with analysing both the extract and addressing the critical view in the question. The vast majority of responses discussed the depiction of Mrs Hale as a desperate and vulnerable character and selected some key quotations to back up their evaluation of her character, commenting on the significance of Gaskell's use of dialogue. Likewise, the essay question's focus on 'rebellion and discontent' was accessible for most candidates who took the opportunity to bring in the novel's rich contextual material to illuminate their discussion and weave together close textual analysis with relevant contextual detail.

Charles Dickens: *David Copperfield*

No candidates studied this text.

Thomas Hardy: *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

This was a popular choice of text and examiners saw some sophisticated responses. The extract question on Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane proved generally straightforward and most candidates identified that Elizabeth-Jane's energy and excitement is set in contrast to Hardy's depiction of a subdued Michael Henchard. In regard to the essay, for the most part candidates engaged well with the statement that the novel is 'primarily about rejection' with the majority of responses discussing Henchard and Susan/ Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane. Candidates' answers were strongest when they wove contextual information and textual analysis together rather than spending time discussing Hardy's own relationship with Emma in a disjointed manner.

SECTION B: DRAMA

Points for Consideration

AO1

- As with Section A, planning is essential for candidates to construct a perceptive and coherent discussion of the text. As stated on the 'information for candidates' section on the front cover of the Unit 1 exam paper, it is advised that candidates spend *40 minutes* on Section B. Strict timings are essential in Section A in order to prevent candidates from running out of time and producing brief and underdeveloped responses for Section B.
- The use of terminology is vital in so far as it creates precision and economy in drama essays. However, a listing of dramatic techniques will not in itself contribute to the quality of an essay and frequently only works to undermine clarity and relevance.
- The strongest answers kept focus on the question throughout the essay, using the beginning and end of each paragraph to develop a perceptive argument.

AO2

- As with Section A, a significant number of candidates embedded textual quotations without discussing *how* meaning is created. These essays tended, therefore, to slip into narrative which undermined critical engagement.
- Some candidates wrote with confidence on language and sub-text but did not pay attention to the effect of the dramatic devices used (e.g. stage directions, lighting, music etc.) and the way a play is structured.
- It is worth noting that some of the more successful responses used AO2 as an anchor for AO3 and AO5.

AO3

- The strongest responses remained focused on the *significance* and *influence* of contexts, using *relevant* information to construct an analytical discussion of the text.
- Due to the heavier weighting of this AO, a significant number of candidates wandered away from the question to produce lengthy paragraphs of extraneous contextual information. Contextual references, including biographical detail, cannot be rewarded for its own sake. As with Section A part (ii), candidates are advised to use the formula: 'task-text-context' to ensure that context informs rather than engulfs the response.

AO5

- Similarly to AO3, candidates must use other relevant opinion to *inform* their own discussion of the text and build a *personal response*. Indeed, some candidates quoted lengthy sweeping statements from critics and did not fully integrate them into their own reading.
- There were some cases where candidates did not include any alternative readings or even any tentative vocabulary (such as 'perhaps'). These candidates can only be awarded zero marks for this AO.
- It was, however, pleasing to see more autonomous candidates take the opportunity to engage with relevant critical opinion in order to link it directly to their own appreciation of the text.

Notes on Texts

Christopher Marlowe: *Doctor Faustus*

Overall, this proved to be a popular choice of text with the majority of candidates choosing to answer Question 6 which asked whether 'Faustus is a character with whom audiences are unable to sympathise'. A large number of very strong discussions explored the complexities of his character, successfully using Aristotelian theory as relevant literary context to produce a perceptive and coherent discussion. However, weaker responses simply listed some technical terms to describe a tragic hero without any attempt at engagement. Question 7 also produced some very good responses which purposefully placed *Doctor Faustus* in its historical context to explore the effect of Renaissance learning on different audiences.

Oscar Wilde: *Lady Windermere's Fan*

There was a balance of candidates responding to both questions and examiners read some confident and perceptive discussions of this late-Victorian play. The strongest responses to Question 8 focused on staging as well as dialogue, for example the symbolic and dramatic effect of the fan and its links to the breaking down of Lady Windermere's marriage. Less successful candidates wandered away from the issue of family bonds to generally discuss the character of Mrs Erlynne while some made sweeping statements about Oscar Wilde's biography without using it to inform their own argument. Similarly, Question 9 responses were, on the whole, focused on the critical statement but candidates need to be cautious in overenthusiastically agreeing with the question's critical quotation: this often undermined critical engagement with the text.

Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Once again, this was the most popular choice of drama text with the vast majority of candidates opting to answer Question 10 on love. Indeed, the majority of responses were able to engage with the character of Blanche Dubois although the weaker candidates did this at a more narrative level. The more successful essays discussed the roles of Stanley and Stella to address the different types of love, exploring Williams's use of symbolism while making relevant contextual links to the position of women in 1940s America. Question 10 also produced some excellent answers with the more confident candidates analysing the contrast between Stanley and Mitch.

Caryl Churchill: *Top Girls*

It is lovely to see this text continue to grow in popularity and there was a balance of candidates choosing to answer each question. With a play such as *Top Girls*, there was plenty of opportunity for candidates to approach both questions in a number of ways by focusing on a variety of characters while alluding to the historical context of Britain under a Thatcherite government. However, it is important that characters in Act One of the play are treated as literary constructs rather than straightforward historical people to ensure that responses are critical in nature.

Brian Friel: *Translations*

This text continues to grow in popularity and there were many thoughtful and mature responses seen by examiners. The questions were accessible with a balance of candidates choosing to respond to each question, discussing the impact of dramatic techniques and the ways in which the rich historical contexts shape the audiences' understanding of the play. On occasion, however, there were examples of candidates only commenting on the early part of the play rather than the significance of the later scenes and the ending.

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UNIT 2: POETRY POST-1900

Overview of the Unit

Examiners were generally happy to note that most candidates had successfully prepared for and addressed the requirements of the examination. Some candidates responded to the texts with perception and sophistication, but it was disappointing to see a continued proliferation in rubric infringements in Section B, which had a detrimental effect on many candidates' attainment. Examples of specific rubric infringements and how to avoid them in future are detailed in the relevant sections. Some candidates answered Section B before Section A, an approach which should be discouraged. Some candidates dedicated too much time to Section B leaving their Section A answers very brief or even incomplete. In both cases, this affected their marks for the section. We would like to emphasise again to centres the importance of providing more timed practice to avoid rushed and incomplete responses. Handwriting was problematic for a higher number of candidates this year and it was noticeable that legibility decreased as responses developed. Again, timed practice could help with this issue. Duffy and Larkin were clearly the most popular pairing with a significant number of centres also choosing to study Sheers and Heaney. The pairing of Hughes and Plath wasn't far behind in popularity but only a minority of centres chose to study Thomas and Lewis and Yeats and Abse.

