



Essay questions, specimen plans and notes

The exemplar essay questions which follow can be used for planning practice and/or full essay writing within the time limit, with or without the text. Many have been previously set by different exam boards for various specifications. In each of the four sections there are essay titles with examiners' notes, further questions for practising, and some suggestions for ideas to include in a plan. Two questions are provided with sample student answers. Remember to talk about the poem and the persona, not the poet, and try to hear how the poem would sound if read aloud. The form and the language are essential elements of the poetry, so you must not restrict yourself to a discussion of content.

The question you choose may direct you to one or two prescribed poems or ask you to select your own. Either way you should think about the following:

- Careful selection of poems is crucial to ensure the relevance and success of your essay. The poems you like or are most familiar with are not necessarily the most appropriate for a particular title.
- Show your knowledge of the whole selection as well as your response to and analysis of particular poems.
- Focus closely on the chosen poem(s) but also relate their content and/or language to elsewhere in the selection; link your comments to the overall themes, and suggest ways in which the poem is typical of the poet's work as a whole.
- Do not waste time paraphrasing what happens in a poem; just give a quick summary of its setting and context, along the lines of who is present, where and why.
- Think about reader reaction, using your own as the basis for your response.
- In an open-book exam there will be annotations you have made in the margin and on the text, but only include the relevant ones, and remember that they need to be organised into a structured response, not just transferred to your essay as a list.

Poem-based questions: prescribed

- 1** 'Many of Keats' poems are meditative: he seems to use a poem as a way of putting into words and coming to terms with a state of mind.' Using a close examination of 'Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed' as your starting point, consider this view of Keats' poetry.

AO1 The quotation itself offers candidates an explanation of 'meditative' and points them in a particular direction. Lower band candidates are likely to be selective in their approach to the quotation, possibly ignoring the internal 'definition' and focusing on



'meditative' without attempting to define it themselves, possibly focusing on 'state of mind' to the exclusion of everything else. Higher band candidates may well take 'putting into words' as a cue to consider poetry as process.

- AO2i The final lines of the specified poem prompt candidates to consider genre and the inherent differences between poetry and prose. Reward against this AO will depend on the extent to which candidates pursue this and also on the type and range of other poems they choose to examine.
- AO3 Candidates are likely to be divided here between those who focus on parts of the poem, looking perhaps at Keats' use of imagery in capturing states of mind, and those who also look at the poem as a whole, as a meditation 'putting into words...a state of mind' and coming to a conclusion. Breadth of analysis here will also be governed by a candidate's range of reference outside the specified poem.
- AO4 Lower band candidates are likely to consider only part of the proposition and may do little more than talk loosely about mood in Keats' poetry, while higher band candidates are likely to consider the proposition in all its parts (and may even challenge it).

(Source: Edexcel mark scheme, June 2003)

2 'Keats: the poet of the senses.' Explore your response to this view and the uses Keats makes of sensory perceptions by examining 'To Autumn' and any other appropriate poem (or section from a longer poem) of your choice.

- AO1 The key words that require understanding and defining are: *poet of the senses*, *view*, *uses*, *sensory perceptions*, *appropriate*. Higher band answers are likely to apply this understanding to the set task, addressing both text (the given poem and other appropriate poems) and task in an analytical and comprehensive manner, providing detailed supporting evidence for a range of arguments, while lower band answers are likely to show a basic awareness of these key terms, and rely more on description of the scene in the poem and Keats' main theme.
- AO2i A key discriminator here is likely to be the range and choice of textual references within the candidates' answers. Higher band answers are likely to explore the generic features of the text (e.g. the ode form) and thoughtfully link this to the requirements of the task, while lower band answers are likely to be limited in their understanding of the text's generic features, the demands of the task and in the range of textual references made, frequently describing the poem's subject matter and main theme.
- AO3 Higher band answers are likely to analyse Keats' use of language and structural devices (e.g. imagery and rhyme schemes) more closely than lower band answers, with a firmer grasp of the poet's intended effects. They are also more likely to see variety in the forms and language features adopted by Keats. Lower band answers are more likely to describe or narrate events or features of the text. How the candidates relate the given poem to their own chosen poem(s) are likely to be key discriminators.



AO4 Higher band answers are likely to explore a range of views and a range of textual supporting evidence in addressing, and possibly challenging, the task or main proposition in a direct and sustained way, while lower band answers are likely to accept the task or proposition and to describe and possibly exemplify the main theme, producing assertions, not arguments.

