

Unit 1

The Study of Prose

Introduction

Studying prose texts

While the study of a GCSE English Literature novel should ideally develop a natural enjoyment of the storyline, success in this examination does not solely depend on how well you ‘know the story’. Knowing the story *is*, however, a good start, laying the foundation on which you can develop all the other skills involved in analysing a prose text.

You will need to consider some important questions:

- Why did the author write this novel?
- What themes or issues did the author want to explore?
- What techniques did the author use in writing this novel?



You have to be able to identify and comment on the various skills and techniques used by the writer to make the story interesting and effective, such as character development and use of language.

In other words, when studying a novel for examination you are expected to show close engagement with all aspects of that text and show an understanding of the writer’s purpose and skills.

Key features of prose texts

First, you need to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the text. This will come from classroom experiences, personal study, essay practice and revision, and possibly internet research. If you are going to discuss and evaluate a novel thoroughly, the most important aspects are:

- **Plot** – the sequence of events that forms the storyline
- **Themes** – the important issues that the author wants to explore
- **Characters** – and the relationships between them, and how they develop
- **Setting** – the situation in which the story takes place
- **Language and style** – use of dialogue, imagery, various types of language.

These key features will be considered in more detail in the following chapters and there will be comments on the novel you are studying.

What kind of questions will be asked?

In the Prose unit (Unit 1), you will be assessed on your:

- knowledge and understanding of the novel you have studied
- understanding of the techniques the writer has used.

Foundation or Higher tier? – An important choice

F Foundation tier questions are slightly more straightforward than Higher tier questions. They also provide more help as they include bullet points which direct you to relevant areas of the novel. The downside is that at Foundation tier the highest grade you can achieve is a Grade C.

H Higher tier questions are more complex. They may encourage you to look at both sides of an argument, or the question may have an additional part. Higher tier questions have no bullet points, so there is little guidance about relevant areas of the novel to discuss. (It is not true that there is *no* guidance, as we shall see when we unpack a Higher tier question.) At Higher tier you can be rewarded with a grade up to Grade A*.

The examiner does not want to surprise you. When you know the question types in advance, you are more likely to produce your best work.

You can compare sample Foundation tier and Higher tier questions in the ‘Bringing it all together’ section (pages XX–XX).

Which question?

For each novel, there is a choice of questions. You may choose between writing a **character-focused** essay and a **theme-focused** essay.

The **(a)** question will ask for a **character-focused** essay. This should **not** be a general character ‘sketch’ or description. You must present your ideas about a character (or characters) in response to the specific question set.

The **(b)** question will ask for a **theme-focused** essay. You will have to present your ideas about a theme or issue in the text. You will already know from a detailed study of your novel what the main themes are.

[Image 01_02: Artwork of representation of Character versus Theme.]

Here are two questions on *Animal Farm*. At Foundation tier there will be bullet points to help you.

H (a) With reference to the ways Orwell **presents** Boxer, show how far you **admire** Boxer.

This question is not asking you to write a general description of Boxer’s character. You should focus your answer on Boxer’s admirable qualities.

H (b) Show that the Seven Commandments **fail** in the course of the novel.

Question **(b)** asks you to look at the theme of failure in the novel. The question, however is specific – focus on the failure of the Seven Commandments, don’t write about failure generally.

Extract or no extract?

The Prose unit (Unit 1) is a ‘closed-book’ examination. This means that you will not have a copy of the novel with you. So you cannot:

- search through the text to remind yourself of events and characters
- check quotations you wish to use.

You will have to rely on your knowledge of the text and ability to remember its features. A methodical revision programme leading up to the examination will help you.

However, one question, either **(a)** or **(b)**, will be based on an **extract** which you will receive along with the examination paper. It is important that you practise answering both kinds of question, so that in the exam you can choose the question that will give you the best chance to show your abilities.

Let’s now consider the challenges and advantages of each question type – the **extract-based question** and the **free-standing essay**.

The extract-based question

Many students like an extract because they feel it gives them a starting point. Then, when they have ‘settled in’, they can move on to ‘elsewhere in the novel’.

