



# Sample essays

## Question 1

Read the passage beginning ‘‘I’m getting a pony for Christmas,’’ said Anita...’ (p. 99) and ending ‘...deep water-filled old mine shafts at the back of the Big House’ (p. 100).

How does Syal convey Meena’s character and her attitude to friendship here?

### Foundation tier

Your essay should mention:

- Meena’s feelings about Anita’s friendship with Sherrie
- Meena’s feelings about Anita
- Meena’s fears and hopes
- anything else which interests you

Note that the essays below are similar as they are based on the same comments and structure. The grade-A\* answer shows you how the grade-C answer can be improved.

### Grade-C answer

When this passage starts you know more about Anita than Meena does. She’s a show-off but sad inside. That’s why she says her parents will get her a horse. But they’ve obviously got no money because she’s wearing her mum’s old cardie. Meena still looks up to her, though, and wants to be friends.

‘much older than I had previously thought’

The above quotation shows that Meena has noticed that Anita is unhappy.

Meena is wearing a ‘hooded anorak and thick socks’ which makes her feel babyish but really it shows that her mum looks after her and makes her wear warm clothes



in winter when its cold. But Anita's mum lets her out in a summer dress and doesn't look after her properly.

Meena makes things up all the time. In this passage she imagines Anita and Sherrie one day living together in London. She's jealous. It's quite funny the way she makes up London too because she can only think of famous sights and a place she's heard of from a game.

So we see that Meena is still just a kid who doesn't know much. She hasn't been to many places because she's young. But somehow you can guess Meena will make something of her life but Anita won't. And it starts with her going to the grammar school at the end of the book. But Anita will probably end up 'in the gutter' as one of the other girls tells her.

In the extract Meena and Anita go past the Big House towards the fair. Meena will do almost anything Anita says and believe what Anita tells her — like making a cross whenever they pass the Big House because a witch lives there.

Later on Meena meets the lady in the Big House. She is called Mireille and not a witch at all so Meena learns that Anita says silly things.

But when she's young Meena believes Anita and thinks its why there's 'menace' at the Big House. Actually the 'menace' is because a little girl once drowned there.

Syal makes Meena look back as a grown up in this passage. That means she can use better language to explain. She doesn't have to stick to what the kids say to each other.

Although this answer meets the Assessment Objectives (AOs), it is short and some of the points (such as the evidence for Anita's jealousy and the fundamental differences between the two girls) could have been developed further to gain more marks. The isolated quotation after the first paragraph does not lead to anything very helpful. Strong candidates avoid the phrase 'the above quotation shows...' and embed their quotations in their sentences instead. Some of the language is too colloquial for a formal essay ('cardie', 'mum', 'kids') and in places it could be much more precise and less general ('says silly things', 'it's quite funny'). There is also a spelling mistake that will not impress the examiner ('its' instead of 'it's' in the phrase 'when its cold').

## Grade-A\* answer

At the opening of this passage, Syal ensures that the reader sees past Meena's narration to recognise Anita for what she really is. She is a rather pitiful and vulnerable child, 'airily' showing off about the pony that her inadequate, feckless parents will obviously never buy for her and wearing a cast-off cardigan of her mother's that is too big for her.



Meena, however — at the time, at least — is taken in. Although she spots the cardigan as a cast-off and the dress as old, she sees only a girl 'much older than I had previously thought' with whom she desperately wants to be best friends. Meena looks up to her.

Anita's appearance and manner make Meena feel wrong-footed and babyish in her 'hooded anorak and thick socks'. The subtext here is that Syal is contrasting Meena's careful and caring mother, who makes sure she is 'cosseted' and wears suitable clothes in winter, with the neglectful Deirdre Rutter who allows Anita out in a summer dress in late October and, we can guess from what we know of Deirdre, probably takes little interest in her daughter's welfare.

Meena is a daydreamer and a creator of stories, as Syal shows us throughout the novel, from the prelude when she romanticises her parents' past onwards. Here she colours her admission that she is 'blindingly jealous' with a glamorous picture of Anita and Sherrie living together in London in the future. It is, of course, a laughably implausible picture featuring a handful of famous sights of which Meena has seen photographs or TV footage, a horse in the kitchen and a place with a pretty name about which Meena knows only from the board game Monopoly.

