Longman Exam Guides

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Martin Stephen

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Editors' Preface

Much has been said in recent years about declining standards and disappointing examination results. While this may be somewhat exaggerated, examiners are well aware that the performance of many candidates falls well short of their potential. Longman Exam Guides are written by experienced examiners and teachers, and aim to give you the best possible foundation for examination success. There is no attempt to cut corners. The books encourage thorough study and a full understanding of the concepts involved and should be seen as course companions and study guides to be used throughout the year. Examiners are in no doubt that a structured approach in preparing for and taking examinations can, together with hard work and diligent application, substantially improve performance.

The largely self-contained nature of each chapter gives the book a useful degree of flexibility. After starting with Chapters 1 and 2, all other chapters can be read selectively, in any order appropriate to the stage you have reached in your course. We believe that this book, and the series as a whole, will help you establish a solid platform of basic knowledge and examination technique on which to build.

Stuart Wall and David Weigall

Acknowledgements

The examination questions provided in this book are representative compilations rather than actual questions taken from specific boards. The author accepts sole responsibility for the sample answers.

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Contents

Chapter 1

Examination requirements

Almost the first step to be taken by any Advanced level candidate in English Literature is to look at or buy a copy of the syllabus relevant to the examination you will be sitting. If one is not available in your college or school, write to the relevant Board (the addresses are given below) and purchase one. You need to know beyond any shadow of doubt how many separate examinations you will be sitting, how long each one lasts, which books you will be required to write answers on, and what form of question will be set. Your lecturer or teacher should make this clear; if not, act on your own initiative.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 give in tabular form some details of the main 'A' levels on offer in the United Kingdom. It is not possible to give lists of actual set texts, as these change from year to year and should be checked in the relevant syllabus. It is usually the school or college that decides which Examination Board the student will use. Stories abound about one Board being 'harder' than another, but these are largely untrue. Questions may differ slightly, as may the approach of a Board, but the standard to which papers are marked is remarkably uniform. Remember some papers are optional, and this needs to be checked in the relevant syllabus.

Table 1. Requirements and formats for English Advanced Level Examinations

Abbreviation	Board and address	Papers	Length	Number of questions	Marks	Description of paper and questions
AEB	Associated Examining Board, Wellington House, Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 1BQ	*SYLLABUS 1 (623)*				
		Paper 1	2½ hours	2	100	Language work: general and current affairs essays, summary, note taking.
		Paper 2	3 hours	3	100	Comprehension and essays on three modern authors.
AEB	As above	*SYLLABUS 2 (652)*				
		Paper 1	3 hours	4	100	Shakespeare and Chaucer: textual questions, essays, and paraphrase.
		Paper 2	3 hours	4	100	Essays on four set authors.
		Paper 3	2½ hours	2	100	Practical criticism, one single passage, one comparative.
Cambridge	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, Syndicate Buildings, 17 Harvey Road, Cambridge CB1 2EU	Paper 1	3 hours	4	100	Shakespeare: minimum of two plays, textual question and essay on each.
		Paper 2	3 hours	3		Plain Texts: essay questions on various texts.
		Paper 3	3 hours	4	100	*Chaucer and Other Major Authors*: Chaucer and two other texts; textual and essay questions.
		Paper 4	3 hours	4		Literature 1760–1832: four texts, four essays.
		Paper 5	3 hours	4		Literature of the Victorian Age: four texts, four essays.
		Paper 6	3 hours	4		English literature since 1900: four texts, four essays.
		Paper 7	2½ hours	3		Comment and Appreciation. (Unseen)
		Paper 8	2½ hours	3		Comment and Appreciation. (Unseen and set texts, Home Centres only.)
	Candidates must offer Paper 1 and any two others; certain papers cannot be taken together. Basic requirement is for six texts, including one by Shakespeare, some poetry and at least one non-poetic text.	Paper 9	3 hours	4		The Renaissance Period: four texts, four essays.
		Paper 10				School Assessment (UK only)
		Paper 0	3 hours	3		Special Paper (optional). Practical criticism and general literary topics.
JMB	Joint Matriculation Board, Manchester M15 6EU	Paper 1	3 hours	4	40%	Context question and two essays on Shakespeare (two plays); essay on one set poet.
		Paper 2	3 hours	4	40%	*Alternative A* is essays on a range of authors from Chaucer to the present day. *Alternative B* is essays on either one topic/theme or one period, with a range of authors. Opportunity also to answer a general question.
		Paper 3	2 hours	2	20%	Practical criticism on poetry and prose.
London	University Entrance and School Examinations Council, University of London, 66–72 Gower Street, London WC1E 6EE.	Paper 1	3 hours	2	33⅓%	Two practical criticism questions.
		Paper 2	3 hours	4	33⅓%	Shakespeare, Chaucer, and other texts. One Shakespeare and one poetry question are compulsory. Context questions and essays, based on detailed knowledge of individual texts.
		Paper 3	3 hours	4	33⅓%	Questions on a wide range of individual texts, but this paper more general than Paper 2, with essays on several texts together.
It is possible to replace Paper 3 by a Mode 3 paper (extended essay or course work).						