Comments on individual questions/sections

SECTION A: CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Many perceptive responses were seen with some detailed and lengthy writing in the time permitted. Many Section A answers this year, however, were far too brief, barely reaching two sides of the answer booklets with some only a page. These responses tended to be limited, lacked close analysis of the texts and did not always answer the questions set in enough detail. As we recommend candidates to spend approximately 45 minutes on this section, it is expected that candidates write in some detail. A minority of candidates answered both available questions in Section A, a rubric infringement. Although examiners marked both responses and awarded the highest mark, the responses were invariably too brief and frequently infringed into time which should have been used for Section B. Concerningly, more candidates than previously included many detailed references to context and critical views which, in some cases, dominated their responses. AO3 and AO5 are not assessed in Section A and their inclusion cannot be rewarded.

AO1

The misreading of poems was again an issue this year where the candidates responded inaccurately to meaning and content. This had an effect on AO1 marks. Worryingly, many candidates responded as if the text were an 'unseen poem' and as if they had never read the set poem previously.

Many candidates wrote general analyses on the named poems without focussing on the theme noted. Although aspects of the responses touched upon the themes, many of the essays lacked application to the wording of the question itself. AO1 marks were obviously affected in these cases.

As accuracy in spelling, grammar and punctuation is one of the foci of AO1, some candidates' marks were negatively affected by careless errors in expression, which led to a lack of clarity. Informality in register and tone was also still a problem for many candidates. Referring to the poets by their first names and voicing their opinion on the poets' lifestyles does not equate to an academic register.

Some candidates still made use of linguistic terminology usually seen in A Level English Language. Some terms, of course, overlap but some essays were hampered by excessive (and not always correct) use of linguistic terminology. Merely recognising or labelling such features cannot be rewarded without being developed into analysis of the poem in the light of the question. More candidates seemed to be labelling basic parts of speech and although some use of this can be productive, many had either incorrectly named phrases or words and some responses were dominated by this approach.

AO2

Examiners saw some detailed and confident analysis of the poems chosen, many with a sophisticated balance between close examination of techniques used and the writer's intended meaning. Some candidates only dealt with a stream of implicit readings, however. While these have their place, some literary analysis based on techniques and effect would improve the overall quality of these responses. Conversely, some responses depended on technique spotting without any detailed comments. This approach limits the marks awarded and would be improved considerably with an examination of the effect of the techniques on the reader. Examiners noted that the strongest responses used a well-chosen selection of quotations and did not attempt to analyse every line of the whole poem within the time given.

Edward Thomas

Most candidates successfully analysed Thomas' use of language, particularly his use of first person. Some candidates, however, included AO3 (not assessed) comments about soldiers going to the war. As 'Adlestrop' was written months before the outbreak of war, these references were problematic. Some candidates also struggled to identify Thomas' creation of mood accurately.

Alun Lewis

A less popular option than Question 1 but an option which produced some confident responses as some candidates dealt with Lewis' use of imagery very well. However, there were some less secure responses which were dominated by AO3.

W B Yeats

There were no responses to this question.

Dannie Abse

Responses were generally successful to this question. Most candidates discussed the match's atmosphere effectively, although some did not comment on the change of tone in the final stanza. More successful candidates explored Abse's use of religious and Faustian imagery in the poem.

Ted Hughes

Examiners commented on some confident responses which dealt with Hughes' language and imagery very well, discussing the brutality of his language very well. A small number of candidates answered on 'The Jaguar' and not 'Second Glance at a Jaguar', despite page references on the exam paper. Unfortunately, there were some misreading in the responses, claiming that the jaguar was in the wild and not in a zoo. It was pleasing to see candidates avoiding references to AO3 in the majority of responses to this question.

Sylvia Plath

A less popular choice than the Hughes poem, which nonetheless produced some fairly strong responses, dealing with Plath's use of imagery and poetic voice well. Some less successful candidates inaccurately noted that Plath created a happy and upbeat atmosphere and there was far too much focus on the depiction of the clouds/sheep. Contextual details on Plath's mental health and Brontë's novel were discussed in many responses, which couldn't be rewarded as AO3 is not assessed here. Most candidates, however, kept their focus firmly on AO1 and AO2.

Philip Larkin

A popular choice but many candidates struggled to engage with Larkin's tone and overall ideas. The most successful candidates grasped Larkin's wry comments on the shop and his use of symbolism. However, a high number of candidates misread the poem, mistakenly commenting that Larkin was a feminist writer due to his condemnation of fashion. Likewise, some candidates claimed that Larkin put forward a Marxist critique of consumerism. Apart from the inaccuracies in these readings, responses that favour AO5 in Section A are self-penalising.

Carol Ann Duffy

One of the most popular choices of the paper, where many candidates responded successfully and in some detail. Many dealt with Duffy's depiction of memories well, but some responses misread some aspects of the poem claiming that the child was a victim of abuse. Some responses lost focus on the theme of memories, adversely affecting their AO1 mark.

Seamus Heaney

A far less popular choice than Sheers' poem, examiners commented on many successful responses which discussed Heaney's use of symbolism. The most successful candidates explored Heaney's use of imagery and discussed the positive and supportive atmosphere of the poem. A minority of candidates included detailed inclusion of AO3 to the detriment of AO2.

Owen Sheers

This proved to be a very popular choice with some interesting and original observations made on Sheers' use of metaphor. Many would have benefited from a closer focus on the theme of separation as some responses were general analyses of the poem. Some responses concentrated on the potential sexual imagery in the poem to the detriment of other, more secure, points.

SECTION B: POETRY COMPARISON

Examiners noted that far fewer plans were seen this year in candidates' answer booklets. This should remain a key element in this section as balancing all five AOs needs clear structuring. Stronger responses in this section usually showed clear evidence of planning. It is recommended that candidates spend 10 to 15 minutes of their 1¼ hour planning their essays as structuring and developing their argument is crucial.

Rubric infringements were once again commonplace this year, mainly with candidates focusing on fewer than the four poems required. In some cases, up to 50% of candidates in a centre committed an infringement with the most frequent problem being candidates only responding to two poems despite managing to complete their essay. We would like to remind centres to emphasise the need to use four poems (two from each poet) to their candidates.

It was pleasing to see that far fewer candidates used poems named in Section A. This also constitutes a rubric infringement. Likewise, although not a rubric infringement, a few essays contained references to up to eight poems, leading to a superficial coverage of the texts. Informality in expression continues to be a problem with many candidates writing in a non-academic register.

AO1

Some unhelpful structuring of essays was noted by examiners: analysing two poems by the same poet, then two by the second poet does not encourage comparison and severely limits AO4 marks.

Less successful responses seemed to try to fit pre-selected poems/pairings to the question. This was rarely successful as even when sensible pairings were chosen as connections weren't always clearly relevant to the question.

AO2

Stronger essays included an analysis of specific textual evidence as a link to contextual detail. Some candidates analysed their chosen poems in full, tracking through each line. This is unnecessary and time-consuming.

Examiners noted that it was pleasing to see some thoughtful and purposeful discussion of the poets' use of structure as well as close analysis of language and literary techniques. Including references to form and/or structure, however, are only rewarded if they are relevant to the question.

The use of linguistic terminology is often used as an end in itself and not linked to analysis. Such an approach should be discouraged. Indeed, candidates can sometimes seem to have a more comprehensive knowledge of techniques than an understanding of how poems work. It is worth reminding candidates that a poem is more than the sum of the techniques which the poet may have used.

