

HOW TO SET A QUESTION

This is designed to empower teachers by giving you the skills you need to set your own practice examination questions for mocks and homework.

Questions on F663 are designed to stimulate candidates to argue, to look at texts in detail, and, in Section B, to compare them in an interesting way.

It will be helpful to work through some of the setting processes below with your candidates: the more familiar they are with the way in which the questions work, the more confident they will find themselves to be in the exam. They are 'inside the project' - they can see the ways in which the questions set out to help them by offering them materials for argument.

Please remember that these are informal guidelines, and that the form and style of future F663 questions may vary to some extent from this advice.

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

- keep copies of past questions to hand, so you can check that the style and format of your questions conform to those set by OCR.
- in Section A, character-based or thematic questions have a fairly standardised format, using a quotation which offers a statement or proposition.
- Section B questions are not text-specific: they all begin with an aphoristic general statement or proposition, so looking back at the accumulated bank of past papers might be very useful.
- try to avoid the predictable in statements - give candidates the chance to argue or to look at a central idea in a new way.
- in Section A, candidates are specifically asked to evaluate the question's proposition: it is assumed they will try to reach a conclusion.
- in Section B, they are expected to use the proposition as a stimulus for a comparison of their two chosen texts. They do not have to reach a conclusion, though many will wish to.



SECTION A

In this first section candidates are offered a choice of two questions on each text. One question is generally focused on one or more named characters, while the other may well be about a theme or concern of the play, or about dramatic effects.

Questions have a standard format: the words 'exploring' and 'considering' are interchangeable, and the phrase 'evaluate this view' can appear at the beginning or end of the prompt.

Either

'[Quotation offering critical statement]'

By considering Shakespeare's dramatic presentation of [character or theme], evaluate this view.

Or, with a variant structure

By exploring the dramatic presentation of [character or theme] in [play], evaluate the view that '[quotation offering critical statement]'.

The key terms in the question fall inside the quotation: the purpose of the more general prompt is to guide the candidates towards the wider area of the text under discussion. For high marks, candidates must give full consideration to both parts of the question.

Before writing questions, a setter will probably have created some kind of map of what he or she sees as key concerns of the text: this might be a 'mind map' of key issues and oppositions.

This is a very worthwhile process to work through with a study group, perhaps drawing them out as a collective task after doing the exercise oneself.

Once this first phase is complete, the next stage is to formulate a proposition which will provoke and stimulate candidates creatively. It will almost certainly not be a 'real' critic's view: many are too extreme or too provocatively worded to be a useful catalyst for an examination answer. The setter needs to say something which the candidate will recognise and be able to think about as a view: the statement should not be so obvious that candidates feel obliged simply to agree, or devastatingly surprising, so that they are utterly unable to bring experience to bear on their discussion. What is wanted is to make the candidate think 'I can do something interesting of my own with this'.

Below are two possible questions on Antony and Cleopatra.

Antony and Cleopatra

Either

- 2 (a) *'Throughout the play, the world of Egypt and the Egyptians is presented as nothing more than a world of foolishness.'*

By exploring Shakespeare's dramatic presentation of Egypt and its people in Antony and Cleopatra, evaluate this view. [30]

Or

- (b) *By exploring the dramatic presentation of Octavius in Antony and Cleopatra, evaluate the view that 'he is too calculating to be seen either as hero or villain.'* [30]

The first question makes a fairly strongly dismissive statement about the way in which Shakespeare represents the Egyptians in the play. It is quite strongly worded; it also reflects the view of some of the Roman characters in the text, such as Philo and Demetrius at the play's opening. However, to agree entirely with the proposition a candidate would be adopting a very partisan view, and therefore the question is provoking candidates to think about a central opposition in the text. Candidates are reminded that the play is a literary construct by the use of the phrase 'Shakespeare's dramatic presentation of Egypt and its people'; and the strength of the statement 'presented as nothing more than a world of foolishness' encourages candidates responding to some of the more intensely emotional scenes to counter-argue that some aspects of the world of Egypt are not foolish at all. So the question is inviting candidates to explore in AO2 detail the ways in which Shakespeare evokes a particular kind of world in the play, and the ways in which the values of that world may be seen as important or unimportant. Candidates may wish to consider the dramatic force of the Rome vs. Egypt opposition, and may have views (for AO4) on the representation of love and the world of politics both for an Elizabethan audience and a modern theatregoer.

The candidates' knowledge of critical debate about the play, and the experience of performance, might enable them to show an AO3 knowledge of critical and performance issues. The second question, looking at the dramatic presentation of Octavius, is designed to help candidates to focus on the ambivalent response many audiences and critics have to this character. It allows candidates to use detailed AO2 evidence to build up a sense of the ways in which the text shows him to combine ruthlessness and intelligence; it also suggests that he proceeds with a deliberation and shrewdness which perhaps contrasts with Antony's reckless short-sightedness. Candidates sensitive to the play's dramatic structure may also look at the ambiguity of his response to the deaths of first Antony, and then Cleopatra; the breadth of their experience of critical writing and performance may also help them to articulate a view in response to the quotation (AO3). Some candidates may be aware that to write a character so subtly ambiguous is difficult, and that such ambiguity is both characteristic of Shakespeare and unusual in the drama (AO4).

