



Sample essays

- What features does a C-grade essay have?
- How does an A-grade essay improve on that?
- What should you include in a good introduction and conclusion?
- What is an 'appropriate' essay style?

Two sample essays are provided below: grade C and grade A* answers to a character-based question. Read the grade C essay first and think how you could improve it. Then read the A* essay. Remember that there could be many different good approaches to the same essay. These sample essays are not meant to be learnt by heart and reproduced in the exam.

Foundation tier

- (a) What different impressions do you have of Mr Wickham in different parts of the novel?
Remember to write about the society he lives in. (12 marks)
- (b) How does Austen's way of writing create this impression of Mr Wickham?
(12 marks)

Grade C answer

(a) George Wickham is a character introduced early on in the novel as a rival to Darcy, but as the story goes on we learn that he is not what he first seems to be. To begin with Elizabeth is taken in by his good looks and chat, until she finds out more. There is no clue at all¹ to what he is really like.

When he first appears he is planning to join the army:

'...the young man wanted only regimentals to make him completely charming.'²

This shows he will be completely perfect once he is in an army uniform.

There is one weird moment when Darcy appears and he goes white³ but you can't work out why.

He talks to Elizabeth a lot after this and Elizabeth trusts him. It says he talks with 'gallantry'⁴ which implies he is a very pleasant man and the very opposite of Darcy. This makes the story he tells of Darcy's selfishness and greed more significant.

1 Not necessarily true — C grade because it fails to read between the lines

2 Good quoted evidence, contextual relevance could be mentioned

3 Poorly worded — ambiguous as to which of the two goes white

4 Incomplete understanding — in 1800, gallantry implied an eye for the ladies and the 'warm temper' alludes to his being quick to anger



5 Wrong word — and the sentence that follows is inappropriate in style

6 Some indication of understanding of social context but undeveloped

7 A good point made here, but the sum of money is inaccurate, expression is clumsy and the paragraph doesn't have the impact it could have

8 Slipping into story telling and irrelevance

9 Story telling — losing focus of the title — Wickham

10 Again, social context hinted at but undeveloped

11 Poor expression: 'shedloads'. Could do with evidence.

12 A good piece of evidence, but the analysis needs development

13 Interesting quotation but overlong — needs cutting

'...a dislike which I cannot but attribute in some measure to jealousy.'

He says that the late Mr Darcy intended to 'provide amply' for him but that Darcy got all the money by fault⁵. This makes Darcy out to be the bad guy to the reader and makes Wickham sound like the victim. Wickham says he has a 'warm unguarded temper'⁴ which also make him sound favourable and a contrast to Darcy.

The first clue we get that he is not what Elizabeth hoped is when he gets engaged to Miss King, who has inherited some money. That seems fair enough as he doesn't have any of his own and in those days, in that class, people had to have money to get married.⁶ However, when Darcy writes what Wickham really did and how he chose to go into the law instead of the church, then wasted the £1,000 Mr Darcy had left to him by:

'a life of idleness and dissipation'

from this it is obvious why Darcy did not let him have the position his father promised.⁷

Worse than that, he tried to run off with Darcy's sister and she was only fifteen. He was obviously after her money, just as he was with Miss King, who is soon whisked away from him by her relatives to go a long way away to Liverpool, where it would take days to get to.⁸

Elizabeth's big mistake is that she doesn't let anyone except Jane know any of this, so no one thinks twice when Lydia keeps talking about him, and then she is allowed to go to Brighton when his regiment goes there.⁹

Next thing we know, Elizabeth gets a letter from Jane saying that Wickham and Lydia have eloped to Gretna Green to get married, but he is even worse than that, he just goes to live with Lydia in London, which would have been extremely shocking in those days, as respectable unmarried couples did not live together.¹⁰

Fortunately, Darcy finds them and gives Wickham shedloads of money¹¹ to pay off all his gambling debts and persuade him to marry Lydia. He has no shame at all and acts as if he never did anything wrong:

'We were always good friends and now are better'¹²

This is what he says to Elizabeth, who he really flirted with at the start and he must know it is not right to marry her sister without even apologising. They talk about her visit to Pemberley and if she met Darcy's sister. She asks him if he would have liked giving sermons.