AO3

A major concern this year was the inaccuracy of contextual details. Many candidates failed to gain marks for this AO due to incorrect information pertaining to the poets' lives, their relationships and the eras in which they lived. Some inaccuracies were seen across whole centres.

Contextual details were most successful when linked to specific aspects of the poems chosen while also linked to the question. Some original contextual links were seen but some, unfortunately, were not always relevant to the question. Likewise, a page of context almost independent of the analysis is unlikely to garner high AO3 marks for the candidate.

Band 5 responses made excellent use of specific context linked to poems/quotations and included literary, social and historical context, not merely general biographical detail.

AO4

Many excellent and perceptive connections were made between texts with the strongest discussing similarities and differences while using specific quotations or commenting on the poets' use of techniques. However, due to lack of planning, links in some responses were very sparse.

Stronger responses included connections throughout and not just after the analysis of two poems. Planning and structuring the essay is vital to ensure this. Many confident connections were made when dealing with how the poems affected the reader.

It is recommended that candidates develop their links as many stated the connection between the poems but limited their marks by failing to expand upon their ideas. Attempting to link four poems simultaneously is unwise as it almost inevitably leads to a superficial approach. Centres should be reminded that linking poems by the same poet provides a limited scope for discussion. Connections made through AO3 (context) are also to be discouraged.

AO5

More perceptive candidates dealt with different interpretation confidently and with some sophistication, weaving their critical discussion throughout their responses. Some candidates named critics and provided quotations from their sources which should be regarded as a prompt for critical discussion. Unless the candidate develops the view by linking it to the poem/quotation, however, they can only achieve limited success.

Yet again, examiners saw the overuse of ‘arguably’ or ‘perhaps’ without a following interpretation or discussion. This approach could limit attainment as they only acknowledge an interpretation. Some candidates did not explicitly address this AO at all in their responses. Such responses were self-penalising.

Edward Thomas and Alun Lewis

The most successful candidates produced well-structured, well-developed responses which incorporated a broad range of contexts and made effective comparisons. The question on discontentment was well-handled with explorations of discontentment with personal relationships, wartime, industrialisation and more. Less successful candidates focussed exclusively on the poets’ experiences of war. Responses to the depiction of night and darkness were less evident, but they generally dealt with the poets’ use of imagery and symbolism quite successfully.

Dannie Abse and W. B. Yeats

Question 14 on the theme of change was much more popular with very few candidates choosing the question on the influence of surroundings. Some of the same poems were used for both questions. Candidates made use of a range of poems covering historical and personal relationships for both questions and there were some insightful connections illuminated by contexts.

Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath

Question 16 was by far the more popular of the two questions with many candidates successfully exploring the poets’ depiction of pain. The most successful responses examined a wide range of poems which were all linked clearly to the question focus. A recurring issue with this pairing is that some candidates over-emphasise the relationship between the poets without considering other influences beyond that relationship. Fewer candidates attempted Question 15 but, in general, their focus was equally as clearer even if they tended to include far too much biographical detail for AO3.

Philip Larkin and Carol Ann Duffy

Larkin and Duffy continue to be a very popular choice for centres and therefore a wide range of responses was seen by examiners. Both questions proved popular with successful answers including some perceptive and well-selected contextual detail. Some responses lost focus on the reference to “the world around them” in Question 18 and instead wrote responses dealing only with personal disappointments. Very few displayed a clear understanding of Larkin’s satirical tone in many poems selected for either question. Sweeping statements about the poets’ private lives were prevalent in responses to both questions, with many inaccuracies on Duffy’s background and upbringing and on Larkin’s private life.

Seamus Heaney and Owen Sheers

Both questions proved to be popular this year. Examiners saw a range of responses using a generally relevant choice of poems although many concentrated on the poets' experiences of romantic relationships only for Question 20. Responses to Question 19 made use of a broader range of poems for Heaney, focussing on Irish culture. AO3 in responses to both questions tended to be dominated by Heaney with references to his family, his marriage and his life in Ireland and California.

Summary of key points

- Avoid references to AO3 in Section A. Some comments might be rewarded for AO2 but it would be better to avoid references to contexts.
- For Section A, candidates should consider the poem as a whole in the light of the question. Analysing through focusing on specific techniques is not the most successful approach.
- Candidates should plan their essays carefully in Section B. Balancing all the AOs is a difficult task and requires some thought before beginning the essay.
- In Section B, candidates must write on four poems, two by each poet.
- Biographical information is often the most interesting contextual detail for the candidate, but literary and cultural contexts are usually far more rewarding in analysing the poetry.
- Making and developing connections is essential in Section B essays.
- If using a critical quotation in Section B, candidates need to ensure that they develop the points made and integrate them into their analysis and argument.

A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCE

Summer 2025

UNIT 3: POETRY PRE-1900 AND UNSEEN POETRY

Overview of the Unit

Some excellent work was seen in the examining of Unit 3 this summer. Candidates were able to access all questions and all questions were attempted, with Chaucer and Rossetti being the most popular poets studied. It is pleasing to note, however, that more centres seem to be teaching Milton and that all five texts are almost equally popular.

Examiners noted the importance of organising the response to the question, selecting appropriate poems and reading both the questions and the poems carefully before beginning to write. In Section A, it was good to see a greater range of contexts being considered, especially literary contexts to the pre-1900 poetry. There weren't any significant misreadings of the unseen poems in Section B, suggesting that they were all accessible. Some excellent work was seen, especially with the unseen poems in Section B. All of the choices available in the Section B poems were used and all of them were used productively. Those who could have an overview of the poems in Section B, having a clear understanding of meanings, were usually the most confident and assured.

Comments on individual questions/sections

SECTION A PART (i)

The strongest responses were those which selected three or four points and focused on the key words of the question. Less successful were those which worked their way through the extract or poem trying to cover as much as possible. These responses tended to be too long and could result in candidates struggling to complete the paper. There were some candidates who spent longer on part (i) than on the essay question for which there are three times as many marks. To avoid this mishap many candidates this year began with part (ii) or Question 6, an approach which should be avoided.

It isn't possible to overstate the importance of reading carefully, slowly if you like. This year, there were candidates who wrote about the wrong 'Holy Thursday' poem, or who didn't notice that Chaucer was speaking through the Merchant in the extract. Reading carefully, picking up tone and attitude, is an advanced skill; one that needs to be encouraged and developed throughout years 12 and 13. It is an approach which seems to develop a tentative way of reading and to the use of language such as 'suggests'. It also discourages assertive language such as 'highlights'. The tentative approach is particularly valuable when it comes to Section B.

Chaucer

In this extract, Chaucer is speaking through the Merchant. Candidates who recognised this took the Merchant's rosy description of a wife's role with a pinch of salt, wondered about irony and wrote less literal more nuanced responses. Most candidates seemed comfortable with Chaucer's language and saw the ambiguity in 'the fruit of his tresor' and 'take a yong wif'. Some candidates stumbled over the comparison with 'bacheloris' and attributed 'They live but as a brid or as a beast' to the 'wedded man'.

Donne

The 'lovers' relationship' posed no problem for candidates. Strongest responses focused on the word 'present' and discussed the effects of the hyperbolic language, especially the central imagery of 'kings' and 'princes'. Many followed up the significance of the poem's title and showed how Donne played with time words such as 'tomorrow', 'day' and 'years'.

