

Preparing for mock exams: how to set a question

One of the best ways of achieving examination success is to practise, and when you start preparing students for the new set texts on H072/H472 AS and A level English Literature, you will need questions on those texts set in the appropriate format for the paper. Rather than providing all of these questions ourselves, we have decided to share with you some of the principles of question-setting, so that you can set your own mock papers with confidence.

Here are some general points to bear in mind when setting questions:

- It is always sensible to have a copy of a past paper in front of you, so that you can check that the pattern of your questions conforms to those which are set by OCR
- Past papers (available for H072 from Sept 2016 and for H472 from Sept 2017) will be a helpful source of material; you are likely to find many past questions which can be easily adapted to the new texts
- You must be careful that your questions are set to an appropriate standard. H072 AS questions should be accessible and not over-complicated; we make very little use of technical critical vocabulary when setting questions
- The best questions are accessible to weaker candidates while still providing opportunities for the more ambitious. Candidates at all levels should be able to understand and make some attempt to answer all questions
- All questions should privilege literary issues: for example, it is better to ask about 'the presentation of marriage in the novel' rather than asking candidates to 'discuss marriage'



Component 01: Shakespeare and poetry pre-1900

Section 1: Shakespeare

Below is a sample question based on one of the new set Shakespeare plays, *Hamlet*.

'A great surprise of the play is that Claudius has a conscience.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view?

[30]

These questions are a little tricky to set, since you will have to research or invent the statement at the top of the question.

All Section 1 questions are set in pairs. There will often be a theme- or character-based option, and then usually an option focused more on style or method. All questions start with a statement about the set text given in quotation marks, as above. This statement can be a quotation from the novel itself; a statement about the novel from a reviewer or a critic; a view of the novel from the novelist herself; or (usually) a statement which you have invented. The advantages of writing the statement yourself are that you can ensure a clear focus on your chosen theme, character or method; and that you can devise a statement which has the appropriate clarity and simplicity for an AS examination (statements from critics are often too complex and multi-faceted to work well at AS). The hardest part of question-setting is finding inspiration for this statement. Sample or past papers are a good source, as are reviews and criticism; all sorts of material can be found online and of course in critical works and introductory essays in editions of the novel. Contemporary reviews can be especially thought-provoking and helpful. If you use a statement from a critic, you may need to simplify the ideas or language to make them suitable for AS.

When you have your statement about the text, you need to add a tail-piece inviting the candidate to respond to the statement, giving his or her own view. Your initial statement should offer a firm, or even controversial view of the novel and you should then add the sentence:

'How far and in what ways do you agree with this view?'

Candidates need to make clear the extent of their agreement or disagreement, and to offer explanation and illustration to support their views.



Section 2: Poetry pre-1900

Below is a sample question based on one of the new set poets, Christina Rossetti.

Discuss Rossetti's portrayal of earthly and heavenly love in *Twice*.

In your answer explore the author's use of language, imagery and verse form, and consider ways in which you find the poem characteristic of Rossetti's work in your selection. [30]

[An extract from the poem named in the question (or the whole poem depending on length) will be printed in the paper]

Decide on the topic for the question: here in the sample paper, we have chosen 'portrayal of earthly and heavenly love'. The idea at the centre of the question is likely to be a central theme or idea in the poem, and should be a concept which is readily accessible to all candidates. Some questions might deal with the nature of the poet's insight or method. When you choose your central idea, you should consider whether there are other poems in the selection which allow candidates to make a link from the set poem to the rest of the collection or whole text (candidates must make links for different reasons, not purely thematic ones to access AO4 marks, but most will feel more secure and confident if some thematic links are available).

In the question above, I am happy that 'love' is a central idea in the set poem, and that there are others in the selection which deal with the same theme. I have asked candidates to 'discuss Rossetti's portrayal of...'- this is standard wording, and reminds candidates that they have to privilege AO2 in their answers.

Finally, you need to add the standard rubric for all Section 2 questions:

In your answer explore the author's use of language, imagery and verse form, and consider ways in which you find the poem characteristic of Rossetti's work in your selection.

The first part of this sentence provides a reminder to candidates that they need to address AO2 in their answers ('explore the effects of language, imagery and verse form'). A good answer will come up with a wide range of ways in which earthly and heavenly love have been presented (for example through imagery, use of blank verse and paragraphing, through word choice and repetition etc.). Weaker answers may discuss a limited range of poetic methods, or even just paraphrase the poem without considering ways in which the writer has treated the central theme.

The second part of the sentence requires the candidate to fulfil AO4 by linking the set poem to other poems they have studied ('consider ways in which you find the poem characteristic of...'). The wording is designed to communicate to candidates that they must refer to other poems in their answer, and that, for good marks, they must explore the relationship between the set poem and the other poems in the collection (or in the case of Milton, Chaucer and Tennyson, elsewhere in the set text). A good answer will make clear what the link is (perhaps the additional poem treats the same theme) and offer an explanation of the relationship between the poems (perhaps the writer has used a contrasting technique, or taken a different attitude to the theme in the other poem(s) referenced).

Component 02: Drama and prose post-1900

Section 1: Drama post-1900

Below is a sample question based on one of the new set texts, *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

'Stanley is macho, posturing and vulgar.'

In the light of this comment, discuss the role of Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

[30]

These questions are similar to the format of the Shakespeare questions in AS paper 1. Again, you will have to research or invent the statement at the top of the question.

