

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 which examination specification you are following, these 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; do not 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, specifications vary 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 in which texts can be interpreted and considered 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 do not hide behind fancy critical terms or complicated language you do not 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, coherent introduction that orientates



the reader, a systematic and logical argument, aptly chosen and neatly embedded quotations and a conclusion which 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.

Of course 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 which 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 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 do not worry about pigeonholing the AOs here.

Extended commentary

This is an example of a commentary on two extracts from the novel — Lydia's letter in Chapter 47 (p. 276–77) and part of Darcy's letter to Elizabeth in Chapter 35 (pp. 191–94) — with a view to the requirements of AO2.

Lydia's and Darcy's letters compared

In Austen there is an expectation that characters produce their very best English when writing letters, especially to people who are only acquaintances and not family, as this is a permanent form and one by which other characters, as well as the reader, have an opportunity to judge the quality of their expression. Lydia writes as she speaks, thoughtlessly and chaotically, but her writing is a greater indictment of her than is her verbal expression when she chats to her sisters. In context, Lydia's letter should be at best contrite and at least informative and serious, but the aim is clearly to exult and show off.

The verb 'laugh' used immediately is associated throughout the novel with Lydia. It is a fault in her character and behaviour that she should find serious topics amusing and give way to unladylike expression of her thoughts and reference to physical actions. The letter favours coordination rather than subordination in its sentence structures. This is in contrast to Austen's morally approved of and better educated characters. The use of 'with who' in the second sentence is ungrammatical. This steers the reader into believing that Lydia is either ignorant or uncaring of correct expression, and, because an abuser of language, likely to have deficiencies in other aspects of her life. She calls her correspondent Harriet Forster (the wife of Colonel Forster, Commanding Officer of Wickham's regiment,

and considerably older than herself) a 'simpleton', which is too casual and insulting a word to be applied to someone senior and to whom she owes gratitude for having invited her to Brighton. To call Wickham 'an angel' is risibly inappropriate and stresses her lack of judgement and her view of life as a romantic delusion. She generally employs extremes and superlatives, which means that she is excessive in deed as well as word. Romantic clichés pepper her letter, as in 'I should never be happy without him', which do not sit well with such vulgar phrases as 'think it no harm to be off.' Many of the words Lydia uses are monosyllabic and do not live up to the standard of elegant utterance expected of polite society.

That she values surprising her parents over her filial duty towards them would have been seen as shocking at the time. With Lydia, drama and jokes are everything, thus showing the triviality of her mind. The exclamation mark, much favoured in all her utterances, is represented here also. How very inappropiate to be referring to another beau, the unfortunately named 'Pratt', when she has chosen her future partner already, and it is also not becoming that she should expect Harriet to pass on messages to soldiers for her. Reference to servants is not considered to be *à propos* in Austen's novels, and it is especially odd to find 'Sally' being named in a letter of such significance, implying that Lydia is incapable of understanding the effect that her elopement is going to have on others, and that she would not care if she did. It is more important to her to change her name and take precedence over her four elder sisters by being the first to be married. It is symbolic that there is 'a great slit' in her muslin gown, but her reputation will not be mended as easily. She ends her letter as vulgarly as she began, giving inappropriate 'love' to Colonel Forster and mentioning alcohol. The letter has neither a proper opening nor conclusion, showing a lack of consideration of content and of formal letter-writing etiquette.

Throughout the novel the way characters select topics, choose vocabulary and form syntax is indicative of their moral standing, and here we see Lydia failing in all three areas by treating the serious matter of her elopement as being of no more consequence than her clothing, by using repetitive and common or immoderate language, and by being unable to write in paragraphs.

A comparison with the structure and language of Darcy's letter in Chapter 35 shows how much is deficient in Lydia's letter. Darcy's tone is the opposite of exuberant, and this is not only because of the seriousness and delicacy of the content, but because every word has been carefully chosen to be decorous, elegant, and eloquent. He never uses a monosyllabic word when there is a longer synonym, and abstract nouns are the keynote of the letter, as they are of Austen's own narrative language and of all her heroes and heroines. Where Lydia would use



the word 'try', Darcy uses 'endeavour'; where she uses 'love' he uses 'sentiment'. Each sentence links to the previous one in developing its ideas, so that the letter has not only an overall structure but internal sequencing and cohesion. The sentences are complex, indicating that an intelligent mind is at work, one seeking to establish causes and effects in a logical manner. Each sentence has several clauses, some embedded, with many commas, which show control of syntax and competence in being able to express himself precisely and concisely. Words like 'apprehension', 'repugnance', 'impartial', 'propriety' and 'esteemed' are not only beyond Lydia's vocabulary, they are beyond her cognition. 'But I shall not scruple to assert' is a construction and use of vocabulary which places Darcy as an aristocrat in the use of language. Many of the sentences are finely balanced around an antithesis or consist of a tripartite structure in the rhetorical mode of the Augustan essayists, such as Dr Johnson, admired by Austen: for example, 'If *you* have not been mistaken here, *I* must have been in an error' (p. 192), or 'The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, by your three younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father' (p. 193).

Perhaps there is something too formal, too stilted and inflexible in the structure and language, since it is Austen's method to allow language to reveal personality and Darcy has yet to learn to become more yielding. Concern, consideration and intelligence are present in the style, however, and ease can come later. The opposite is harder to achieve, and there is no evidence in Lydia's letter that she can become a respecter of words and therefore of morals and of people. In Austen's use of direct speech — which is what a letter is, in written form — structure and language shape character and the reader's understanding of it.

Essay planning

See the free website at www.philipallan.co.uk/literatureguidesonline for sample essays, with grades and examiner's comments, and for further questions. Answers to the questions set as tasks in this section are also given online.

Comparative essay: whole-novel question

Examples of works with which *Pride and Prejudice* may be compared are *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles or *The Yellow Wallpaper*