However, you must remember that a key word in the question is going to be **presents**, so the examiner is looking for your ideas about *how* the writer presents the material in the extract. You need to discuss in some detail things like **dialogue**, **language** and **imagery**, **paragraphing** or **punctuation**. Accurate and properly presented quotation from the extract is expected. You have been given the extract: it is up to you to use it!

In your answer you will need to **balance** use of the extract and ‘elsewhere in the novel’.

F At Foundation tier, bullet points will help you to balance your answer and suggest an effective order for you to deal with the material.

H There are no bullet points at Higher tier so you will need to **plan your answer**, allowing time to deal with both extract and ‘elsewhere in the novel’. You will also have to decide whether to start with the extract or not. To some extent, strong work in one area may compensate for less thorough work in another, but remember, both extract and ‘elsewhere in the novel’ need to be discussed in response to the specific question.

The free-standing essay

There is no extract to consider, so you may be able to make a quicker start, though you must remember how important it is to plan your answer.

F At Foundation tier, bullet points will help you to do this.

H At Higher tier there are no bullet points, and you may feel that there is very little support in the question. But this may not be true. Here is an example.

H With reference to the ways Steinbeck **presents** George, show how far you would agree that George is a **true friend** to Lennie.



This essay question does not tie you down to an extract, but gives you some freedom to select your own relevant material. You can choose whether to consider a limited amount of material in depth, or to write a broader essay which goes into less detail.

Examiner's tip!

The key terms will be printed in bold to help you.

Considering the writer's skill and technique

What does 'presents' mean?

This key term is found in almost every question set. It directs you to discuss the techniques used by the writer to create all aspects of the story which we, as readers, enjoy.

Whichever question type you select, you *must* attend to the key term **presents**. With no extract, you will do this in a general way, discussing such features as characterisation, structure and contrast. Any relevant references or quotations you can provide are valuable. With an extract-based question, you can deal with the techniques the writer has used in the extract in a detailed way, and then refer to the techniques used 'elsewhere in the novel' in a more general fashion.

Here are some writer's techniques and uses of language to consider:

Discussing the writer's techniques in a way which is relevant to the question will put you on the road to success in the Prose unit (Unit 1) and in the English Literature examination generally.

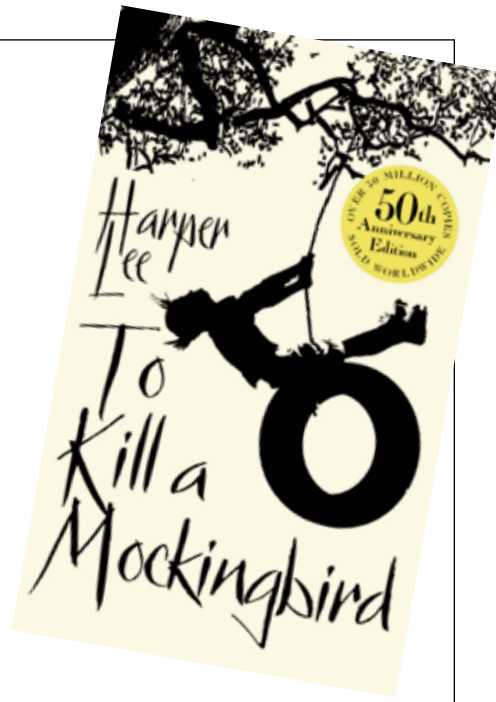
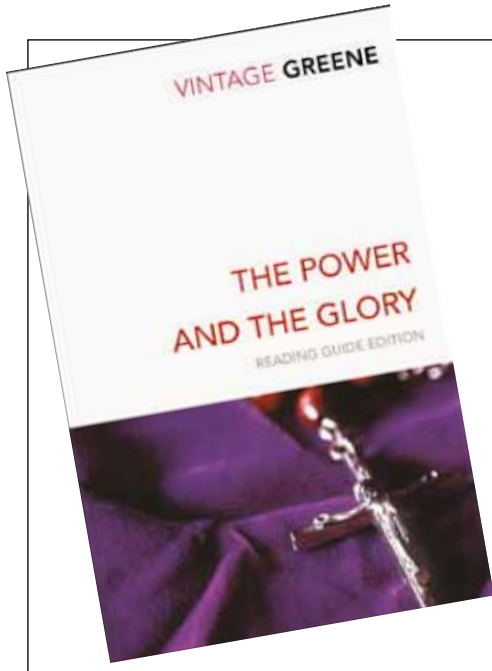
- **structure** of the text: e.g. chapters; use of climax; chronological ordering; flashback; introductions and conclusions; repetition, parallelism, comparison, contrast
- **descriptive techniques**: e.g. vocabulary choices; use of visual and aural imagery
- creation of **setting**: e.g. time; place; atmosphere
- creation of **character**: e.g. narrator's descriptions; use of dialogue; actions; interaction with others
- **narration**: e.g. omniscient narrator; first-person narrator; use of persona; autobiography
- use of **punctuation** and other **typographical effects**: e.g. italics; capitalisation; suspension points.