Milton

Milton seemed more popular this year. Candidates seized on the language of impending disaster and the contrast between the 'serpent' Satan's 'hellish rancour' and Eve's flowerlike beauty and fragility. It was impressive to see so many students engaging with the density and richness of Milton's language.

Blake

Most candidates saw that the question's focus on 'use of imagery' meant they should concentrate on the effects of imagery. The strongest responses, and there were many, looked at how much of the imagery stressed the innocence of children and their relationship with 'heaven'. Some attention was also paid to the language of music such as 'voice of song' and 'harmonious thunderings'. There was a tendency, however, to pay too much attention to unnecessary contexts.

Rossetti

Rossetti was another popular choice. The poem, 'An Apple-Gathering', was clearly one many candidates had studied in detail. Most were very confident that it was an allegory of female, misplaced trust and disappointment. Candidates who took a more circumspect approach often responded more sensitively to the poem's ambivalence, especially to the repetition of 'loitered' and what it might indicate in the last verse.

SECTION A PART (ii)

Candidates were very well-informed on contextual influences. However, it's better not to start responses with a paragraph of biography or contexts. It seemed that many writing about Blake and Rossetti in particular were very tempted to begin in this way. The strongest responses began by addressing the key words in the questions: power, time, conflict, the lives of children and the experiences of women.

References to relevant contextual influences reach the higher bands when they are directly linked to text. There was a tendency to make too much of biographical knowledge, for example of Donne's wife, Anne More, and Rossetti's relationships.

Some candidates answering on Donne, Blake and Rossetti used the part (i) poem in their part (ii) responses. This often led to a repetition of part (i) material which could not be rewarded twice. A convincing response should draw on at least two fresh poems. Three or more would be preferable if the candidate is to be able to show detailed knowledge of the text, the effects of different techniques and to be able to draw on a wide range of relevant contexts.

There was a lot of evidence of a lack of organisation this year. At the extreme, this sometimes meant a run of paragraphs without any clear connections. Perhaps there should be more care taken over planning. It is valuable to have a clear overview before beginning to write the answer.

Chaucer

Candidates found 'power' very accessible. Some took a general approach, writing about the relationship between man and woman, often arguing that May and Proserpina were used by Chaucer to challenge fourteenth century conventions. The most common approach focused on the nature of Januarie's power over May and Damyan, but it had the danger of writing character studies instead of concentrating on power itself. This could also lead to more narrative responses. Generally, there was sound use of relevant religious contexts and confident references to Chaucer's use of literary conventions such as courtly love and fabliaux.

Donne

The most convincing responses focused on time's relationship to love and ageing. They looked at 'The Sun Rising' as a poem which argued for love's power over time. The poem was also used to show the significance of many key contextual influences, such as alchemy, monarchy, religious and Platonic ideas, and New World discoveries. Candidates who had studied a range of poems benefited from this question, making use of Holy Sonnets (last days) and Elegies such as 'Change', 'His Picture' and 'The Autumnal' (ageing). Some responses focused on poems that indicated time in their titles, such as 'The Good Morrow', 'A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day' and 'The Relic'. Candidates who interpreted the question as referring to Donne's lifetime often found themselves with too much of a biographical focus, making too many references to Anne More and finding it difficult to organise such responses. Candidates who wanted to use 'The Flea' struggled to make it relevant.

Milton

Conflict elicited many thoughtful, well-informed responses. Some were character based: Satan v God, Satan v Eve, Adam v Eve. This approach could lead to a narrative based response. Some looked at internal conflicts: within Satan, Adam, and Eve. A smaller number explored more abstract, more conceptual conflicts: Good v Evil, freedom v obedience, reason v love. On the whole, responses showed a sound knowledge of contexts such as Milton's views on monarchy, freedom, religion and women, and the central influence of classical literature and culture on his writing.

Blake

Blake candidates were generally very well prepared. Many wrote confidently about how childhood in 'Songs of Innocence' differed in ways from its presentation in 'Songs of Experience', making particular comparative use of the two poems called 'Nurse's Song' and 'The Ecchoing Green' and 'The School Boy'. Often, excellent use was made of the influence of Rousseau, the French Revolution, radical ideas of the time and dissenting's relationship with the established church. There was a danger with some candidates of contextual knowledge overpowering engagement with the poetry. In the tussle between Blake the idealist and Blake the pessimist, it was the latter who came out on top.

Rossetti

Candidates were almost without exception well prepared to discuss the experiences of women as presented by Rossetti. There were some very perceptive discussions of 'Goblin Market' and its positive picture of sisterhood. Most candidates were aware of the range of experiences expressed in the poems, from regret ('Have You Forgotten'), rejection ('From the Antique'), independence ('No Thank You, John'), to maltreatment ('A Daughter of Eve'). Candidates referred confidently to relevant contexts such as her religious beliefs, her work with 'fallen women', her links to the Pre-Raphaelites and to literary influences such as Petrarch, Shakespeare and Keats. Some candidates relied too much on biographical references.

SECTION B: UNSEEN POETRY

As usual, there were some wonderful responses, full of perceptive readings and illuminating connections. All three poems were used to make comparisons with Poem A; 'Asleep' by Wilfred Owen the least popular.

The strongest responses rested on clear overviews of both poems. Candidates then based their answers on three or four thought out connections. Poorly organised responses seem to have begun without establishing a view of the whole poem.

The sort of overviews confident candidates put forward included:

- the change in tone and attitude in the middle of Poem A, from the dark, storm language of suffering to the language of light and calmness brought by the 'Master'
- from the language of 'your worst fear' to the images of protection and unity in Poem B
- from the baby's struggle to stay awake to the predatory sleep's claiming of 'its own' in Poem C
- from the wounded soldier's exhaustion to his escape through death from the 'tremulous' world of those 'who wake' in Poem D.

Sound connections were often based on the use of extended metaphors, especially on the effects of 'shipwrecked' in Poem A and the effects of the animal metaphor in Poem C. Other useful connections were based on similar kinds of language, such as the references to water and 'waves' in poems A and B. Focusing on techniques rather than on meaning could lead to more superficial connections, such as spotting examples of alliteration or repetition. Comparing titles could be useful if the comparison was informed by close reading of the poems themselves.

Discussions of form and structure were often disappointing. Claims about the effects of rhyme and rhythm were usually asserted with very little detailed engagement with the actual words and lines. Not unusual was a comment such as the following: 'Poem A has a set rhyming structure with ten stanzas each with four lines, whereas poem B lacks structure and rhyme'. Students might like to think about the use of the word 'structure' here and to consider what is being compared. Do rhyming quatrains in themselves express any particular attitude or feelings? Only by looking closely at actual words can a poem's form's contribution to the experience of a poem be understood.

Examiners found it difficult to read a number of scripts this year. Poor handwriting was a real problem. Without doubt candidates lost marks because their answers were illegible.

