



Working with the text

Meeting the Assessment Objectives

The four key English literature Assessment Objectives (AOs) describe the different skills you need to show in order to get a good grade. Regardless of what texts or what examination specification you are following, the AOs lie at the heart of your study of English literature at AS and A2; they let you know exactly what the examiners are looking for and provide a helpful framework for your literary studies.

The Assessment Objectives require you to:

- articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and concepts, and coherent, accurate written expression **(AO1)**
- demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, form and language shape meanings in literary texts **(AO2)**
- explore connections and comparisons between different literary texts, informed by interpretations of other readers **(AO3)**
- demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood **(AO4)**

Try to bear in mind that the AOs are there to support rather than restrict you; don't look at them as encouraging a tick-box approach or a mechanistic reductive way into the study of literature. Examination questions are written with the AOs in mind, so if you answer them clearly and carefully you should automatically hit the right targets. If you are devising your own questions for coursework, seek the help of your teacher to ensure that your essay title is carefully worded to liberate the required Assessment Objectives so that you can do your best.

Although the Assessment Objectives are common to all the exam boards, each specification varies enormously in the way they meet the

requirements. The boards' websites provide useful information, including sections for students, past papers, sample papers and mark schemes.

AQA: www.aqa.org.uk

EDEXCEL : www.edexcel.com

OCR: www.ocr.org.uk

WJEC: www.wjec.co.uk

Remember, though, that your knowledge and understanding of the text still lie at the heart of A-level study, as they always have done. While what constitutes a text may vary according to the specification you are following (e.g. it could be an article, extract, letter, diary, critical essay, review, novel, play or poem), and there may be an emphasis on the different ways texts can be interpreted and considering the texts in relation to different contexts, in the end the study of literature starts with, and comes back to, your engagement with the text itself.

Working with AO1

AO1 focuses upon literary and critical insight, organisation of material and clarity of written communication. Examiners are looking for accurate spelling and grammar and clarity of thought and expression, so say what you want to say, and say it as clearly as you can. Aim for cohesion; your ideas should be presented coherently with an overall sense of a developing argument.

Think carefully about your introduction, because your opening paragraph not only sets the agenda for your response but provides the reader with a strong first impression of you — positive or negative. Try to use 'appropriate terminology' but don't hide behind fancy critical terms or complicated language you don't fully understand; 'feature-spotting' and merely listing literary terms is a classic banana skin all examiners are familiar with. Choose your references carefully; copying out great gobbets of a text learned by heart underlines your inability to select the choicest short quotation with which to clinch your argument. Regurgitating chunks of material printed on the examination paper without detailed critical analysis is — for obvious reasons — a reductive exercise; instead try to incorporate brief quotations into your own sentences, weaving them in seamlessly to illustrate your points and develop your argument. The hallmarks of a well-written essay — whether for coursework or in an exam — include a clear and coherent introduction that orientates the reader, a systematic and logical argument, aptly chosen and neatly embedded quotations and a conclusion that consolidates your case.



Working with AO2

In studying a text you should think about its overall form (novel, sonnet, tragedy, farce etc.), structure (how it is organised, how its constituent parts connect with each other) and language. In studying a long novel or a play it might be better to begin with the larger elements of form and structure before considering language, whereas analysing aspects of a poem's language (imagery, for example) might be a more appropriate place to start. If 'form is meaning', what are the implications of your chosen writer's decision to select this specific genre? In terms of structure, why does the on-stage action of one play unfold in real time while another spans months or years? In terms of language features, what is most striking about the diction of your text — dialogue, dialect, imagery or symbolism?

In order to discuss language in detail you will need to quote from the text — but the mere act of quoting is not enough to meet AO2. What is important is what you do with the quotation — how you analyse it and how it illuminates your argument. Moreover since you will often need to make points about larger generic and organisational features of your chosen text such as books, chapters, verses, cantos, acts or scenes which are usually much too long to quote, being able to reference effectively is just as important as mastering the art of the embedded quotation.

