

# 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.
- 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'



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## Component 01: Drama and poetry pre-1900

### Section 1: Shakespeare

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

**Answer both parts (a) and (b).**

**(a) Discuss the following passage from Act 3 Scene 1, exploring Shakespeare's use of language and its dramatic effects.** [15]

[An extract from the play will be printed in the paper]

This is a compulsory two-part question. For part a, decide on the Act and Scene you'd like candidates to look at: here in the sample paper, we have chosen Act 3 Scene 1. The question itself will remain static from series to series: **'Discuss the following passage....exploring Shakespeare's use of language and its dramatic effects.'**

The question wording prompts candidates to address AO2 in their answers ('**use of language and its dramatic effects**'). A good answer will pay close attention to how Shakespeare uses language to create meaning in the given passage. Candidates should refer closely to the set passage in their response.

**And**

**(b) 'The lovers are the chief source of hope in *The Tempest*.'**

**Using your knowledge of the play as a whole, show how far you agree with this view of *The Tempest*.**

**Remember to support your answer with reference to different interpretations.** [15]

For part b, questions will start with a statement about the play given in quotation marks. This statement might be a quotation from the play itself; a statement about the play from a reviewer, director or critic; 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 or method; and that you can devise a statement which has the appropriate clarity for A level examination.

The hardest part of question-setting is finding inspiration for this statement. Past papers are a good source, as are reviews and criticism and all sorts of material can be found online. If you choose to use a statement from a critic or scholar, you may need to simplify the ideas or language to make them suitable.

When you have your statement about the play, you need to add the rubric inviting the candidate to respond to the statement, giving his or her own view:

**'Using your knowledge of the play as a whole, show how far you agree with this view of *The Tempest*.'**

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

**'Remember to support your answer with reference to different interpretations.'**

The part of the question requires the candidate to fulfil AO5. We are fairly inclusive in our approach to AO5 generally so this might include:

- reference to recognised critics
- different theatrical interpretations of drama where learners discuss different directors' presentations or different actors' portrayals
- different interpretations of texts produced through rewriting or television/film adaptations.

There is no specific requirement to quote from critics (although this is often a differentiator) indeed, the AO5 requirement to show awareness of other interpretations might be fulfilled simply by a candidate exploring/ discussing the statement at the head of the question, which functions as one interpretation.

The essential quality we are looking for is awareness that there can always be more than one view of a text. Learners should show that they have a view of their own in relation to the question, but that they are capable of seeing that there may be other ways of looking at it.



## Section 2: Drama and Poetry pre-1900

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

Drama	Poetry
Christopher Marlowe: Edward II	Geoffrey Chaucer: The Merchant's Prologue and Tale
John Webster: The Duchess of Malfi	John Milton: Paradise Lost Books 9 & 10
Oliver Goldsmith: She Stoops to Conquer	Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poems
Henrik Ibsen: A Doll's House	Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Maud
Oscar Wilde: An Ideal Husband	Christina Rossetti: Selected Poems

**'Forbidden tastes are sweetest.'**

**In the light of this view, consider ways in which writers explore the attraction of that which is forbidden.**

**In your answer, compare one drama text and one poetry text from the above lists.**

**[30]**

These questions are designed to stimulate candidates to argue, to look at texts in detail and to compare them in an interesting way. The setting of Section 2 questions begins with a decision about the area under scrutiny: the general thematic or literary concern which is to be discussed.

In asking candidates to make comparisons across genres (drama and poetry) of pairs of texts, we are looking at the concerns and techniques which these texts share, or the respects in which they contrast or differ (AO4). We are also looking at the intellectual and social contexts which produced the texts (AO3). The aim is to provoke candidates to apply the propositions in their questions in an interesting way, by comparing their chosen texts. Questions cannot therefore be text-specific - there are numerous possible combinations of texts for study. Therefore, the more generally applicable the propositions are, the more choice candidates will have.

The format is simpler than the first section: there are six questions, each of which begins with a brief statement, usually 'aphoristic' - a brief, and fairly compressed statement, offering a general opinion.

They are invented for the paper, and have a bearing on the central concerns of the set texts.

Examples from past papers include:

- 'Life is a game of chance in which skillful players risk everything.'
- 'Vanity drives us, and can all too easily destroy us.'
- 'The pleasures of pursuit are greater than the thrill of conquest.'
- 'We admire defiance or disobedience - especially in the face of the inevitable.'
- 'Because we know we must die, we live all the more intensely.'
- 'Love is the most selfish of emotions.'

Each statement is followed by a general prompt, which aims to help candidates to focus on the area of concern raised by the statement:

**In the light of this view, discuss ways in which writers [explore a topic or make use of a technique.]**

The rubric also reminds them:

**In your answer, compare one drama text and one poetry text.**

## Component 02: Comparative and Contextual Study Section 1: The unseen extract

Below is a sample question based on one of the new set topic areas, *American Literature 1880-1940*.

**Write a critical appreciation of this passage, relating your discussion to your reading of American Literature 1880–1940.** [30]

[unseen extract printed here, see <http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/171433-unit-h472-2-comparative-and-contextual-study-sample-assessment-materials.pdf>]

This question structure is brand new for H472 A Level English Literature from September 2015. The format differs from anything we have set before and therefore may appear daunting at first.

The unseen extract will always be taken from the wider topic area set at A level and the question structure will remain consistent series on series. The first part of the question will be:

‘Write a critical appreciation of this passage...’

Then, you need to add the standard rubric:

relating your discussion to your reading of...topic area X.

X will be one of the following:

American Literature 1880–1940  
The Gothic  
Dystopia  
Women in Literature  
The Immigrant Experience

The first part of this sentence ‘Write a critical appreciation’ instructs candidates that they need to privilege AO2 in their answers and ‘explore the effects of language, imagery and verse form’ in the extract.

The second part requires the candidate to fulfil AO3 (‘Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received’) by contextualising the unseen extract within the topic area they have studied as a whole.



## Section 2: The comparative essay

Below is a sample question from one of the new set topic areas, *American Literature 1880-1940*.

### **2 (a) F Scott Fitzgerald: The Great Gatsby**

**'Much American literature explores the theme of isolation.'**

**By comparing *The Great Gatsby* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.** [30]

**Decide on the text to be privileged for the question: you must have taught one of the two core set texts, if not both, so one of the two must be named in the question. Alternatively, you could set the broader question (which is example (c) in the sample paper):**

**(c) 'The ideals of freedom and opportunity are central to American literature.'**

**By comparing at least two texts prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you have found this to be the case. In your answer you must include discussion of either *The Great Gatsby* and/or *The Grapes of Wrath*.** [30]

For either format, you must create or choose a proposition to be used at the head of the question. The idea at the centre of the question is likely to be a central theme from the set text and also from the wider topic area as a whole, and should be a concept which is readily accessible to all candidates. Some questions might deal with the nature of the writer's insight or method. When you choose your central idea, you should consider whether it is fruitful enough to allow candidates to make substantial comparative links between the set texts they've studied and relate this to the topic area they have studied in depth.

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 A Level.

These questions are designed to stimulate candidates to argue, to look at texts and the contexts in which they were written in detail and to compare them in an interesting way.





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