Oxford	Oxford Local Examinations, Ewart Place, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7BX	Paper 1	3 hours	5	100	Shakespeare and set authors. One context question and one essay on a Shakespeare: one context and two essays on other set texts.
		Paper 2 – 6	3 hours	4	100	1550–1680. Papers 2–6 all have the same format: one comment and appreciation question and three essays on a range of set texts from within the specified period. Paper 3 1660–1790; Paper 4 1790–1832; Paper 5 1832–96; Paper 6 1896 to present day, all with same format as for Paper 2.
		Paper 7	3 hours	4	100	Practical criticism on poetry, prose, and drama.
O & C	Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, 10 Trumpington Street, Cambridge	Paper 1	3 hours	4		Shakespeare. Two set plays to be answered on, context and an essay question on each.
		Paper 2	3 hours	4		Chaucer, and Milton or one other author: same format as for Paper 1, with a context question and an essay on each author.
		Paper 3	2½ hours	3		English Literature from early times to the present day. Four books to be studied, but usually only three essays required.
		Paper 4	3 hours	3		Comment and Appreciation/Practical criticism. Optional paper.
NIESC	Northern Ireland Schools GCE Examination Council, Beech Hill House, 42 Beech Hill Road, Belfast BT8 4RS	Paper 1	3 hours	2		One context question and one essay on two Shakespeare plays: context must be on a different play to that chosen for the essay answer.
		Paper 2	3 hours	4		General set texts, essays only.
		Paper 3	3 hours	?		Practical criticism; poetry, drama, prose.
SEB	Scottish Examination Board Ironmills Road, Dalkeith, Midlothian EH22 G3	Paper 1	100 mins	2	50	Language paper, based on composition, essays and reports.
		Paper 2	90 mins	2	50	Comprehension and language work.
		Paper 3	110 mins	4	60	One Practical criticism question and three essays, on general set texts.
SUJB	Southern Universities Joint Board for School Examinations Cotham Road, Bristol BS6 6DD	Paper 1	3 hours	4		Set texts, poetry, drama, and prose. Option to answer on 'related' reading.
		Paper 2	3 hours	4		Special authors, requiring detailed knowledge.
		Paper 3	2 hours	2		Comment and Appreciation/Practical criticism on a passage of verse and a passage of prose.
This Board stresses particularly the importance of background reading.						
WJEC	Welsh Joint Education Committee, 245 Western Avenue, Cardiff CF5 2YX	Paper 1	3 hours	4	100	Compulsory question on passage from Shakespeare, and either Chaucer or Milton. Essays on Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton.
		Paper 2	3 hours	4	100	General set texts, essay questions.
		Paper 3	2½ hours	2	50	Practical criticism of poetry and prose.

Table 2. Types of question set at Advanced Level

Examination board	AEB 1 623/1	AEB 2 652/1	Cambridge	JMB	London	Oxford	O & C	NIEC	SEB	SUJB	WJEC
Context questions											
Shakespeare		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Chaucer		●	●			●	●				●
Milton			●			●	●				●
Other Authors			●			●					●
Essay questions											
Shakespeare		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Chaucer		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Milton		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Other Authors	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
General Authors			●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●
Historical/Literary Background			●		●	●		●	●	●	●
Practical criticism											
Poetry		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Prose		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Drama			●	●	●	●	●	●	●		
Language work	●								●		

The above notations do not imply that a question of the designated type *must* be answered by a candidate, but rather that questions of the given type are usually available on the paper. Again, always check with the actual syllabus.