All Section 1 questions are set in pairs. There will often be a theme- or character-based option, and then usually an option focused more on style or method. All questions start with a statement about the set text given in quotation marks, as above. This statement can be a quotation from the novel itself; a statement about the novel from a reviewer or a critic; a view of the novel from the novelist herself; or (usually) a statement which you have invented. The advantages of writing the statement yourself are that you can ensure a clear focus on your chosen theme, character or method; and that you can devise a statement which has the appropriate clarity and simplicity for an AS examination (statements from critics are often too complex and multi-faceted to work well at AS). The hardest part of question-setting is finding inspiration for this statement. Sample or past papers are a good source, as are reviews and criticism; all sorts of material can be found online and of course in critical works and introductory essays in editions of the novel. Contemporary reviews can be especially thought-provoking and helpful. If you use a statement from a critic, you may need to simplify the ideas or language to make them suitable for AS.

When you have your statement about the text, you need to add a tail-piece inviting the candidate to respond to the statement, giving his or her own view. Your initial statement should offer a firm, or even controversial view of the novel and you should then add either:

'How far and in what ways do you agree with this view?'

Or

'In the light of this comment, discuss...'

Candidates need to make clear the extent of their agreement or disagreement, and to offer explanation and illustration to support their views. If the initial statement is more of an observation you may prefer to add 'In the light of this comment' which invites the candidate to explore relevant material and relate it to the statement in the question.

Section 2: Prose post-1900

Below is a sample question based on one of the new set texts, *The Great Gatsby*.

F Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

Discuss ways in which Fitzgerald presents the rewards and disappointments of pleasure-seeking in *The Great Gatsby*.

In your answer you should make connections and comparisons with the following passage, in which a New York lady's lifestyle is described. [30]

Tuesday. Joe came barging into my room this morning at practically nine o'clock. Couldn't have been more furious. Started to fight, but too dead. Know he said he wouldn't be home to dinner. Absolutely cold all day; couldn't move. Last night couldn't have been more perfect. Ollie and I dined at ThirtyEight East, absolutely poisonous food, and not one living soul that you'd be seen dead with, and "Run like a Rabbit"¹ was the world's worst. Took Ollie up to the Barlows' party and it couldn't have been more attractive – couldn't have been more people absolutely stinking. They had those Hungarians in green coats, and Stewie Hunter was leading them with a fork – everybody simply died. He had yards of green toilet paper hung around his neck like a lei²; he couldn't have been in better form. Met a really new number³, very tall, too marvellous, and one of those people that you can really talk to them. I told him sometimes I get so nauseated I could yip⁴, and I felt I absolutely had to do something like write or paint. He said why didn't I write or paint. Came home alone; Ollie passed out stiff. Called up the new number three times today to get him to come to dinner and go with me to the opening of "Never Say Good Morning"¹, but first he was out and then he was all tied up with his mother. Finally got Ollie Martin. Tried to read a book, but couldn't sit still. Can't decide whether to wear the red lace or the pink with the feathers. Feel too exhausted, but what can you do?

Dorothy Parker, From *The Diary of a New York Lady* (1933)

This question structure is brand new for H072 AS English Literature from September 2015. The format differs from anything we have set before and therefore may appear daunting at first.

All Section 2 questions are rooted in the set text but ask candidates to make connections and comparisons with an unseen extract printed in the paper. The unseen extract will always be taken from the wider topic area set at A level because we expect that the majority of teachers will be co-teaching our AS and A level specifications.

Unseen extracts:

- For *The Great Gatsby* extracts will be taken from the A level topic area 'American Literature from 1880-1940'
- For *The Bloody Chamber* and other Stories extracts will be taken from the A level topic area 'Gothic literature'
- For *Nineteen Eighty-Four* extracts will be taken from the A level topic area 'Dystopian literature'
- For *Mrs Dalloway* extracts will be taken from the A level topic area 'Women in literature'
- For *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* extracts will be taken from the A level topic area 'The Immigrant Experience'

Questions will be rooted in the set text and the unseen extract will be thematically linked according to the question. Questions will usually start with an instruction to 'Discuss...' a particular theme or concept from the set text. Decide on the topic for the question: here in the sample paper, we have chosen 'the rewards and disappointments of pleasure-seeking'. The idea at the centre of the question is likely to be a central theme or idea in the set text, and should be a concept which is readily accessible to all candidates.

You then need to select an appropriate unseen extract to go with your question. A good place to start might be with the other prose texts suggested for study in the topic area at A level. So, for example, if you're teaching *The Great Gatsby* you could select an extract from Wharton's *The Age of Innocence**. Extracts should be roughly half a side in length – remember candidates will only have 1 hour for this question in the exam room and ideally 10-15 minutes of this time will be spent reading and annotating the unseen extract.

The second part of the question requires the candidate to fulfil AO4 by linking the set text to the unseen extract printed in the paper ('In your answer you should make connections and comparisons with the following passage, in which X is described'). The wording is designed to communicate to candidates that they must explore the relationship between the themes or issues in their set text and the unseen. Context (AO3) is assessed in this question but examiners will not be expecting candidates to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of contexts related to the unseen extract. Context may relate exclusively to the set text (the main purpose of the unseen passage is to enable AO4).

*Please note this advice is for the purposes of setting mock exam questions. Named texts which are suggested for study in the specification, like Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* will never be used for setting the unseen extract in the formal examination.





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