Syal is showing us humorously just how childish Meena still is, with her limited knowledge of the world. But the reader has the sense that Meena will, one day, move away from Tollington to a more varied life: the grammar school opportunity and new home in prospect at the end of the novel is the just the start. Anita will, on the other hand, will almost certainly be stuck in Tollington, quite probably 'in the gutter' as Fat Sallie bellows at her in anger when they fight. Even Sherrie, the friend of whom Meena is so jealous here, moves away from Tollington with her family to a better life (in the Lake District) before the end of the novel.

In the extract Meena trots off with Anita past the Big House towards the fair and will, at this stage in the novel, do almost anything Anita says and believe what Anita tells her. For example, Anita superstitiously advises that Meena should cross herself 'every time yow pass' the Big House because a witch lives there. Much later in the novel, when Meena meets Mrs Singh who lives at the Big House with her husband, the older, wiser Meena discovers that her name is Mireille and comments wryly 'a rather elegant name for a witch I thought', having by then learned to disregard Anita.

In this extract, though, Meena is still 'dumbly' credulous: 'I should have guessed, it explained everything' Syal makes her say, accepting Anita's witch story as an explanation for the 'sense of menace surrounding the place'.

In fact, the reader can see clearly that the 'sense of menace' probably stems from the collective village memory of the drowning of Jodie Bagshot a few years earlier.



Meena recalls the atmosphere in the village — ‘three frantic days’ when the four-year-old disappeared and was eventually found drowned near the ‘deep water-filled old mine shafts’ in the grounds of the Big House. When Tracey Rutter almost meets the same fate at the end of the novel, Mireille Singh, now a flesh-and-blood character rather than a distorted figment of children’s imaginations, remembers Jodie’s death with horror.

Syal uses the voice of the adult Meena looking back on events in the early 1970s to fill in these background details — a contrast to the child’s direct speech conversation we have just read between the older Anita and the gullible, younger Meena.

This answer offers a detailed and perceptive analysis of the passage, meeting all the assessment objectives (AOs). It also skilfully relates the passage to the rest of the novel. The candidate recognises from the first sentence that Syal, as the author, is deliberately presenting her characters as part of an unfolding narrative to convey ideas and messages to the reader. The essay makes good use of short quotations tightly woven into sentences and uses well-chosen and apt vocabulary (‘romanticises’, ‘wrong-footed’, ‘gullible’ etc.) with accuracy.



## Question 2

Meena has grown up a lot and changed in many ways by the end of the novel. How does Syal show this?

### Foundation tier

Write about the ways in which Meena's feelings and life around her change during the novel. Mention:

- the friendship with Anita
- other things that happen to Meena
- ideas of your own

Remember to support your ideas with details from the novel.

Note that the essays below are similar as they are based on the same comments and structure. The grade-A\* answer shows you how the grade-C answer can be improved.

### Grade-C answer

There's a lot of change in *Anita and Me*. Meena grows up because of things that happen to her. I am going to write about four things that change things for Meena. They are being friends with Anita, going to hospital, Nanima and the new stuff in the village.

Anita is 'bold and brassy' and has a 'foghorn voice, foul mouth'. Meena thinks she's cool cos she isn't like her cousins Pinky and Baby and other Indian girls.

But they don't get on all the time and by the end of the book their friendship has come apart. They have different sorts of families and Anita's lot haven't had much education as well as being white.

And Anita gets pally (well more than that) with Sam whose a 'bad boy'. When he says horrible racist things at the fete Anita thinks he's really great so Meena says to her 'Anita Rutter, yow am a stupid cow sometimes' which shows that Meena is learning to stand up to Anita.

Later Anita boasts about watching Sam 'Paki-bashing'. That really upsets Meena so she jumps on a horse but then she falls off.