A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCE

Summer 2025

UNIT 4: SHAKESPEARE

Overview of the Unit

It was once again impressive this year to note the detailed knowledge of the plays studied by candidates and the close engagement with Shakespeare's use of language, a striking feature within the responses of many candidates. As in previous years, the majority of centres had studied *King Lear* or *Hamlet*. An increasing number of centres had studied *The Tempest* or *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Comments on individual questions/sections

SECTION A

In Section A, the extract question, candidates are assessed on AO1 and AO2. Once again, the vast majority of candidates produced responses which addressed the relevant AOs, although a minority drifted to focus on contextual material (perhaps most evident in the extract question on *King Lear*), and it would be timely to remind centres that AO3 is not assessed here. This year, it was noted that an increasing number of candidates chose to write their extract response *after* the essay. Although such an approach is valid, it often led to very brief or under-developed responses, which were sometimes self-penalising. Examiners also noted once again that candidates do need to carefully read the questions as, occasionally, responses tended to be generalised discussions of the scenes presented, rather than focused analyses which engaged closely with the set tasks.

In this year's paper, nearly all extract questions, with the exception of *Antony and Cleopatra*, included a dual focus on more than one character. It was vital, therefore, that candidates engaged with the characters (and where relevant, their respective relationships) to fully engage with the tasks which had been set.

King Lear

King Lear was once again the most popular text choice this year. The extract focused on the presentation of Gloucester and Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom). Stronger responses were able to comment on the significance of the changes in status (for both Gloucester and Edgar) and many explored the importance of Gloucester's pleading to the Gods. Less successful responses included too much discussion of events prior to this point in the play, particularly the blinding of Gloucester, and this led to a lack of focus on the extract presented to them.

Antony and Cleopatra

Candidates responded effectively to the presentation of Cleopatra in this extract on the whole, although a few candidates misidentified Dolabella as Cleopatra's female servant. Successful responses here commented on Cleopatra's idolatrous view of Anton, and how this is supported by Shakespeare's use of imagery (which is almost God-like and mythological in places).

Hamlet

Most candidates engaged with the demands of the question which required exploration of the characters of both Hamlet and Horatio. Successful candidates engaged with Hamlet's closeness with Horatio and his willingness to confide in him. They also commented thoughtfully on Hamlet's growing decisiveness and his disdain for Claudius (and Gertrude), supporting such comments with detailed discussion of Shakespeare's language and use of dramatic irony.

King Henry IV Part 1

A very small number of candidates continue to study this text. Candidates engaged enthusiastically with the presentation of both Falstaff and the Prince in this extract, drawing some interesting contrasts between the Prince's demanding tone and the casualness of Falstaff's colloquial language.

The Tempest

Candidates engaged with the task which focused on the presentation of both Prospero and Alonso. Candidates explored Prospero's proclamation of his powers, and his ability to manipulate his magic. Some candidates also engaged with Alonso's grief and love for Ferdinand which is resolved as the scene concludes.

SECTION B

In Section B, candidates are presented with a choice of tasks focusing on their understanding of the play as a whole. It was pleasing to see advice in last year's report referring to avoiding the duplication or repetition of the extract question had been heeded, and, once again, candidates' detailed textual knowledge and ability to support points with a range of accurate references to the play were impressive features of many responses.

Within this section, context is heavily weighted and accounts for 30 marks. As has been noted in previous reports, candidates who score highly on AO3 are able to draw upon a range of contexts and actively aim to establish the connections between text and contexts. In the best examples, it was excellent to see an increased engagement with literary contexts, with some candidates exploring the conventions of tragedy with confidence in their discussions of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. Unfortunately, however, too many candidates continue to explore contexts in isolation. This year it was noted that many essays began with an exploration of context, bolted-on and sometimes disparate from the questions that had been set for candidates. In a few cases, contexts had been overlooked completely with only very brief or limited references to the Elizabethan or Jacobean era, which had not been rooted or anchored within discussions of the chosen play.

In relation to AO5, most candidates engaged with the critical views presented within each of the questions. It was pleasing to see a continued upturn in candidates making effective use of stage and film adaptations of the plays to enrich their textual discussion. Many candidates this year, however, seemed to conflate the term 'critical readings' with often irrelevant or under-developed references to contexts and, sometimes, such discussion was in isolation from the texts themselves. Integrating both AO3 and AO5 within the analysis of the texts and in light of the question is crucial in the organisation of essays in this section of the examination.

As has been mentioned previously, some candidates produced particularly extensive and overly long essays which tended to stray from the required foci of the questions. Although candidates initially seemed to engage with the themes and tasks set, such lengthy responses became more generalised as they continued. The most successful responses this year clearly highlighted the significant importance of planning and organising essays to address all relevant assessment objectives.

King Lear

Question 6 and Question 7 both proved popular choices with candidates. Candidates used the critical interpretation of *King Lear* as a play ‘not without hope’ to anchor some focused responses which often explored Lear’s tragic downfall and the fragmented relationship with his daughters. The ‘suffering’ cited within the question led to many candidates exploring the scenes involving the blinding of Gloucester and the disowning of Cordelia. In relation to Question 7, candidates explored the view of King Lear as a play which presents a ‘world where truth has little value’ and the task invited some insightful discussion of Lear’s descent into madness, and the dutiful service offered to the protagonist by both Kent and Cordelia. Many candidates also included some astute discussion of the role of the Fool (and the dynamic with Lear) in their response to this assignment. In response to both questions, fruitful contextual material included exploration in relation to the ideas of kingship and the dynamics between parents and children. It was once again pleasing to note an ever-increasing number of candidates making productive use of staged productions of the play to inform AO5, and this supported some insightful explorations of the text.

Antony and Cleopatra

Question 9 proved the most popular question for candidates, with many producing insightful responses to the view that ‘love and politics do not mix well’. They included some detailed explorations of the relationship between the titular lovers and the conflicts between Egypt and Rome explored within the play. Question 8 invited candidates to explore how Antony is ‘conquered not by Caesar but his own failings’. Many used this interpretation to support their arguments and contrasting the Antony presented prior to, and after losing the battle.

Hamlet

Question 10 was the most popular question in response to *Hamlet*, with many candidates offering detailed responses on the concept of ‘death as a central and unifying theme’ in the play. Such responses explored the significance of the theme within the conventions of the revenge tragedy, often exploring the influence of the Ghost and Hamlet’s preoccupation with death (and revenge within the play). This included some illuminating contextual discussion of contemporary ideas about the supernatural and the afterlife. Question 11 produced some insightful responses on the view of Hamlet’s main problem of being ‘too caught up in the past’, with many candidates focusing on Hamlet’s grief over his father’s death and his preoccupation with his mother’s remarriage in their essays. Candidates were also able to draw upon the consequences of his struggle to avenge in Hamlet’s inability to move ‘forwards’. Once again, it was pleasing to see candidates engage with ideas about the dramatic significance and stagecraft when analysing Shakespeare’s choices of language and imagery within their responses. It was also encouraging to notice an upturn in candidates engaging with literary context for AO3, with many candidates exploring conventions of revenge tragedy and the influence of contemporary drama within Shakespeare’s play.

King Henry IV Part 1

Of the few candidates who chose this text, it was pleasing to note engagement with both of the questions on offer. Candidates explored the conflict presented in the ‘rivalry between the Prince and Hotspur’ (Question 12) and the subsequent consequences of this struggle for power. Meanwhile, there were interesting essays constructed on the ‘struggle for political control’ within the play (Question 13) and the integration of contextual material was a strength in many responses here, with candidates exploring ideas of kingship and attitudes towards political leaders in their essays.