The six set texts in the Prose unit (Unit 1)

In the Prose unit of the English Literature examination, the six set texts are:

- *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (see pages XX–XX)
- *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (see pages XX–XX)
- *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene (see pages XX–XX)
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (see pages XX–XX)
- *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (see pages XX–XX)
- *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (see pages XX–XX)

You are required to study **one** of these texts.



[Images 01_04–01_09: Cover images of all set texts (editions that are recommended in spec/by CCEA) if possible – can be reused throughout in actual set text pages]

1

Setting

Key Word

Setting

The place and time of a story

In the English Literature examination, you may be asked to write about ‘characters, ideas, themes or settings’. In this section, we will look at what is meant by the setting of the novel you are studying.

Where and when

The setting is the background against which the characters carry out their actions. It is the place where the action happens, but also the historical time in which it happens. A novel can have more than one setting. We can speak of setting in a wide sense – a country for example; or in a narrow sense – a room. Settings can be based on a real time and place, such as 1930s Alabama in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or they can be imaginary, such as the farm where animals can talk in *Animal Farm*. Or they can be a mixture of both.

Why are settings important?

We will look at three reasons why settings in a novel are important:

- to add to our understanding of character and action
- to create atmosphere
- to create contrast.

To add to understanding of character and action

A setting may help us understand what is happening, and also *why* it is happening. For example, in *Things Fall Apart* the life of the main character, Okonkwo, falls apart. It adds greatly to our understanding that the setting for this event is West Africa, that Europeans have just arrived in the area, and that they are determined to destroy and replace the tribal way of life. So we come to understand that the title refers to much more than just the life of Okonkwo.

Correspondingly, the way Steinbeck describes the 1930s setting in *Of Mice and Men*, with its unemployment, enforced travel, work-tickets and job interviews, helps us understand how an event like Lennie’s death could happen, and why George felt as he did about it.

To create atmosphere

The setting can also be important in creating atmosphere. For example, *The Power and the Glory* begins with a description of a port town, with a ‘little burnt plaza’, a statue of an ‘ex-human being’, vultures looking for carrion, and a dirty, sluggish river. This creates an atmosphere of exhaustion and hopelessness, which is an important part of the meaning of the novel. Fortunately, the plot of the novel is an exciting one!

Consider the setting at the start of *Lord of the Flies*. The details of the description of the tropical island – the sunshine, the sand, the coral reef, the



deep swimming pool on the beach – show why the boys who survived the plane crash become pleased and excited, believing that they are part of a great adventure.

To create contrast

Often, a writer will use contrasting settings, for example as Steinbeck does in *Of Mice and Men* when he moves from the natural surroundings of the pool, with the deep green river and the animals coming to drink, to the bare and comfortless bunkhouse where George and Lennie will live. Why does Steinbeck choose to do this? Perhaps he is showing us something about one setting by contrasting it with another which is very different. Perhaps also he is showing us something about the characters by describing how they act in differing environments.

ACTIVITY 1

Considering setting

Complete these tasks for the novel you are studying.

- 1 In groups or with your teacher, select one setting from your novel which seems interesting and important (perhaps because an important event or a significant change took place there).
- 2 Make notes on how the writer describes the setting. Jot down important or memorable details.
- 3 Write a paragraph in which you:
 - explain what part the setting plays in the novel and what happens there
 - show how the writer uses language to describe the setting
 - explain why you think this setting is important.
- 4 Read your paragraph to other members of the group. Share your group's ideas with the whole class.