'Exceedingly well. I should have considered it as part of my duty and the exertion would soon have been nothing. One ought not to repine; but to be sure, it would have been such a thing for me!'¹³

He must know that she has heard the truth about him, but still doesn't say anything to excuse himself.¹⁴

The last time he is mentioned is at the very end when it says he is always in debt so he and Lydia depend on Elizabeth and Darcy for money and Bingley and Jane for somewhere to live. My impression of him is really bad and completely different from the 'gentleman' I thought he was to start with.¹⁵

(b) The way Austen writes about Wickham is quite clever as she keeps you guessing by fooling you into thinking he is just the man for Elizabeth, then gradually showing the truth.

She uses dialogue to show what a good persuasive talker he is and how he shows himself in a good light by using positive emotive words:

'He was my godfather and excessively attached to me. I cannot do justice to his kindness. He meant to provide for me amply, and thought he had done it...'

Words like this make you believe that Darcy was jealous of how his father favoured Wickham.

He is shown as a big contrast to Darcy, very friendly and trusting to tell so much about himself. It also says how attractive Elizabeth found him: '...whose very countenance may vouch for your being amiable'. The fact that he is saying negative things about Darcy that Elizabeth wants to hear to match her prejudice makes him even more attractive to her.

The bad things about Wickham are all told by other people and a lot of it is in letters. Elizabeth's aunt warns her that getting too attached to him is a waste of time because they could not afford to marry, so when they discuss Miss King, you just go along and agree with Elizabeth that he did what he had to do. Only when Darcy tells her in the letter he writes about how he wasted his inheritance and what happened with Georgiana, you begin to realise he is a real villain and not to be trusted at all.

Jane's letters all about Lydia make this point too. At first she just says he is:

'thoughtless and indiscreet...nothing bad at heart'

But when the whole truth comes out, even Jane, who always thinks the best of everyone, says he is 'not a man to be trusted'.

When Mrs Gardiner's letter tells the whole truth about how much it cost Darcy to persuade Wickham to marry Lydia, then it is clear he is a real villain with no morals and no feelings.

Debts paid '...amounting...to considerably more than a thousand pounds, another thousand...settled on her and his commission purchased.'

14 More analysis required. For example, his comments about Georgiana seem inappropriate given that she is the girl he persuaded to love him and with whom he attempted to elope.

15 Attempt at conclusion — sums up that there is a change in impression but no detail about what it is. Needs to refer back to the question more explicitly



This list shows just how much of a fortune hunter Wickham is.

The way he talks to Elizabeth at the end, as if nothing has happened, just shows what a hypocrite he is.

Austen's method of fooling us into thinking he is really good, then gradually showing all the other evidence to shock us made him an interesting character.

Like the answer to part (a), this is also clearly a C-grade answer. It does focus on the task set — here a more complex one that involves looking at the writer's style. Each section generally manages to avoid storytelling and selects evidence from the text to support the points made. Both parts are sustained at some length. In part (b) there is an attempt to get to grips with language (emotive words, use of lists) as well as different narrative methods such as dialogue and letters.

The two main reasons that this answer is a C-grade one are:

- the simple level of analysis
- the inappropriate style

To get to the higher grades, more than accuracy is required. You need to demonstrate the sophistication of your understanding.

Higher tier

What different impressions do you have of Mr Wickham in different parts of the novel, and how does Austen create this impression? Remember to write about the society he lives in. (24 marks)

Grade A* answer

George Wickham is introduced early on in the novel as a rival for Elizabeth's affection, though right from the outset it is hinted that he is not what he seems to be. Austen's narrative method is engaging for the reader as she keeps us guessing whether to agree with Elizabeth that he is just the man for her, or whether her 'first impression' of him is as misguided as that of Darcy.¹

The description which introduces Wickham has elements of irony:² he is described as having a 'most gentlemanlike appearance' and ... [wanting] only regimentals to make him completely charming' which alerts the reader into questioning whether his appearance may be deceptive. A soldier's uniform might well make him look very handsome to a certain shallow type of girl, but the man beneath matters more than his 'charming' appearance.³

Authorial comment proclaims him to have 'a happy readiness of conversation... perfectly correct and unassuming' in direct contrast to the taciturn Mr Darcy,

1 Strong introduction — refers to both parts of the question, making an important observation relating to the novel's original title and hinting at understanding of a central theme. This initial opinion is developed in the essay.

2 Awareness of authorial methods

3 Selects good evidence and makes a sophisticated critical judgement

though he goes oddly silent when Darcy appears and 'Both changed colour, one looked white, the other red,' which arouses curiosity as to what has happened between the two.