The Tempest

Question 14 proved the most popular question choice in relation to *The Tempest* with candidates exploring the view of Prospero as a 'master puppeteer'. Candidates engaged effectively with this concept, though it was pleasing to see views put forward as to the significance of other characters, most notably Caliban and Ariel, as being influential within the play. Question 15 focused on the 'sense of harmony' achieved by the play's conclusion, with many responses focusing on Prospero's influence and power in achieving this outcome.

Summary of Key Points

- In Section A, the Shakespeare extract, it is vital that candidates analyse the effect (and where appropriate, the dramatic impact) of language, rather than paraphrasing the meaning of quotations.
- Candidates need to read the demands of extract questions carefully, and if addressing more than one character, this needs to be reflected within their response.
- It is vital that candidates are able to move beyond a feature-spotting approach when addressing AO1 and AO2. This was particularly evident in extract questions this year where candidates (sometimes incorrectly) identified a feature with a term without analysing its meaning or effect in their response.
- In Section B, successful candidates were able to balance the demands of all of the relevant assessment objectives, and maintained a close focus on the questions posed, demonstrating a secure grasp of relevant concepts.
- Context is heavily weighted in Section B, but it is vital that candidates are reminded that context must always relate to, or be rooted within, their discussion of the task and text. Occasionally, some candidates relied upon a contextually driven approach, or explored context in isolation, often seen in the introductions to essays. If context is not clearly linked to the text, there is a limit to which band can be awarded for AO3.
- The most successful candidates engage fully with a range of critical interpretations and integrate such discussion in light of the questions set. Candidates should avoid using phrases such as 'critical readings' too loosely as was evident in some responses this year.
- As mentioned previously, overly long essays tended to deteriorate, in terms of quality of expression and analysis, as they progress. It would be useful to encourage candidates to recognise planning and organisation of ideas as a valuable part of the writing process.
- Managing timing is important in supporting candidates to meet the demands of each section. This year, some overly long essays sometimes led to very brief extracts, and occasionally vice versa, with extracts occasionally being longer than essay responses. Recommendations for how to manage these timings are on the front of the examination paper and can be a useful reminder for candidates on how to organise their time.
- As has been noted in previous reports, handwriting that is difficult to read can make the awarding of marks difficult and remains a significant issue for examiners. It is once again a useful reminder for centres to consider whether some candidates might fare better if they use a word processor.

A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE

GCE

Summer 2025

UNIT 5 (NEA): PROSE STUDY

Overview of the Unit

As the only NEA element of this specification, the Unit 5 Prose Study is a valuable opportunity for candidates to select texts and tasks of interest to them and to be allowed some autonomy over their studies. All five of the GCE AOs are assessed here, providing candidates with the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of all the skills developed through the study of English Literature at GCE level. Although expert guidance from their teachers is essential for candidates to succeed in this unit, preparing for the Prose Study should also allow candidates the freedom to read widely, to consider a range of ideas and viewpoints, and to formulate their own ideas about the texts. It allows them to spend more time crafting their argument than would be the case in an exam situation, and to refine their response with a range of textual, critical and contextual detail. The most successful centres are those able to balance the thorough reinforcement of the skills necessary to analyse prose texts with an encouragement towards independent study.

Moderators' experiences this year were largely similar to those in 2024, and much of the advice that follows should be familiar, but this makes it all the more important that centres take these points on board in order to secure the best outcomes for their candidates. Moderators still see far too many centres repeating approaches that have been advised against in previous centre reports, and this can lead to disappointment for candidates. With AI increasingly evident in candidates' responses this year, centres and moderators had to exercise more vigilance with regard to inauthentic work. Centres are advised, insofar as is practical, to discuss candidates' work with them in detail during the process in order to ensure its integrity.

As has been the case in previous years, the following areas are crucial in ensuring the most successful results for candidates:

- Thoughtful selection of texts and tasks.
- An emphasis on analysis of prose techniques as the driving force of the response.
- Careful use of online study resources and research tools.
- Secure and well-informed assessment.

This report will contain reference to examples of best practice and problem areas from this year's submissions, but centres are strongly advised also to consult the Principal Moderator's Reports from 2023 and 2024 for a comprehensive review of this unit.

Tasks

Comments on tasks/questions relating to candidate performance/meeting assessment criteria

TEXT SELECTION AND TEXT COMBINATION

While texts such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Atonement*, *Never Let Me Go* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* continued to be popular choices, it was pleasing to see other original, ambitious choices from some candidates, particularly in the selection of post-2000 texts. It was clear in some centres that candidates had been given plenty of ideas and encouragement, resulting in some enthusiastic responses. Moderators noted again that candidates writing about more recently published or less frequently studied texts generally had fewer online study resources at their disposal; this was often beneficial as it led to closer textual study and more originality in their approaches.

How texts are combined is also important to success, however, and some pairings continue to be very popular despite their pitfalls having been highlighted in previous reports. *The Great Gatsby* with *Atonement*, *The Handmaid's Tale* with *A Thousand Splendid Suns* or *The Power*, and *The Color Purple* with *The Help* all continue to be hugely popular combinations. While all these novels have been approved by WJEC for A-level study, in combination they can encourage a reductive approach, with a focus on contextual detail over literary analysis. Given some of the thematic similarities between the texts in these pairings, candidates can be led to view the texts solely through the lens of the pursuit of wealth, female oppression or racial inequality. Strongly defined genres can also be problematic when paired with other texts of the same genre, such as combining *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with *The Road*. There is no doubt that these challenging texts provide plenty of opportunity for close literary study, however in combination candidates can find it difficult to look beyond the features of the dystopian genre and tend to describe the novels' worlds without analysing the writers' choices. Similar problems arose this year when candidates combined texts using features of the gothic, producing checklists of gothic tropes and again losing sight of the writers' methods. Candidates writing about texts from different genres or with clear contrasts often fared better in exploring writers' contrasting choices.

There were numerous examples this year of candidates using texts which are not suitable for study at this level, including those that appear on the GCSE specification, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Centres should ensure that they submit their texts for approval before the end of November on the [Portal](#).

As outlined in previous years, when delivering the teaching of the unit, centres took a range of approaches, with more than one route to success. Very few candidates will be successful when left entirely to their own devices in terms of study; candidates at this age are unlikely to have enough experience of studying prose texts to be able to do so entirely without any intervention. The following approaches all worked well, however, and centres should be able to adapt to what best suits their candidates:

- Teaching both texts but providing a range of tasks to ensure originality and independence in candidates' responses.
- Teaching one text and allowing candidates to study the other text independently. In this case, the most successful centres had clearly monitored their candidates' independent study and had provided plenty of guidance in terms of how to go about this task and how to identify useful critical and contextual material.
- Providing a free choice of both texts, but within a carefully planned and supportive framework. Where centres had taken this approach, the most successful had clearly delivered a structured programme of study around the analysis of prose techniques and successful ways of addressing the five Assessment Objectives.

In centres where text combinations or task wordings varied across the sample, candidates were encouraged to recognise the multiple possible interpretations of the texts and this gave them the best opportunities to produce thoughtful, independent responses.