Examiner's tip!

Try to understand *how* writer the writer's uses settings and what intentions are.

Reviewing the setting of your chosen novel

Things Fall Apart

Some key settings:

- the marketplace and *ilo* (playground) of Umuofia, where several important events take place. The village is centred here.
- Okonkwo's compound. His family life is centred here.
- the wider setting, the area of West Africa near the Lower Niger, with its huts, farms, dirt tracks, and scrub and forest land.

Lord of the Flies

The island is doubly enclosed by the calm waters of the lagoon and by the coral reef. The 'snapping sharks' wait far away outside the reef, and the war in the air is 10 miles above the boys' heads. 'This is a good island,' says Ralph.

ACTIVITY 2

Settings in *Things Fall Apart*

- 1 Collect and note down some of the words and phrases which Achebe uses to describe these settings.
- 2 Write two short paragraphs outlining the main events which occur in the marketplace and in Okonkwo's compound.

ACTIVITY 3**Settings in *Lord of the Flies***

- 1 Why do you think Golding chose an island for the setting of his novel? Write a paragraph suggesting some reasons for his choice.
- 2 What are the important features of the geography of the island? Describe briefly what happens in each of the places you have mentioned.

***The Power and the Glory***

In this novel the setting is important as it helps create atmosphere. Greene emphasises the ugliness and depressingly run-down nature of the surroundings – whether he is describing the state capital or the outlying villages. ‘This was the atmosphere of a whole state.’

ACTIVITY 4**Settings in *The Power and the Glory***

- 1 Why do you think Greene sets the main part, of the novel in a run-down area? (Collect and be ready to use some of the words and phrases in these descriptions.)
- 2 Note the contrasting setting in Part 3 – the Lehrs’ hacienda. Why do you think Greene makes this contrast?

To Kill a Mockingbird

Lee sets the novel in Maycomb – the setting mostly corresponds to the roaming range of the young Scout. It is centred on the Finch family home, with a fairly clear geography embracing the courthouse with its jail, the Negro church, the town dump and the schoolyard. The time period is the 1930s, and there are references to Hitler and Roosevelt.

The town’s history is mentioned in Chapter 13, where its smallness and closed-in nature are emphasised – a town where Atticus believes ‘nobody has much chance to be furtive’.

ACTIVITY 5**Settings in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

- 1 Why might Lee wish to emphasise the remoteness and closed-in nature of the little town?
- 2 Collect and note down some of the words and phrases used to describe the sleepy little town.

Animal Farm

The setting is the farm; the action never crosses its boundaries. Within the farm, memorable events take place in the barn, in the farmyard, on the knoll and, for the final scene in the novel, in the farmhouse itself.

ACTIVITY 6

Settings in *Animal Farm*

- 1 Discuss in groups: Why do you think Orwell limits the setting in this way? He could, for example, have included scenes of Jones drinking in the Red Lion, or Frederick and Pilkington plotting on their farms, instead of just telling us about them. But he does not do so.
- 2 Write a paragraph suggesting reasons for his decision.

[Image 01_12:
Image/photo/film
still/cartoon still
of farm in
Animal Farm]

Of Mice and Men

There are four memorable settings:

- the pool on the Salinas River where the action begins and ends
- the bunkhouse
- Crooks's room
- the barn.

ACTIVITY 7

Settings in *Of Mice and Men*

- 1 Collect the words and phrases Steinbeck uses to describe these settings.
- 2 What does the description of the bunkhouse tell us about the lives of the ranch workers?
- 3 What does the description of Crooks's room tell us about Crooks and his life? Look closely at the details here, as Steinbeck has chosen them very carefully.
- 4 Why do you think Steinbeck ends the book in the setting where it began? There is one difference: at the start there is a realistic description of rabbits sitting then hurrying for cover, but at the end there is a gigantic rabbit which 'waggled its ears' and talked to Lennie. Why do you think Steinbeck included this detail?

Review

Make sure you understand the settings of your novel and the effects the writer wishes to create – **atmosphere, contrast, character and action.**