Chapter 2

Examination techniques in English Literature

A NOTE FOR THE MATURE STUDENT

A large number of people who sit 'A' level examinations are 'mature students', or students who are older than the average for a sixth-former at school. This work is designed for *all* candidates taking an Advanced level course in English Literature. It would be grossly insulting to generalise too widely about either mature students or sixth formers; everyone is individual, and the great joy of English Literature is that it recognises and allows for this whilst still placing upon the student rigorous academic demands. However, by definition someone who has already left school and then returns to academic study will find him or herself in a different situation to that faced by the candidate still at school. The chapters which follow start with the absolute basic essentials necessary for an understanding of the subject, and then move on to progressively more advanced matter. This has not been done to patronise any student at any level, from a first-year sixth-former to someone taking an Open University degree in retirement. It has been done first, because it is the only safe and sensible way to proceed with a subject that is enormously popular with a vast mix of candidates, and second, because far too many books on the market assume a level of knowledge in the Advanced level candidate that the candidate simply has not had the chance to acquire. For the candidate with a mature and intimate knowledge of the subject, the more basic details can act as a check list; for the candidate who is starting from scratch, the details are as essential as anything else he or she will learn.

TYPES OF EXAMINATION QUESTION

The major method by which literature candidates are examined is the essay, with variations that are discussed below. Before discussing the various types of essay question it is essential to grasp the basic principles and conventions that govern almost all essay writing.

WHAT IS THE EXAMINER LOOKING FOR?

'It's so *vague*!' is the most common complaint from students facing up to writing a literature essay, the alleged vagueness being in what the question is actually demanding from the candidate. There will always be a degree of vagueness in the questions set on a subject such as English Literature, which requires a significant element of personal response from a student. This is compounded by the fact that the rules and regulations of *essay writing* itself will always be a little vaguer than for a number of other forms of written examination. Nevertheless, the degree of uncertainty that you face in interpreting and answering questions can be significantly reduced.

Firstly, distinguish between what happens when you read a book for personal pleasure, and what happens when you read it for an examination. In the first case you can think what you like about the book, and will probably first of all decide whether or not you enjoy it. Words such as 'boring' or 'interesting' are the first ones that are likely to spring to mind. When you read a book for an *examination* these are the *last* things you should think of. It is a bonus if you enjoy a book, but what the examiner wants to know is if you have *understood* it; a very different thing. When you read a book that you will be examined on you are reading it to judge or find out what the author wanted to say or achieve in that book (the content), and to expose the techniques or methods by which he went about that aim (the form). Again, you can think what you like about a book when you read it as part of an examination course; the difference from personal reading is that in literary criticism *you have to be able to justify or prove everything you think by reference to the text.* You will be reading the work of creative or imaginative writers, but your essay will need a style more akin to that of a lawyer, presenting a viewpoint and then establishing it through firm evidence, than to that of an author. It follows that with any essay there are certain basic do's and don'ts.

Style

Write *on* an author, not *like* him! Flowery language, magnificent similes and metaphors, long words, and intricate sentence structure often interfere with an examination candidate's aims more than they help. Simplicity, clarity, and economy are the most valuable stylistic features in any literary essay. One of the most common mistakes is to use a flowery or ornate style, and to go for the sound of an essay over its content. One example is,

> This question is one of the most difficult of all to answer, and I propose to look at both sides of the case before proceeding to my conclusion. What are we to think of this issue? The multi-layered phenomenon of a great tragedy with its eponymous hero and final catharsis presents such a magnitude of experience that only excessive insight can provoke a final and complete understanding . . .