Working with AO3

AO3 is a double Assessment Objective which asks you to 'explore connections and comparisons' between texts as well as showing your understanding of the views and interpretations of others. You will find it easier to make comparisons and connections between texts (of any kind) if you try to balance them as you write; remember also that connections and comparisons are not only about finding similarities — differences are just as interesting. Above all, consider how the comparison illuminates each text. It's not just a matter of finding the relationships and connections but of analysing what they show. When writing comparatively, use words and constructions that will help you to link your texts, such as 'whereas', 'on the other hand', 'while', 'in contrast', 'by comparison', 'as in', 'differently', 'similarly', 'comparably'.

To access the second half of AO3 effectively you need to measure your own interpretation of a text against those of your teacher and other students. By all means refer to named critics and quote from them if it seems appropriate, but the examiners are most interested in your personal and creative response. If your teacher takes a particular critical line, be prepared to challenge and question it; there is nothing more

dispiriting for an examiner than to read a set of scripts from one centre which all say exactly the same thing. Top candidates produce fresh personal responses rather than merely regurgitating the ideas of others, however famous or insightful their interpretations may be.

Your interpretation will only be convincing if it is supported by clear reference to the text, and you will only be able to evaluate other readers' ideas if you test them against the evidence of the text itself. Worthwhile AO3 means more than quoting someone else's point of view and saying you agree, although it can be very helpful to use critical views if they push forward an argument of your own and you can offer relevant textual support. Look for other ways of reading texts — from a Marxist, feminist, new historicist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, dominant or oppositional point of view — which are more creative and original than merely copying out the ideas of just one person. Try to show an awareness of multiple readings with regard to your chosen text and an understanding that the meaning of a text is dependent as much upon what the reader brings to it as what the writer left there. Using modal verb phrases such as 'may be seen as', 'might be interpreted as' or 'could be represented as' implies that you are aware that different readers interpret texts in different ways at different times. The key word here is plurality; there is no single meaning, no right answer, and you need to evaluate a range of other ways of making textual meanings as you work towards your own.

Working with AO4

AO4, with its emphasis on the 'significance and influence' of the 'contexts in which literary texts are written and received', might at first seem less deeply rooted in the text itself but in fact you are considering and evaluating here the relationship between the text and its contexts. Note the word 'received': this refers to the way interpretation can be influenced by the specific contexts within which the reader is operating; when you are studying a text written many years ago, there is often an immense gulf between its original contemporary context of production and the twenty-first century context in which you receive it.

To access AO4 successfully you need to think about how contexts of production, reception, literature, culture, biography, geography, society, history, genre and intertextuality can affect texts. Place the text at the heart of the web of contextual factors that you feel have had the most impact upon it; examiners want to see a sense of contextual alertness woven seamlessly into the fabric of your essay rather than a clumsy bolted-on rehash of a website or your old history notes. Try to convey

Taking it **Further** >

The *Casebook on Othello*, edited by John Wain, gives examples of interpretations by different readers over time: see the *Taking it further* section, p. 108 of this guide



your awareness of the fact that literary works contain embedded and encoded representations of the cultural, moral, religious, racial and political values of the society from which they emerged, and that over time attitudes and ideas change until the views they reflect are no longer widely shared. And you're right to think that there must be an overlap between a focus on interpretations (AO3) and a focus on contexts, so don't worry about pigeonholing the AOs here.

Examinations

You may be studying *Othello* as an examination text or for coursework.

Examination essay questions

1 'Iago "rewrites" *Othello*: a play which begins as a romantic comedy, but which ends as a tragedy.'

Evaluate the relationship between tragedy and comedy in *Othello* in the light of this comment.

Top band answers to this question demonstrated the following features:

AO1	creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts, articulated using appropriate terminology and concepts, and coherent, accurate written expression consistently fluent, analytical writing confident perceptive evaluation of the relationship between tragedy and comedy in <i>Othello</i> in well-structured, informed argument
AO2	consistently well-informed and perceptive analysis of imagery, language and dramatic effects, paying particular attention to the rhetoric of Iago
AO3	well-developed, perceptive judgements consistently informed by explorations of different readings of the text
AO4	consistently effective and well-developed understanding of the significance and influence of context, particularly the relationship between tragedy and comedy and the play's stage history

Note the repetition of the key terms **analytical**, **consistent**, **confident**, **perceptive**, **well-informed**, **well-developed** and **well-structured**.