TASK-SETTING

Much advice has been provided over the years regarding successful task-setting, but this continues to be a challenge for many centres. Carefully crafted tasks provide a strong starting point for candidates and steer them in the direction of a literary argument. It is vital that candidates have the opportunity to pursue their own interests in this unit, but they will need assistance to produce appropriately worded tasks that will enable them to achieve their potential. Detailed guidance, in the form of Principal Moderator's reports and CPD materials, remains available on the [AS/A level English Literature website](#) and on the [Portal](#) to assist centres with this work.

Although setting tasks early in the process can be a time-consuming activity, it is an essential one for centres seeking the best outcomes for their candidates. Consider the following examples of tasks taken from this series:

Example 1

“Both novels depict worlds where women always suffer in love.” With this view in mind, compare and contrast the ways in which the writers present the power politics of love in *Emma* and *Normal People*.

Example 2

‘Power is neither good nor evil. It just is.’

With this statement in mind, compare and contrast the ways in which both authors present how the perception of gender and innocence has influence over both narratives, as well as the reader's perspective. In the course of your writing, make clear how your interpretation of the texts has been influenced by other readers' views, as well as the consideration of relevant contextual factors.

Example 1 makes use of the term ‘depict’ to remind candidates that it is the writers who create these characters and situations. While Example 2 uses ‘present’, which is also a helpful steer towards the writers' craft, the phrasing ‘how the perception of gender and innocence has influence over both narratives’ confuses the issue and implies that context is driving the narrative, rather than the authors' decisions. The use of ‘worlds’ to describe the settings of the novels in Example 1 further emphasises that real-life societies and those of the novels are not one and the same. Context is therefore kept in its place as an aspect that can shed light on the texts, rather than being the focus of the response. In Example 1, the candidate is given a clear focus – the ‘power politics of love’ – which will help to produce a tightly-structured argument. The critical statement used here, while by no means an essential component of a successful task, provides a springboard for argument; it is specifically focused on the texts and allows for the possibility of disagreement. In Example 2, where the candidate was writing about Nabokov's *Lolita* and Alyssa Nutting's *Tampa*, a generic philosophical statement was used, not concerned directly with the texts nor with literature in general, and it is not clearly linked to the task focus of ‘gender and innocence’. This lack of clarity could mean that the candidate will be drawn in different directions and will not produce a tightly argued response. The lack of literary focus also encourages the candidate to use the novels as evidence for societal truths, rather than focusing on the craft of the writers.

Without repeating what has been explored in considerable detail in previous Principal Moderator's reports, the following points are vital in ensuring a successful task-setting process. Centres should:

- avoid imposing a topic on the whole class and teaching the texts on the basis of one idea. Instead, teaching should allow for the interpretation of a range of different ideas in the texts. In a number of centres, although the tasks were worded differently all candidates were essentially writing about the same issue, for example the subjugation of women or the constraints of social class
- work with candidates to craft the task in a way that ensures a specifically literary focus; as noted in the 'Text selection and combination' section above, centres should avoid directing candidates towards an issue-based approach with tasks on racial prejudice, class barriers, female repression and identity. Although references to these issues may well form part of candidates' contextual understanding, to use them as the task focus encourages candidates to write solely about the issues, often treating the characters as though they were real people, and to lose sight of the writers' craft in presenting a range of nuanced ideas
- take great care with ideas that are difficult to tackle in relation to works of fiction. The concept of 'identity' has become increasingly popular in recent years but is very challenging to define when writing about constructs. Most candidates addressing such tasks treat the characters as though real and often begin to psychoanalyse them. As well as 'identity', tasks focusing on 'agency', 'personal growth' or 'the shaping of individual destiny' were increasingly popular. AI tools will often steer candidates towards such phrases and this is another example of how they can be less than helpful when approaching literary study.

It is important to note that there is no prescribed way to word a task for this unit and a number of different approaches can be equally successful within one centre. In the past, WJEC has suggested that one way of setting up an argument for candidates is to use a contentious statement as part of the task. As in Example 1, above, this can be an effective approach and it has been pleasing again this year to see this method used well. To be useful to candidates, this statement must provide a view of the texts, rather than being a generalised philosophical or sociological statement not specifically about literature, such as that employed in Example 2. Such statements can lead candidates away from productive AO2 analysis. Statements allowing little opportunity for disagreement, such as "*Birdsong* and *Atonement* both successfully show a variety of human suffering" are also unhelpful.

CAREFUL USE OF ONLINE RESOURCES

Previous reports have highlighted the potential pitfalls for candidates in over-reliance on online material, in particular from study guides. For some, these can become a replacement for close reading of the texts and their commentary style can lead candidates into thinking that this is what constitutes close literary analysis. The use of AI tools such as ChatGPT was increasingly evident in this series. It can have its uses in assisting candidates' research, but centres are advised to emphasise to their candidates the dangers of over-reliance on AI. Moderators found a number of cases of candidates relying heavily on AI to support their writing in a way that was not helpful to them. This often resulted in repetitive writing, a lack of textual support and the prevalence of certain words and expressions across responses from different centres. Good practice was seen where teachers had identified this and had asked their candidates to acknowledge the use of ChatGPT, for example, within their work, but centres will need to be increasingly alert to their candidates' use of AI if we are to maintain the benefits of this rigorous unit for candidates.

ADDRESSING THE AOS WITHIN THE RESPONSE

AO1

The most successful centres and candidates understand that this unit begins with thorough knowledge and understanding of the texts as a result of close reading. Most centres will be teaching a range of candidates of different abilities, with some being more enthusiastic readers than others. However, as was the case last year, moderators expressed concern at the number of candidates who appeared not to have read their texts or who were not sufficiently familiar with them to be able to tackle their tasks with confidence. It must be emphasised again that those who have read a range of literary fiction, in addition to their chosen texts, will have acquired an understanding of prose conventions that will help when studying their chosen texts. A successful response to AO1 begins with detailed planning of the candidate's argument, and moderators noted that the most effective responses showed an ability to focus closely on the task throughout and to present a fully developed argument. Candidates must remember that the recommended word count is 2,500-3,500 words; in previous years many candidates have far exceeded the recommended limit and to produce a tightly argued response they must be able to let go of what is not relevant to their task. A new problem this year, however, was candidates writing relatively brief responses of under 2,500 words. This may be due to a reliance on AI, and candidates should be reminded to try to use the allowed word count to develop their argument in sufficient depth. Several moderators noted issues with the quality of candidates' introductions and conclusions this year. There was a marked tendency to treat the two texts as though they were the same, with introductions and conclusions focusing on the word 'both', and with little sense of the contrasts between the two. This also affected the quality of candidates' AO4 as many were seeking only to find what was similar in the texts. Many candidates also used their introductions to expand rather than to clarify their arguments. Often, moderators saw candidates piling up concepts; for example, one candidate introduced a task on estrangement with 'estrangement is explored through themes of alienation, miscommunication, social class, and identity'. Such an approach will, of course, lead to the candidate ranging across a number of themes and producing an unfocused, surface-level response. The PL materials available through the [Portal](#) provide some useful activities on writing effective introductions, which can be used to help candidates.