(Source: Edexcel mark scheme, June 2003)

3 'In many of his poems Keats starts out from the familiar and everyday but quickly takes us off into different territory.' In the light of this comment explore Keats' poetic methods in 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

Possible ideas to include in a plan

- 'I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds' (letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 25 October 1818)
- heard bird singing (on Hampstead Heath in London); real but not exactly everyday experience (cf. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn')
- trigger for poem is a sublime appeal to the senses, in this case hearing
- different mental territory but not physical: movement from celebration of life to death wish
- nightingale changes from real bird to mythological character and symbol of history, immortality and romance
- description of journey into dark woods represents flight of fancy of persona
- 'viewless wings of Poesy' is the gateway to 'heaven's bourne' (Wasserman)
- language becomes ecstatic and kinetic ('I will fly to thee')
- fusion between heavy persona and light bird
- the 'return' pivot on use of word 'forlorn' between last two stanzas; comes back to earth and everyday world with a bump
- persona back in real world but unable to tell whether the experience was a dream
- typical of Keats to investigate the ambiguities and borderlines between waking and sleeping states
- reveals Keats' longing for immortality through poetry and his desire to escape the pains and mutability of this world

Further questions

- 4 With reference to 'Hyperion' and one other poem of your choice, discuss the use Keats makes of classical/Greek mythology in his work.**
- 5 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever.' Discuss this claim with reference to 'Endymion' and one of the odes.**
- 6 Critics have commented that the main impact of Keats' poetry lies in his use of imagery. Using 'Ode on Melancholy' as your starting point, explore the ways in which Keats uses images to present thoughts and feelings.**
- 7 'The Eve of St Agnes' is a better narrative poem than 'Lamia'. How far do you agree with this judgement?**



- 8** In the odes the poet seems to take up the position of mediator. With reference to at least two odes, discuss this claim and explain what is being mediated.
- 9** “‘The Eve of St Agnes’ is built up as a series of deliberate contrasts.’ By means of a close examination of three distinct passages, explore Keats’ varied use of contrast in the poem in the light of this comment.
- 10** ‘Keats characteristically gives visual form to the idea that human life is soon over.’ Do you agree? You should base your answer on ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and a poem of your choice.
- 11** Keats said that ‘Poetry should surprise by a fine excess.’ Discuss this remark in relation to two of the odes.
- 12** How is Porphyro presented in ‘The Eve of St Agnes’ — as a romantic lover or as a scheming seducer taking advantage of a young girl’s naivety? You should refer closely to the poem to support your discussion.
- 13** Ricks says that ‘Keats’ poetry can accommodate what are ordinarily incompatible impulses’. How far is this true of ‘Lamia’?

Poem-based questions: selected

- 1** Keats held that ‘a long poem is a test of Invention’. Basing your answer on a close examination of *two or three* extracts from *one* of the longer poems, consider the ways in which Keats plays with narrative technique to sustain the reader’s interest.
 - AO1 Although the question seeks to clarify the terms of the quotation by referring to ‘narrative technique’ in the context of sustaining ‘the reader’s interest’, what is likely to distinguish candidates is their interpretation of both ‘Invention’ and ‘test’: lower band candidates are likely not to consider why a long poem might be construed as a test and therefore to discuss ‘Invention’ in isolation, interpreting it very possibly as ‘innovation’, while higher band candidates will see the two as interdependent and related to the effect of the poem on the reader.
 - AO2i The question focuses on ‘long poems’, and candidates are likely to be divided between those who seek to distinguish between these and other kinds of poem, and those who do not. Choice both of poem and of extracts will be key here, with some candidates considering only a limited range of narrative techniques, while others look at a variety of both narrative and other techniques.
 - AO3 In asking candidates to examine ‘the ways in which Keats plays with narrative techniques’, the question directs candidates to a consideration of structure; lower band candidates are likely to do little more than give instances of different types of narrative technique, while higher band candidates will consider Keats’ deliberate manipulation of not only structure but language to achieve particular effects.
 - AO4 Lower band candidates are likely not to pursue the suggestion that long poems pose particular problems in terms of sustaining the reader’s interest, while higher band candidates will explore the variety of ways in which Keats ‘plays with narrative techniques’, possibly relating their comments on this back to his own statement



about long poems being 'a test of Invention', and perhaps even questioning whether 'Invention' is necessarily an appropriate term to use to describe what he actually does in the longer poems.