These are the goals of all literary study at A-level. AO1 requires attention to the particular concepts referred to in the question — in this case, tragedy and comedy. AO2 is particularly concerned with language

because it plays such an important role in this play: how does Iago's rhetoric enable him to gain such a hold over Othello? AO3 requires your judgements to be illustrated by reference to the views of other readers (not just of critics, but of different producers as shown by their productions of the play). AO4 requires a knowledge of the play's historical and social context as well as of its stage history.

2 Othello has been described as 'fatally self-centred' and 'lacking in self-knowledge'.

Evaluate Shakespeare's presentation of Othello in the light of this view.

Top band answers to this question demonstrated the following features:

AO1	consistently fluent, analytical writing confident perceptive evaluation of presentation of the character Othello in well-structured, informed argument
AO2	consistently well-informed and perceptive analysis of imagery, language and dramatic effects, paying particular attention to the rhetoric of Othello
AO3	well-developed, perceptive judgements consistently informed by explorations of different readings of the text
AO4	consistently effective and well-developed understanding of the significance and influence of context, particularly the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero, race and culture in the play, and the play's stage history

Again, note the repetition of the key terms **analytical, consistent, confident, perceptive, well-informed, well-developed** and **well-structured**. AO1 requires attention to the particular concepts referred to in the question — in this case, the character of Othello. AO2 is particularly concerned with language, because it plays such an important role in this play: how does Othello's rhetoric reveal his character? AO3 requires your judgements to be illustrated by reference to the views of other readers (not just of critics, but of different producers as shown by their productions of the play). AO4 requires a knowledge of the play's historical and social context as well as of its stage history.

Practice essay titles

1 'It is essential to the development of the play's tragic situation that Othello, Iago and Cassio are soldiers.'

Evaluate the importance of the military aspect of *Othello* in the light of this comment.



- 2** ‘Both Othello’s jealousy itself and the speed with which it develops are absurd.’
Evaluate the plausibility of the plot of *Othello* in the light of this comment.
- 3** ‘Jealousy in the play is not confined to Othello.’
Evaluate the importance of the jealousy in *Othello* in the light of this comment.
See online at www.philipallan.co.uk/literatureguidesonline for a sample essay answer (essay 2).
- 4** Wilson Knight said ‘Othello loves emotion for its own sake, luxuriates in it.’
Evaluate the character of Othello in the light of this comment.
- 5** ‘The enduring interest of the play is its treatment of race and the outsider.’
Evaluate the roles of race and alienation in *Othello* in the light of this comment.
- 6** ‘The great failing of *Othello* is that Desdemona and Emilia are too weak and easily deceived to be convincing.’
How far do you agree with this criticism of the play?
Evaluate the roles of the women in *Othello* in the light of this comment.
See the sample essay on pp. 103–05 of this guide for a suggested answer.
- 7** ‘The play is a beautifully contrived arrangement of patterns.’
Evaluate the roles of patterns in the plot of *Othello* in the light of this comment.
- 8** Bradley says of Iago, ‘He is the spirit of denial of all romantic values.’
Evaluate the character of Iago in the light of this comment.
- 9** Leavis claimed that ‘Othello is too stupid to be regarded as a tragic hero.’
Evaluate the character of Othello in the light of this comment.
- 10** ‘*Othello* is the tale of a gullible hero deceived by a melodramatic villain.’
Evaluate the characters of Iago and Othello in the light of this comment.
- 11** *Othello* has been described as ‘much ado about a handkerchief’.
Evaluate the role of the handkerchief in *Othello* in the light of this comment.

12 ‘The real tragedy of the play is that Othello proves that the world really is as Iago sees it.’

Evaluate the roles of viewpoint and perception in *Othello* in the light of this comment.

13 ‘*Othello* is a tragedy without meaning and that is the ultimate horror of it.’

Evaluate the play in the light of this comment.

Coursework

Othello is a play which may be selected as a coursework text for several examination boards. Coursework tasks can be of two kinds:

- critical or explorative study (generally comparative)
- re-creative piece or creative response

There is a very useful document provided by AQA on their website entitled ‘Teacher Resource Bank: Coursework Guidance’ specifically for this unit. It includes suggested texts which can be studied with *Othello*.