AO2

As in previous years, AO2 was the least secure element in many candidates' responses. Many more candidates now resort to a commentary style, with embedded quotation but without analysis, or to the assertion of ideas with little or no textual support. As was the case in 2024, candidates tended towards certainty and a desire to fix meaning on to the texts, with increasing use made of verbs such as 'show', 'display', 'represent' or 'showcase' rather than the more literary and tentative 'suggest', 'imply', 'portray' or 'present'. Although there were many pleasing examples of candidates exploring wider prose techniques, these are becoming harder to find and 'microanalysis' of individual words and phrases continued to be an issue this year. It is important that candidates are able to consider effects and ideas across the whole of these substantial texts, rather than seeking to pin large amounts of meaning on to isolated words and phrases. Some candidates continued to make large claims for aspects of grammar, such as the use of pronouns, or for the impact of effects more relevant to poetry, such as alliteration or plosive sounds. Even though candidates have studied a novel at AS level, the most successful centres recognise that they will still need considerable reinforcement of their understanding of the novel form and its conventions.

Encouraging candidates to make detailed notes, to plot character arc and to identify patterns in language, imagery and structure can all help to consolidate their understanding of the texts as carefully crafted works of art.

AO3

WJEC has often advised centres to keep context in its place with the mantra 'Task-Text-Context'. This is an effective way of remembering that, despite being weighted equally with AO1 and AO2, AO3 needs to be secondary to close analysis of the literary features of the texts. As outlined above, however, the nature of some candidates' tasks meant that this was often the element approached with most enthusiasm. Candidates had generally researched AO3 in detail and most managed to include context relevant to their texts, while the most successful candidates were able to explore a range of contexts and were able to use these to develop their arguments regarding the texts as works of literature. The strongest candidates were also able to make effective use of literary context, such as references to writers' other works or to literary movements, rather than the often more sweeping comments on social or biographical context. Responses were most successful when candidates refrained from bringing in contextual detail until they had established a firmly literary focus to their argument.

AO4

Many candidates showed good understanding of the requirements of AO4 and had gained much from the comparison of two challenging texts. As noted above, however, a significant number seemed to interpret the study of two texts as a requirement to find similarities alone and almost conflated the texts as though one and the same. This was particularly noticeable when candidates had context-driven or issue-based tasks. The most successful approaches were those where candidates had gone beyond the simple 'similarly' or 'in contrast' and had shown a real ability to evaluate the effects of the writers' different choices, particularly when candidates focused on writers' use of prose techniques, rather than comparing characters' experiences as though they were real people.

AO5

Where candidates performed best in AO5, centres had guided them in identifying relevant critical material, rather than leaving candidates to their own devices. When the latter was the case, candidates often resorted to reader reviews or examples of 'critics' commenting on characters' behaviour or describing events in the texts, rather than those commenting on writers' methods. These proved to be less helpful for candidates when seeking to engage productively with other views and to use them to develop their arguments. As was the case last year, confusion had arisen at some centres regarding AO3 and AO5, with contextual detail often being rewarded in assessment as AO5, simply because it was a quotation from a secondary source. Centres should note that the wording of the AO5 criteria in the assessment grid refers to 'other relevant interpretations of texts'.

While many of the same problems with centres' approaches arose this year as last, it should be noted that there are very many centres providing excellent guidance and encouragement to their candidates. All moderators noted the pleasure that was to be had in reading carefully structured responses that impressed with the maturity of their arguments.

Task marking

Comments on approaches to internal marking

With samples of work being uploaded for the first time this year, rather than being sent through the post, some teething problems were inevitable. Some common issues highlighted by moderators included: incomplete submissions, where pages were missing or scans were not legible; unclear labelling of candidates' work; and cumbersome documentation, where centres submitted different parts of candidates' work as separate documents, sometimes within zipped folders. There is no need to submit the coversheets and responses separately, as it is clearer and more efficient for the moderator to see the assessment with the response, as one document. A copy of the NEA checklist should be uploaded separately, although it is recognised that some of the points on the checklist no longer apply to online submissions. Most moderation samples were submitted on time, however, and were efficiently prepared, which made the task of moderation far more straightforward.

In a small number of cases, incorrect marks had been submitted on IAMIS. These were usually as a result of an addition error or lack of clarity over final marks following internal moderation.

Where centres are part of consortia, centres should contact the Subject Officer to clarify consortium arrangements early in the process. There were some examples this year of centres working as unofficial consortia and this led to confusion when reporting back on moderation.

Accurate assessment meant that centres were taking a realistic approach to their candidates' achievement, balancing strengths and shortcomings in their annotation. Detailed annotation, with use of AO markers accompanied by language from the band descriptors, helped centres to reach more accurate decisions. Centres, however, must be familiar with the standards as exemplified through the benchmark responses available on the [WJEC Portal](#). Where problems were found with a centre's assessment, often the qualifying terms from the assessment grid had been used where understanding of the standards was not secure and the work did not support this judgement. At times, the terms used in annotation on the response did not fit the mark given on the coversheet. Where possible, dual marking and/or internal moderation was helpful in ensuring secure assessment of candidates' work; when moderation has been undertaken in a centre, it is helpful to provide some annotation to convey how this has influenced the final decisions made and to ensure that final marks are clear. Ideally, any changes should be made on the response and before the final marks have been added to the coversheet. Moderators understand that dual marking is not always possible, especially for small centres. Making reference to the WJEC standardising materials mentioned above in centres' annotation can be helpful to justify assessment and to indicate understanding of the required standards. There were a few examples of centres providing very little or no annotation on candidates' responses and in most of these cases problems were found with the accuracy of the assessment.

As noted above, problems with the assessment of AO5 persisted this year, with a number of centres continuing to award AO5 marks for contextual citations. This resulted in inaccurate allocation of marks in these cases. Centres should make close reference to the benchmark folders on the WJEC website to assist in recognising the differences between AO3 and AO5. CPD materials also contain useful tasks that can be used with candidates to demonstrate how to use contextual and critical material productively.

Moderators were impressed by the many examples of good practice seen in the assessment of candidates' work, however, and thanks are due to those centres that produced carefully taught and assessed work, sometimes despite challenging circumstances. There were some excellent examples of meticulous assessment that balanced candidates' strengths and areas for development, as well as of rigorous internal moderation processes. It was good to see improvements too in centres that had responded positively to recommendations in the previous year's report. A number of centres, however, continue to have their marks adjusted and should review their assessment procedures as a matter of urgency to avoid further disappointment for their candidates. Centres are again encouraged to consult previous Principal Moderator reports, as well as CPD materials available through the WJEC [Portal](#), which contain a wealth of examples and detailed guidance for successful delivery of this unit.

Supporting you

Useful contacts and links

Our friendly subject team is on hand to support you between 8.30am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

Tel: 029 2240 4292

Email: gceenglish@wjec.co.uk

Qualification webpage: [English Literature AS/A Level](#)

See other useful contacts here: [Useful Contacts | WJEC](#)

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Access our popular, free online CPD/PL courses to receive exam feedback and put questions to our subject team, and attend one of our face-to-face events, focused on enhancing teaching and learning, providing practical classroom ideas and developing understanding of marking and assessment.

Please find details for all our courses here: <https://www.wjec.co.uk/home/professional-learning/>

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