And that's the second thing which has an effect on Meena because her accident means hospital for months. While she's there she meets a clever boy named Robert. They like the same books and jokes and he becomes a proper friend. When she compares Anita with Robert and thinks about Anita in hospital, she says 'Anita and I had never been meant for each other.' She realises what a good friend is really like.



Then when Robert dies (he's very ill while Meena's in hospital) Meena is very sad but it makes her think in a more grown-up way.

The third thing to change Meena is Nanima, Meena's Nan. She's an old lady and she's had a hard life in India. That's why she is wise and doesn't mind what she says.

She stays with Meena's family for a few months and tells Meena lots of stuff about India. So she feels she belongs.

Meena quickly learns enough of Nanima's Indian language so that they can talk and they get really close.

When Meena and Nanima go for a walk with the baby in the pram, Meena looks after the other two. She is growing up and being more responsible.

Then Nanima gets homesick. Meena really doesn't want her to leave but she doesn't scream and shout. Instead she decides to be 'grown up' because that's what she has seen her parents do. This shows that she is a changed girl.

The fourth thing I want to mention is the way Tollington, Meena's village, changes at the end of the book.

By the end of the novel the old school has been knocked down. The fields are full of posts to show new houses are coming. Their going to have a supermarket and the new road is open. If the village grows much more it will be part of the nearest town and not a village any more. Meena is part of all that because she is leaving the village — and Anita too.

I have written about the four things which I think made Meena change most.

This candidate has tried to structure her essay logically and the four clear points work quite well. The points about Anita, Robert, Nanima and Tollington briefly meet the assessment objectives, but several points are underdeveloped — almost thrown away. Apart from jokes and books, what does Meena have in common with Robert and what does she really learn from him, for example? Unfortunately, the very short conclusion says nothing to gain any more marks. There is too much inappropriately informal language ('stuff', 'pally', 'cos'). The candidate also uses too many very general (and therefore sometimes inaccurate) phrases, such as 'really upsets Meena' and 'is very sad'. More incisiveness and more detail would have scored more marks. Finally, the spelling mistakes ('Sam whose "a bad boy"' instead of 'who's', 'responsible' instead of 'responsible' and 'Their going to have' instead of 'They're') will not impress the examiner.



## Grade-A\* answer

*Anita and Me* is a novel about change. Syal presents Meena as someone who changes and develops as she is influenced for two years, at an impressionable stage in her life, by things which happen around her. Her attitude and, in parallel, the community and village around her are dramatically different when she is eleven from how things were when she was nine. In this essay I shall consider four of these influences on Meena: the friendship with Anita; the stay in hospital; Nanima; and the new building in the village.

At age nine Meena is fascinated by the 'bold and brassy' Anita with her 'foghorn voice, foul mouth'. The attraction is that Anita is totally different from girls like Pinky and Baby and everyone else Meena knows.

As the novel proceeds Meena remains drawn to Anita and even feels affectionately sorry for her after Deirdre Rutter leaves. But Syal shows how the friendship is gradually disintegrating. There are many reasons for this, but mainly the two girls are culturally and educationally very different and there is a difference in social class. Meena also becomes increasingly detached from Anita because of the latter's growing relationship with Sam Lowbridge, the local 'Bad Boy'. Meena's feelings about Sam are complicated because she finds him charismatic in a way that she does not quite understand.

After Anita expresses admiration for Sam for shouting racist insults at the crowd at the fete, Meena confronts Anita and tells her what she really thinks for the first time. 'Anita Rutter, yow am a stupid cow sometimes' she says assertively — although she is apprehensive of the consequences afterwards when she thinks about what she has said.

Later Anita boasts that she was there when Sam and his moped-riding, lager-swilling group beat up the Indian 'bank manager' at the bus stop, and Meena overhears her. This upsets Meena so much that she leaps onto the back of Sherrie's horse, Trixie, as a reckless attention-seeking gesture.

At this point, Syal's plotting is very tight because the second major influence on Meena comes directly from her overhearing Anita's racist boasting. It is her fall from Trixie which puts Meena in hospital for four months, where she meets Robert and has a lot of time to think about herself, her friendships and her future.