Sample coursework title for comparative critical study

1 Compare and contrast the differing ways in which the theme of love is treated in *Othello*, *Wuthering Heights* and Plath’s poems. Particular attention should be paid to the ways in which form, structure and language are used by the authors to communicate their themes. What light is thrown upon the evolving treatment of this theme by the responses of readers and critics to these works?

TASK 11

Here is the introduction to a candidate’s coursework piece addressing the title above.

All three of these works are about love. Love is a very important theme in these books. In the case of *Othello*, it is unhappy love and ends tragically. In some ways in *Wuthering Heights* it is tragic too, but not completely, because there is resolution. Sylvia Plath was also tragic, although in her case it was in real life and not in her works. The common theme in all these books is the betrayal of love. In every case the woman is betrayed by the man, but for different reasons. In this essay I will contrast the different betrayals and show that, although the surroundings change, the betrayal is the same at heart.

How would you improve this introduction? A rewritten version is available on the series website at: www.philipallan.co.uk/literatureguidesonline.



Sample coursework titles for explorative study, comparing *Othello* with *Much Ado About Nothing*

- 1** Coleridge states that Iago is 'a being next to the devil' driven by 'motiveless malignity'. Comparing the presentation of Iago and Don John, and considering the context of the plays in performance, how far do you agree that the villains are purely evil?
- 2** F. R. Leavis states that 'Iago's power...is that he represents something that is in Othello...the essential traitor is within the gates.' Comparing the presentation of Othello and Claudio, and considering the context of the plays in performance, how far do you agree that the villains' success relies upon the character flaws of these men?
- 3** Marilyn French states that Desdemona 'accepts her culture's dictum that she must be obedient to males'. Comparing the presentation of Desdemona and Hero, and considering the context of the plays in performance, how far do you agree that the women of these plays are victims of the misogynistic values of their societies?

See online for a sample essay answer (essay 3).

Sample re-creative coursework titles

- 1** Taking *Othello* as your starting point, write a re-creative piece in which a manipulative young man attempts to twist the mind of his rival by suggesting that the rival's girlfriend has been cheating on him. You will need to explore the motives of the Iago-character and the weaknesses of the Othello-character. What role does the Desdemona-girlfriend play?
- 2** Write Michael Cassio's account of the events he has witnessed in Cyprus from the arrival of Othello to his dramatic death, in the form of a dramatic monologue. You should aim to create an authentic voice for Michael Cassio which builds upon Shakespeare's presentation of his character.

Sample coursework titles for creative critical response

- 1** View a performance of *Othello* upon which reviews have been written. Write your own review of the performance in which you both give your own views and respond to the views expressed by others.
- 2** Write the script of a talk to be given to your fellow students about two different film versions of *Othello*. In your comparison you should explain your own views.

3 Identify one scene in *Othello* which directors regard as being difficult to stage. Write the script for a talk to be given by you as director outlining the problems posed by this scene and explaining how you propose to overcome them in your production.

Sample essay

Below is a sample essay written by a student in answer to an essay question. It has been assessed as falling within the top band.

‘The great failing of *Othello* is that Desdemona and Emilia are too weak and easily deceived to be convincing.’

How far do you agree with this criticism of the play?

Evaluate the roles of the women in *Othello* in the light of this comment.

The criticism that Desdemona and Emilia are too weak and easily deceived is a good argument to be considered. There are many arguments for and against this claim, but I think that there are more arguments against this claim, which I will now outline. Emilia is not a weak character, and I think she represents how the female voice should be heard. Emilia not only defends herself but her sex when Iago derides women: ‘You shall not write my praise’. She is also sharp witted — ‘is this man not jealous?’ and has such strength that she says what she thinks — ‘I will not charm my tongue I am bound to speak’. Emilia also becomes her mistress’ defender, she is a strong character as well as convincing.

Her only flaw is that she did not understand her husband Iago, and was deceived by him. Even though this does happen, she had suspicions about him all along which is why she repeats ‘my husband’ several times when Othello tells her about him because she is thinking her doubts and suspicions through. If Emilia was ‘weak’ then she would not have the ability to bring about the downfall of the clever and extremely convincing Iago. She begins the process which leads to Iago’s undoing — showing her intelligence as well as her strength.