The problem with this is that *it does not say anything.* You might usefully note a number of other points on style:

1. Never say how difficult the question is, or that you cannot make up your mind on it; you are only stating the obvious or displaying to the examiner the fact that you are inadequate.
2. Never ask questions in an essay; your task is to answer them.
3. Never write gobbledygook, or language so puffed-up as to be incomprehensible.
4. Never use words because they 'sound good'; it is what they mean that matters.
5. Never use a word unless you are absolutely sure of what it means. Certain words and phrases should be avoided at all costs, such as 'brilliant', 'terrific', 'nice', 'nasty', 'naughty', 'boring', and 'super'. Try to use 'however' as little as possible, and never as a conjunction.

- Never try to ram your argument down an examiner's throat. Saying something many times over is not the same as proving it, so writing 'No one could deny that . . .' or 'It is absolutely obvious that . . .' achieves nothing. In practice most students only say things like this when they are actually quite unsure of what they should think.
- Never patronise or condescend to the reader, or try to show off your knowledge, as in 'When one has studied the book in great depth, and thought long and hard over it . . .'; the examiner expects you to have done all that, and does not need telling. It is the weight of your arguments that wins marks, not the loudness of your voice.

Answering the question

The single most common cause of failure to write an effective answer is failure to answer the question. This usually takes two forms. The first is where the student writes an answer to the question he *wants* to be asked, instead of writing an answer to the question he *has* been asked. The second is where the student gives a plot summary, or piles up details of the story, instead of answering the specific question as set. A long, rambling account of the plot gets you nowhere; the examiner can find the plot when he reads the book, and does not need you to tell it to him. It is what you make of the plot that matters, not your knowledge of it. Your essay should contain quotations from the text and references to incidents in it, but only as back-up or evidence for a point you are making.

Ask yourself at all times if what you are writing down is wholly and totally relevant to the question you have been set. If the examiner ever has cause to want to write down 'So what?' in the margin of your answer, you will almost certainly lose marks. The examiner wants to see that you can *choose* the few relevant facts from a mass of information, and then apply them to a specific area of the text and its content. Nor is it enough merely to provide relevant information: you have to show the examiner *why* it is relevant. Very often candidates

will put down a quotation and just leave it, wrongly assuming that it is obvious why it is there in the essay. It never is obvious: you should always explain why you have chosen to include a quotation, or a reference to an incident or character.

A major help in making sure that you are answering the question is the use of the *topic* or *theme* sentence. This is always the first sentence in any paragraph, and in it you make sure that you have summed up exactly and precisely what that paragraph is going to be about. Thus each paragraph falls into three sections:

1. The topic sentence which sums up the statement made in that paragraph;
2. Some more lines to elaborate on that topic or theme;
3. Quotation and evidence to prove it.

Many candidates find this a difficult technique, because we are conditioned to think of a conclusion as something that comes at the end, and a topic sentence is in a way a summary of an argument or viewpoint – yet it comes at the start of a paragraph. There is a good reason for this. If you start your paragraph with a great long list of evidence for a certain point you wish to make, the examiner cannot judge whether or not this evidence is relevant to the point you are trying to make and the question you have been asked to answer. He needs to know what you are trying to say before he can judge your evidence, and so by far the best technique is to provide him with this before you get into detail. If you look at the plan for your essay and cannot think of a sentence to sum up what the paragraph is trying to say, it is probably that the paragraph is saying nothing at all, and needs to be re-thought. Equally, a glance at your topic sentence and a glance at the essay title tells you immediately if the content of that paragraph is relevant to the question.

Punctuating the title

The title of a book or poem is always given special punctuation in an essay to mark it out from the rest of the text. First of all, find out the correct title of the book you are studying, and how to punctuate it; this is on the fly leaf or title page of the book, and may *not* be what is printed on the spine. The title of a *book* or *play* should be underlined throughout; the title of an individual *poem* should be placed in inverted commas. Some other useful points on punctuation are:

1. Never underline *and* put inverted commas round a title; you can have too much of a good thing.
2. Never write a title out in a different coloured ink – examiners do not mark you on artistic skills, and you do not have the time to change pens in an examination.
3. Always write the title out in full. Shakespeare wrote Much Ado About Nothing, not Much Ado; Tom Stoppard wrote Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
4. Start each word of the title with a capital letter, unless the title page of the book does it differently, as in The History of Mr Polly.

where the 'of' does not require a capital. As with all rules, it helps to understand why it is necessary. The answer is that it can cause terrible confusion if the examiner thinks you mean Hamlet the character when actually you mean *Hamlet* the play; similarly, words in a poem sometimes appear as the title, and the examiner needs to know if you are talking about the whole poem, or individual lines from it. Thus you would refer to Thomas Hardy's Selected Poems (underlined, because it is the name of a whole book), but write 'The Darkling Thrush' when you referred to a poem in that book.