'Anita and I had never been meant for each other,' she concludes in hospital. Syal presents her identifying with the 'bank manager'. Both he and Meena have been put in hospital, in different ways, by Sam and Anita.

At the hospital the biggest influence is the imaginative, bookish and intelligent Robert Oakes who has much more in common with Meena than Anita does.



She meets him only once face to face because of the elaborate quarantine arrangements required by Robert's serious illness. Otherwise they 'chat' by notes and messages and laugh at the same things. For the first time Meena understands how a real two-way friendship based on mutual respect and shared interests works.

She also learns how fragile such precious bonds can be because only a few days after Meena leaves hospital, Robert dies. Even the letter from Robert's well-mannered, decent, bereaved parents is a contrast with anything the Rutters could ever have done.

When Meena eventually hears Robert's voice she finds him quite 'posh' so his family, like the Kumars, is a very different social class from nearly everyone in Tollington. Syal is presenting these differences to show us how Meena has learned a great deal about life and about people in two years.

Third, Nanima, Meena's grandmother, is presented by Syal as an engaging and feisty old lady with 'gnarled brown fingers' and 'rheumy and mischievous eyes' and she is a major influence on Meena. She has lost everything in life several times and has acquired great wisdom as the result of her experiences.

When Nanima arrives in the Kumar household for an extended stay after Sunil's birth, she becomes, for Meena, the flesh-and-blood link with her Indian heritage that Syal's narrator feels she has never had before.

Meena quickly learns enough Punjabi to understand Nanima's stories and a real bond develops between the grandmother and her 'jungle' granddaughter.

'I knew Nanima was going to be fun when she rolled backwards into the farty settee and let out a howl of laughter,' Syal makes Meena say.

Then we see Meena beginning to think of others. When Syal shows Meena and Nanima walking together to Mr Ormerod's shop with Sunil in the pram, she is assuming real responsibility for two other people. This is a very different Meena from the self-centred child earlier in the novel who steals money to buy sweets and who takes the collection tin from Mr Ormerod's counter (to impress Anita) and pins the blame on her cousins.

But Nanima is homesick and does not enjoy winter in Wolverhampton so, six months later, she leaves to return to India. Meena had hoped for 'many more years with Nanima' so she is very upset and would like to shout 'Buy her a fur coat! Leave the heating on all night! Strap a sodding hot water bottle to her bosom and force-feed her rum!' Instead she decides to be 'grown up' and stoical because she has seen her parents 'swallow down anger and grief a million times'. This shows very clearly that her feelings about life and people have changed.



The fourth influence I want to highlight is the way in which Meena's physical environment — Tollington itself — is developing and growing almost out of recognition.

Syal deliberately sets her semi-autobiographical novel at a time and in a place which were changing rapidly. By the end of the novel, the village school has been bulldozed and replaced by a new one on an outlying estate. Fields and other land are marked out for new housing. A supermarket is to be built on the site of the old school. The new motorway link is open.

Soon Tollington will merge with the nearby town. That will mean its loss as a self-contained community. Meena observes when she comes home from hospital that 'The whole village had aged behind my back.'

These changes coincide with, and reflect the changes in, Meena as she grows up. It is now time to move away, enrol at the grammar school, make new friends. She must leave Anita and Tollington behind. Syal's rueful ending is inevitable.

I believe, and have tried to show, that the four influences discussed here are the main ones which Syal uses to show how much Meena changes during the novel, although, of course, there are others, such as Meena's discovery of Mireille at the Big House or the way she settles to her eleven plus exam revision.

This outstandingly confident essay is neatly structured, with a clear introduction, four points of discussion and a conclusion which acknowledges that there is more that could be said and makes two new points, thereby showing that the candidate has been intelligently selective with his material. The contrast between the friendships with Anita and with Robert is fully discussed, with reference to the effects of these relationships on Meena. The candidate also does well to notice the significance of Nanima in Meena's development. All the assessment objectives (AOs) are effortlessly met and the standard of writing is high: impeccable grammar and punctuation, and wide vocabulary.