(Source: Edexcel mark scheme, January 2001)

2 'For Keats, *how* he writes about a subject or an idea is often more important than the idea itself.' Consider your response to this view. In your answer you should examine *at least two* poems or sections from the longer poems.

AO1 The key words and literary terms in the task that require understanding and defining, and which are likely to be key discriminators, are: *how, idea, more important, subject*. Higher band answers are likely to apply this literary understanding to the set task, addressing both text (chosen poems) and task in an analytical and comprehensive manner, providing detailed supporting evidence for a range of arguments, while lower band answers are likely to show a basic awareness of these key words and literary terms, and rely more on description of scene, action or theme.

AO2i A key discriminator here is likely to be the range and choice of textual references within the candidates' answers. Higher band answers are likely to explore the generic features of the poems and thoughtfully link this to the requirements of the task, while lower band answers are likely to be limited in their understanding of the poems' generic features, the demands of the task and in the range of textual references made, frequently describing events and the poet's ideas.

AO3 Higher band answers are likely to analyse the poet's use of language (be it grammatical, structural, poetical or rhetorical devices) more closely than lower band answers, with a firmer grasp of the poet's intended effects. They are also more likely than lower band answers to see variety in the manner of the presentation of description, action, tone and themes. Lower band answers are more likely to describe features of the text and the poet's use of language. Discussion and analysis of the chosen poems, together with how they relate to the candidate's argument, are probably discriminators.

AO4 Higher band answers are likely to explore a range of views and a range of textual supporting evidence in addressing, and possibly challenging, the proposition in a direct and sustained way, while lower band answers are likely to accept the proposition and to describe and possibly exemplify the main theme, producing assertions, not arguments.

(Source: Edexcel mark scheme, June 2003)

Further questions

3 'There is a tension in Keats' poetry between the "immortal spirit...free/As the sky-searching lark" which he creates, and the deliberate and precise poetic form which he adopts.' Do you agree? You should base your answer on a detailed examination of *two or three* individual poems or sections from one or more of the longer poems.



- 4** What is the evidence, from *three* poems you have studied, that Keats was a Romantic poet?
- 5** Compare and contrast two of Keats' odes.
- 6** With close reference to *two* poems of your choice, discuss Keats' qualities as a narrative poet.
- 7** Examine Keats' ability to create contrasting atmospheres in his poetry by analysing two poems.
- 8** 'What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape/Of deities or mortals, or of both,/In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?' Explore Keats' poetic treatment of the scenes he takes from mythology. You should base your answer on a detailed examination of *two or three* individual poems or sections from several longer poems.
- 9** 'Although its subject matter is abstract, Keats' poetry relies on close observation and description of the physical world.' Say whether you agree, basing your answer on a detailed examination of *three* individual poems or sections from longer poems.
- 10** 'Romanticism consists of the strange, the exotic and the grotesque.' Illustrate the truth of this statement by exploring the themes and techniques of Keats' poetry. Select two or three key passages.

Whole-text questions: open book

- 1** How can the following quotation from 'Endymion' IV, 646–48 be applied to Keats' work as a whole?

There never liv'd a mortal man, who bent
His appetite beyond his natural sphere,
But starv'd and died.

Possible ideas to include in a plan:

- consistent preoccupation in poetry with borderline between mortal/immortal
- appetite key concept in Keats – linked to senses and desires
- frequent use of word 'sweet' and related food and taste words
- starvation a metaphorical concept in Keats – nourishment needed for imagination
- death a recurring event or reference throughout work – and Keats' life
- early poems like 'The Eve of St Agnes' and sonnets advocate indulgence in the senses as escape route from harsh reality to happiness
- by last poems, e.g. 'Lamia', those who pursue unnatural appetites cut themselves off or are punished
- in 'Endymion' the poet learns to be satisfied with an imperfect realisation of the ideal
- but 'Fancy' (published 1820 and therefore a late opinion on the subject) seems to condone letting fancy roam since pleasure and beauty cannot otherwise be found in the everyday domestic world
- quotation is typical of Keats' philosophy of irreconcilable opposites: senses deceive but also sustain, and reason is an impoverished diet, inadequate for a poet