5. Never try to copy published works by attempting to write in italics.

This correct punctuation of a book or poem title has to become an instinct, so automatic that you do it without thinking.

Quotations

Any good essay will contain quotations. Provide none, and you are depriving yourself of your main evidence for proving any point that you might make. Equally, if you provide too many the examiner might think he could just as well have read the book in its original form! There are three basic mistakes which commonly occur in essays with regard to the use of quotations:

1. *Misquoting* or presenting the quotation wrongly;
2. *Quoting too much*;
3. *Turning poetry into prose.*

It is essential that you quote accurately, down to the last comma and full stop, even if you think the original writer has made a mistake. If the original is wrong in some way, either grammatically or because it does not make sense, you can always write 'sic' – Latin for 'thus' – to show the mistake is not your own. If your quotations are not accurate your whole knowledge of the text is thrown into doubt, together with the accuracy of anything you might say. It is also grossly insulting to an author to change what he or she originally wrote.

Long quotations are a menace; after all, the examiner is marking you, not the original author. Always remember that at Advanced level the examiner *expects* you to know the text in detail, and wants to read your comment on it. The best quotations are usually not more than four or five lines long at most, and are often shorter than that. In any event, very few candidates can learn more than forty or fifty lines for every text they are examined on.

The rules for presenting a quotation are quite simple. If a quotation is *two lines or less* in the original, it can be *run-on* in your essay without starting a new line. All that is needed is a comma before the quotation, and the quotation to be marked off with inverted commas, as follows:

Hamlet's bitterness and anger towards women come to the surface with increasing frequency as the play progresses, as when he orders Ophelia, 'Get thee to a nunnery!'

If it is poetry that you are quoting you can still *run-on* a quotation of *two lines or less*, but the end of one line in the text and the start of another must be marked by a diagonal line:

Othello's anger is clearly heard in the lines, 'Now, by heaven,/My blood begins my safer guides to rule'.

Where a quotation occupies *more than two lines* in the original text, it should be preceded by a comma, started on a new line, and indented (given an extra left-hand margin). Inverted commas are not strictly necessary, but can be useful for complete clarity:

Othello's anger is clearly heard in the lines,

'Now, by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgement collied,
Assays to lead the way.'

This speech marks the start of Othello's breakdown.

If something is written as poetry it is written on a line-by-line basis, *and it is essential that you should quote it as poetry, keeping to the original line arrangements.* Poetry (or *verse*) is written in lines, and if you ignore the division into lines you convert poetry into prose, and in so doing tell the examiner that you cannot tell the difference between poetry and prose.

Planning

As a very rough guide the time spent on an essay written in your own time (that is, not under examination conditions), should be divided into three.

- *Part one* consists of going through the text and notes assembling information that is relevant to the essay title you are answering.
- *Part two* consists of taking this raw material and working up an essay plan for it.
- *Part three* consists of actually sitting down and writing the essay.
- Each part should take roughly the same amount of time.

In an examination, there is less time for planning. A question requiring an hour to answer can allow for up to ten minutes' planning time, but you will not be able to produce an effective plan in this time unless you have learnt the techniques we have mentioned when working under more relaxed conditions.

The first stage of planning is to make yourself want to do it, because it can be very tedious and unexciting. When you walk into an examination you will know quite literally thousands of pieces of information about your set texts. Your examination will test you on perhaps twenty per cent of what you know. You are tested on your ability to *select* the right information from a very long list. If you do not select you do not pass, but this selection is impossible if you write spontaneously and off-the-cuff.

Try an experiment. Take an essay title on a book you know and write down *everything*, in the briefest note form, that comes into your head as a possible answer to that question. This is actually the first