



# Tackling the exam

- How well do you know your text?
- What are tiers of entry?
- How should you plan and structure your exam essay?
- How should you provide evidence to support your interpretation of the text?

## Knowing your text

Read your text several times and use this text guide to help you. You will notice different things on your second and third readings and begin to enjoy making connections you have never thought of before. You will be allowed to take your text into the examination but unless you are very familiar with it, it could become more of a hindrance than a help as you could waste a lot of time re-reading parts that you really should know.

Although you gain no marks for retelling the story you have to show the examiner you know it well. You should have a sound grasp of the following:

- the main sequence of events (the structure)
- the parts played by each of the characters
- the nature of the ghost story
- the writer's possible intentions

You need to learn the correct spellings of the names of people and places.

## Higher and foundation tiers

You will be entered for the examination at either foundation or higher tier. Make sure you know your target grade. If you are a foundation candidate, your target is no higher than a C grade. If you are a higher candidate, your target can be as high as an A\* grade but no lower than a D. If you do not achieve at least a D grade, you will not receive an award at all on the higher papers.

### Foundation paper

Often, the questions on higher and foundation papers are similar, except that on the foundation tier you are given bullet points to help you. These



serve to give some broad structure to your essay, although they are often phrased as suggestions rather than instructions. Unless you work out a very clear structure of your own, it is advisable to follow them.

Below are some examples of foundation-type questions.

**1** Write about two places in the novel where setting is important to the story.

- Describe these places and briefly say what happens in each of them.
- Say why they are important to the story, explain the atmosphere of each place and what the writer wants the reader to think and feel.
- Explain how successful she has been. Give reasons for your views.

**2** Choose two of the following characters and write about their importance in the novel:

Mr Bentley, Mr Samuel Daily, the landlord of the Gifford Arms, Keckwick.

- Write about their role in the novel, referring to what they say and do.
- Write about what Kipps thinks about them.
- Write about what you think about them and their role.

**3** Why do you think Susan Hill called her story *The Woman in Black*? How effective is it as a title?

- Write about the appearance and the importance of the ghost in the story.
- Write about religious beliefs at the time.
- Explain your feelings about what she does and her intentions.

## Higher paper

At the higher tier you are unlikely to be given bullet points to help you so it is a good idea to work out your own points before you start on a comprehensive plan. You need to think about what the question is asking you to do. You may be asked to write about themes or style, not just about character and setting. Examiners are especially keen to see how well you can comment on the language and structure of a text. You will only be given bullet points if the question is a difficult one.

Below are some examples of higher-type questions.

**1** How does Susan Hill explore the theme of revenge in the novel?

You should make detailed reference to Christian beliefs and moral attitudes of the time and the language used to express these ideas in the novel.

**2** Should Jennet Humfrye be pitied or condemned? Explore her behaviour when she was alive and as a ghost.

**3** Why do you think Susan Hill called her story *The Woman in Black*? How effective is it as a title?

## The question

You will be given a choice of questions so obviously you choose the one that you can say most about. This is not necessarily the one that looks the easiest. Sometimes questions appear to be so simple you can't find enough to say to gain you high marks. Believe it or not, examiners are not out to trick you and they give a lot of time to setting questions that are straightforward and understandable. They want to give you marks for the things you say and they don't ever knock marks off. However, they can only award marks to relevant points and the development of these points. So, the message is, make sure you know what you are being asked to do. Underline the key words. Break down the task and plan carefully.

## Breaking down the question

Here is a possible breakdown of a question without bullet points.

Consider Kipps' role in *A Woman in Black* and how effectively Hill portrays him.

- Kipps' role as the narrator. The effective use of the first person.
- How Susan Hill presents him as a young man.
- The contrast between the character of the young and middle-aged Kipps.
- The decisions he makes and how he reflects upon his own actions and character.
- His reactions to the events in the story.

## Planning your answers

The section above already goes part of the way to breaking down and interpreting the question in preparation for forming your plan. If you are provided with bullet points, you can use them instead but, remember, you still have quite a lot of planning to do.

## The form of your plan

You may find it helpful to use a mind map or diagram of some kind as it may help you to keep your mind open to new ideas as you plan so you can add to it at a later stage. Then you need to arrange them. Deciding on an order and numbering them will help.