I think that Desdemona is represented very differently from Emilia, as she is weaker than Emilia, but she is still a very strong convincing character. Brabantio says she was a ‘maiden never bold of spirit so quiet and still that her motion

Taking it **Further** >

There is a list of film and television productions of *Othello* in the *Taking it further* section (p. 109 of this guide). This is an easy way of looking at varying readings of the play.



blushed at herself'. Yet when she enters, she contradicts everything that has been said about her because she is perceptive — 'I do perceive a divided duty' — and shows an ability to sort out problems — 'I am hitherto your daughter but here is my husband'. She is so strong that she has asserted her independence from a male patriarchy. This was an extremely brave thing to do because women had little power, and had to do what their 'men' relationships told them to do. Thus Desdemona is not only strong but she is responsible, sensitive 'a child to chiding' and is extremely sympathetic (for example Othello's headache).

I think Shakespeare has presented Desdemona as such an innocent character that she does not fully understand the depth of Othello's jealous emotions. She totally misinterprets the handkerchief case, and even when Othello was getting more and more angry, she kept talking about Cassio which suggested she had feelings for him. She has such love and commitment for Othello, she wants to live with him in every sense and can't bear to be parted from him — 'the rites for which I love him are bereft me, let me go with him'. Yet her innocence and purity means she is blinded by her love for him, and does not truly understand him or the situation.

After examining the ideas for and against this argument I strongly disagree with the statement because neither Emilia or Desdemona are weak. I think Shakespeare has presented the strength of womanhood. He has presented a wide viewpoint on women. Emilia who is pragmatic about relationships — 'they are all but stomachs and we all but food' — and Desdemona who is idealistic — 'tell me Emilia that there be wives that do abuse their husbands in such gross kind'. Both characters are trying to understand men in the world they live in. Iago's misogyny triumphs, however, as even when Emilia and Desdemona are alone talking, the topic is men and how to interpret them.

Desdemona is presented as such a strong character that even when Othello hits her she says 'I have not deserved this' but respects Othello's authority over her, and does not put up a fight when Othello kills her. She will even damn herself by lying for Othello — 'Nobody, I farewell' shows how she won't tell Emilia that Othello killed her. As Marilyn French (a twentieth-century critic) said, 'Desdemona is a symbol of female passivity' and I strongly agree with this.

Top ten quotation >

The role of women in *Othello* is to show how women can be persecuted and vindicted [sic] by men. I think Shakespeare uses Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello* to represent how the strength of women in that society is increasing, giving inspiration and advice to the Shakespearean audience. In some cases I think Desdemona and Emilia are deceived, but they are wonderfully strong characters and their deaths represent their nobility. This is why I do not agree with this statement.

(Reproduced by kind permission of OCR)

TASK 12

Even though this essay would be awarded an A grade, it could still be improved in terms of content, style and accuracy. Can you suggest how? Look online to see the examiner's comments.

Top ten quotations

...I am not what I am.

(Iago, I.1.66)

From the start Iago reveals to the audience that he is duplicitous, thus making it complicit and drawing attention to how gullible all the other characters are for not being able to see through him. The themes of false appearances and faulty judgement are thus introduced in the first scene, and Iago is presented as a dangerous Vice figure.

1

...an extravagant and wheeling stranger...

(Roderigo about Othello, I.1.137)

This description of Othello summarises the resentment the Venetians have towards the Moor: the way he looks, the way he talks, and the life he has led. The racist attitudes later expressed in 'sooty bosom' by Brabantio are already indicated here by the word 'stranger'. None of the Venetians, who include Iago (Cassio is a Florentine and therefore a stranger himself, which is partly why Iago hates him), accept Othello's right to seduce a local woman, especially one of noble birth, and the adjective 'wheeling' is an accusation of the use of magic to achieve that end, since otherwise how could a black man be preferred to them?

2

**The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so...**

(Iago, I.3.393–94)

This comment on Othello's character raises the irony that only an evil person can detect evil in others, and Othello is too trusting to be a match for Iago; he also naively underestimates the response of Brabantio to his daughter's elopement. The quotation continues the theme of duplicity.

3