SECTION B

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 (AO3). We are also looking at the intellectual and social contexts which produced the texts (AO4). Close knowledge of language and technique (AO2) will enable candidates to support the argument with evidence.

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 sixteen possible combinations of texts for study. Therefore, the more generally applicable the propositions are, the more choice candidates will have.

Question choice is an area of examination technique which is well worth practising in Section B; past sessions have frequently shown the considerable ingenuity with which candidates have adapted questions to their arguments in ways which have been admirable and sometimes very exciting.

Experience of setting this part of the paper suggests that simplicity is crucial - think of a statement, then simplify it - it becomes more effective as a prompt.

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 skilful 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].'

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

It has been observed in discussions that the passions and the seven deadly sins figure largely in the list of concerns on this paper. This reflects the texts in the section until the summer of 2013.

Setting a Section B question - an exemplar task

The setting of Section B questions begins with a decision about the area under scrutiny: the general thematic or literary concern which is to be discussed. In the following example I share the process which is involved in arriving at a question.

Starting point

Often this begins with a glance at a couple of central texts, which may, for example, be concerned with **gender relationships** and the dynamics of their presentation in the texts. What is needed is a proposition: among other aspects past questions have looked at seduction, pursuit and conquest, and vanity.

One possibility is to look at the idea of women's adaptability and intelligence 'wiles and stratagems' is a phrase sometimes used to suggest the means by which direct force or patriarchal authority is opposed in such situations. 'Men use force, women counter this by intelligence' is the vague shade of such a proposition. But this formulation is restrictive, since in some of the texts, women are subject to subtle attack, and in others they are the protagonist. So some covering phrase, such as 'in the battle of the sexes' may be helpful - thus 'in the battle of the sexes, men use force, and women counter this by intelligence' is beginning to evolve. However, 'counter this' is restrictive, and in not all texts do the women actually manage to resist: a possible other stratagem would be to prompt a look at **reader response**: 'we watch, fascinated, as men and women conduct the battle of the sexes'. However this formulation is too general: it loses the focus on the **means** by which the sexes do battle (force versus intelligence). So 'force versus intelligence', at the moment, looks better, because it is more specific.

But let's rephrase 'force versus intelligence' because it's **too** specific, and implies an opposition which may not be in both texts. 'Power' works well - and more generally - instead of force, and 'persuasion' is both alliterative and more open. We also need to bear in mind that 'gender' is a problem with Satan's seduction of Eve - he may behave in a masculine way, but he is not male. And while issues of power and persuasion are crucial in Jonson's play, much is between males. And maybe 'battle' is a bit strong for some texts.

Applicability

The next stage is to consider how many text combinations may be 'hit' by the formulation - maybe we can leave out explicit reference to gender altogether, and talk about seduction or persuasion more generally: control over others, bending them to our will, with a nod to flirtation in Sheridan and persuasion in Marvell.

'We are fascinated by the play of power and persuasion in relationships'

This has the advantage of being non-gender specific, and not mentioning 'reader' or 'audience' - it allows candidates to talk about gender, but isn't restricted to sexual relationships. It also has a touch of catchy alliteration, and 'fascinates' and 'play' encourages an AO2 attention to how interchange works. Good! But have we thrown out the baby with the bathwater, in making the question so much less specific? I don't think so - we can still use the question to talk about sexual relationships, but now we are not stereotyping either party - which is helpful, because the 'power' shifts across texts.

Conclusion

So we finally arrive at:

'We are fascinated by the play of power and persuasion in relationships'

We now have to make a crucial decision: what will we identify as the 'concern area' in the prompt?

'In the light of this view, discuss ways in which writers [depict relationships] [explore the dynamics of relationships]

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

I think the first formulation is better (more general is almost always better), though it is still a bit awkward: but this is the formulation which I will offer to the Assessment Material Evaluation Committee, where it will provoke debate and (perhaps) be simplified and amended in a way which I have not yet imagined!

So our question is:

'We are fascinated by the play of power and persuasion in relationships'

In the light of this view, discuss ways in which writers depict relationships. In your answer, compare one drama text and one poetry text.

While many of the questions set in the past would be effective for the new texts, it would be very useful to discuss and explore the emphases created by the new text list. Thus a collective approach to idea-gathering like the one suggested for Section A might lead to the formulation of statements (or re-use of past questions in a modified form). Again - those who write questions and look at them closely have little to fear, and will achieve more, in the final examination.

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