## Structuring your essay

Every essay must have:

- 1 an introduction
- 2 a development section
- 3 an effective ending

### Introduction or beginning

Keep your introduction short and to the point. Start with a strong statement. For example:

Kipps has two important roles in *A Woman in Black*, the narrator and the main character.

Don't spend time explaining what you are going to do or what you intend to show. Refer to the key words of the question. For example:

In allowing Kipps to tell his own story in the first person Susan Hill allows him to have a more immediate effect on the reader. This is effective because it arouses sympathy and it is easier for the reader to identify with his situation as the story unfolds. However, there are occasions when she interrupts the narrative in order to slow down the pace of events and comment on the action.

Then move on to the development of the essay.

### Development or the middle

The success of this part of the essay depends on how well you have prepared your plan. You have jotted down notes on what you are going to say and the order in which you are going to make your points. Now the challenge is to put them together so the ideas flow smoothly. To do this, you need practice using discourse markers (words which link ideas). Here are some examples:

- 'First' or 'primarily' signpost your main point.
- 'Furthermore' or 'in addition to' indicate that another point is being made.
- 'However' signposts an exception.
- 'Nevertheless', 'nonetheless' and 'despite this' mean you are going to consider alternative interpretations.
- 'Another example' means you are developing the idea further.
- 'Moreover' signals that a more decisive point is about to be made.
- 'Lastly', 'finally' or 'in conclusion' show you are coming to the end.

### Conclusion or end

Your conclusion should draw all your arguments to a logical ending. Don't

simply repeat your ideas. Refer back to the key words in the question and try to give an overview and a personal response. A good technique is to choose an apt quotation from the text. There are many ways you could use the last line from *The Woman in Black* because it illustrates so many points in the story, for example Kipps' exhausted state of mind or Susan Hill's narrative technique.

## Using quotations and referring to text

It is essential to use quotations and references to the text in your exam essay. This is to provide evidence for the points you make and to show that you know the text. You are expected to express your personal views and interpretations of what the writer may be saying. The examiner will be delighted if you say something original. However, you must always back up your views with evidence.

### Separate quotations

The first kind of quotation you can use is a separate quotation. This means making your point then backing it up with a quotation. Remember to begin quotations which are longer than three words on a separate line. For example:

Hill describes the way the filthy fog permeates every aspect of life. This is a really disgusting simile:

[the fog] '...seething through cracks and crannies like sour breath,'

### Embedded quotations

An embedded quotation is one which runs on from your own words on the same line or is included within the sentence you are writing. Embedded quotations are considered more sophisticated and you will be rewarded if you use them correctly within grammatically correct sentences. Don't forget to put quotation marks in the correct place. For example:

The older Kipps looks back at his own 'priggish' behaviour as a young man ...

### Referring to the text

It is not always necessary to use a quotation. If you cannot accurately recall or find the quotation you want easily, it is often just as good to refer to it. For example, you could write:

Kipps refers to the way Londoners look down on people from the provinces.



## Referring to the author and title

You can refer to Susan Hill by her surname only or as the author. You can also save time by using a simplification of the book's title. Give the title in full the first time you use it, for example 'The Woman in Black (TWiB)'. You can then use TWiB on its own in the rest of your answer.

## Writing in the appropriate style

Remember you are expected to write in an appropriate style for a formal examination essay. You must write in an appropriate register. This means:

- not using colloquial language or slang unless using a direct quotation from the text, in which case remember to use quotation marks. For example, 'The young Arthur Kipps is a bit of a posh twit who thinks he's better than the people of Crythin Gifford' is definitely written in an inappropriate style
- not becoming too personal, for example, 'Mr Bentley reminds me of my doctor because...'
- using suitable phrases for an academic essay. For example it is better to say 'It could be argued that...' not 'I reckon that...'

## Writing in the first person

Although this style has become more common, try not to use it. If you do, you are unlikely to achieve the highest grades.

### Review your learning

(Answers given on p. 90)

- 1 Name two ways of using quotations.
- 2 What is a discourse marker?
- 3 Give two pieces of advice on how to start an answer.
- 4 What is the point of a conclusion?
- 5 Should you write in the first person?



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