

## Chapter 2: Effective essay writing

Writing competent essays is not a product of luck. At GCSE level, it is a matter of applying knowledge in a relevant and organised manner.

### Qualities and characteristics of an effective essay answer

It is essential that we are aware of the qualities and characteristics of an effective essay answer – after all, 70 per cent of the overall mark allocation is given to the three essays you will write in the exam! The ability to produce three competent essays in two and a half hours is one of the major keys to success, so it's important that we have a sound grasp of the components that go together to make an 'efficient' essay.

#### Activity 2.1

Individually, in pairs or small groups, take 10–15 minutes to make a list of the important qualities and features that would be essential in the development of a competent essay. See Checklists on page 73.

Below is a question taken from a Literature Paper. It is followed by a competent response. The answer is annotated in order to highlight how this essay matches the indicators set out in our checklist. When seen in use, these qualities are not quite so threatening. (Don't worry if this is not based on one of your set texts, as the focus is on the qualities of the essay not its content.)

#### Steinbeck: *Of Mice and Men*

**This question is about power.**

Show that Steinbeck presents three characters who have differing kinds of power. Which kind of power do you think is the most destructive? Give reasons for your opinions.

In your answer you should consider:

- George
- Lennie
- Curley.



*George, Lennie and Curley all have large amounts of power through the entire novel but they have different kinds.*

*George 'A small man, dark of face with dark eyes and sharp features' has power over Lennie, he is a father figure to him, we see this at the very beginning when George takes the mouse from Lennie. Lennie is very forgetful and George is constantly reminding him of where they are going and what they are doing 'So ya' forgot that awready'. George minds his work slip for him as he knows that it is more than likely that Lennie will lose it. Lennie is treated as a child by George and Lennie in turn treats George like a father figure.*

*Lennie 'A huge man, with pale eyes and sloping shoulders, he dragged his feet a little when he walked, the way a bear drags its paws' on the other hand Lennie has physical strength, he often kills mice by stroking them too hard. He is unaware of this strength and cannot control it. We next see this strength when Curley starts to fight with him 'Come on ... No son-of-a-bitch gonna laugh at me ... I'll show ya whos yella'. Lennie does not want to fight with Curley but in the end he crushes his hand. He does this after George encourages him to fight back 'Get 'im Lennie ... I said get 'im' Lennie grabs Curley's hand but does not know when to let go, he does not realise the damage he is doing 'I didn't want to hurt 'im'. Lennie uses this uncontrollable physical strength again in the killing of the puppy and Curley's wife. He loves to stroke soft things and when Slim gives him the puppy he accidentally kills it by stroking it too hard. A similar incident happened with Curley's wife, she is a very flirtatious woman and when she invites him to touch her soft hair he can not resist 'it is so soft ... right around there ... feel right around there its so soft, Lennie feels her hair but gets too rough and she panics, this is similar to the incident which happened in Weed. "Don't you go yellin" Lennie shook her and her body flopped like a fish ... She was still for Lennie had broken her neck.'*

*Curley has power over the men on the ranch because 'His old mans the boss'. Curley is 'A small man, dark face, dark eyes and tightly curled hair'. Although he has all the power he is a weak and insecure man, this may be due to the fact that he is disliked by everyone on the ranch including his wife. He is suspicious of his wife and the other men on the ranch as he believes she may be having an affair with one of them, he is particularly suspicious of Slim 'Is weary of Slim and Slim in turn is not afraid of him.'*

*It is my opinion that Lennie's power is the most destructive, although it is unintentional, his power and strength has had the worst consequences. His power led him to the killing of animals, the mice and the puppy, the killing of another being, Curley's wife, and finally it has led to the killing of himself.*

A straightforward introduction that re-states the question drawing attention to the key issue – 'kinds of power'.

An effective combination of quotation, evidence and concluding analysis develop the sense of a candidate tackling the first element of the task in a relevant manner.

You will note that the same basic arrangement has been used to consider this character as was used for the first. This formula is repeated again when the writer goes on to deal with the final character mentioned in the question.

This time there is greater depth to the analysis with a wide range of appropriate examples presented.

Perhaps the final reference here is too detailed. The temptation to include yet another quote means that the emphasis here is very much on relating incident and fails to relate back to the central focus – 'kinds of power'.

The opening sentence clearly keeps the answer on task. Following the now-familiar opening piece of description, the third sentence offers relevant analysis.

Again focused on task, this candidate finishes off by dealing with the final element of the question.

There is a real attempt to conclude the essay with a strong summative remark.