When he next meets Elizabeth at her aunt's gathering, Austen makes extensive use of dialogue⁴ to show how articulate and persuasive he can be, and how he shows himself in a good light by gaining sympathy both from the reader and Elizabeth. He begins by fuelling her prejudice against Darcy claiming that 'The world is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing manners...'⁵ Encouraged by Elizabeth's response, he continues in this negative vein to imply that he has been hard done by, a 'disappointed man' as the church 'ought' to have been his profession.

He relates how the late Mr Darcy intended to 'provide amply' for him with a 'valuable living'.⁶ This is very significant, because it was normally the second son of a wealthy family who was given the opportunity to enter the church, however Wickham was merely the son of one of the employees on the estate, so this was a real act of generosity.⁷ When he claims that Darcy denied him this promise because of 'a dislike which I cannot but attribute in some measure to jealousy', the reader may well surmise that this could be the truth. However there are plenty of clues here that Wickham caused his own problems: he says Darcy accused him of 'extravagance, imprudence – in short anything or nothing' and confesses to a 'warm unguarded temper' and, though these are fairly abstract as descriptions of any faults, they do turn out to be at the root of the actions which led to Darcy's decision not to honour his father's promise.⁸ One reason Elizabeth believes him is how attractive she finds him: his '...very countenance may vouch for [his] being amiable'. She is also blind to how inappropriate such intimate revelations are to a person he hardly knows, largely because of her prejudice against Darcy.

Elizabeth continues to enjoy his company for a couple of months, until her aunt Gardiner warns her not to become too attached to him since they could never afford to marry, so when they hear of his engagement to a Miss King, who has inherited a fortune of £10,000, with thoughts of Charlotte Lucas's 'sensible' choice, the reader sides with Elizabeth that Wickham achieved what he needed. In Regency England, the upper classes sometimes married just for money and certainly rarely married without considering the financial side of things.⁹ However damning information, often from this point on communicated in letters, (a technique Austen uses to propel her narrative)¹⁰ indicates that Wickham has very few scruples when it comes to money. After Elizabeth has rejected Darcy's proposal of marriage, partly on the grounds of his mistreatment of Wickham, he reveals the truth: how Wickham rejected the offer of a career in the church and chose to study law instead, then wasted the £3,000 Darcy agreed to give him in place of the promised living on 'a

4 Another technique mentioned: focuses on the question

5 Good use of short quotations with an explanation of their significance

6 Shows clear understanding of complex content

7 Linked with sophisticated knowledge about historical context

8 Perceptive inference and interpretation with good use of apt short quotations

9 Understanding of context integrated with detailed knowledge of the text

10 Reference to authorial methods



life of idleness and dissipation', instead of spending it on his studies as he claimed he would.

The same letter also reveals that Miss King is not the first heiress to tempt him, for he planned an elopement with Georgiana Darcy when she was only fifteen years old. Fortunately, like Miss King, Georgiana was rescued before any harm was done.¹⁰ Elizabeth tells no one except Jane about any of this, so warning signs are missed when Lydia, with a crush on Wickham, is allowed to follow his regiment on its new posting to Brighton. Not much more than a month later, Elizabeth is shocked to be informed in two letters from Jane that Wickham and Lydia have eloped to Scotland, then, even worse, that they are unmarried and living together in London. Add this to the tale of Miss King and Georgiana and it is evident that Wickham is an unscrupulous villain.

Jane's letters reinforce this point too, at first judging him as: 'thoughtless and indiscreet ... nothing bad at heart', however, even Jane, who always thinks the best of everyone, agrees he is 'not a man to be trusted' when the whole story is told.¹¹

Fortunately, Darcy finds them and the couple are married. This is a huge relief to Elizabeth as the scandal would have made the whole family social outcasts at that time, not to speak of the consequences for Lydia, who may well have slipped into a life of prostitution, as there would have been little hope of any other future for her once Wickham lost interest.¹²

The complete tale of Wickham's moral evil is not revealed until Mrs Gardiner's letter communicates what Darcy paid Wickham to marry Lydia: his debts paid 'amounting...to considerably more than a thousand pounds, another thousand... settled on her and his commission purchased.'¹³ Darcy even has the forethought to buy him a position in a regiment stationed hundreds of miles north in Newcastle, well away from gossip about the seedy start to their marriage.

When the newly-weds visit her family before leaving for their new life, Wickham shows himself to be shameless, saying to Elizabeth, 'We were always good friends and now are better.' The hypocrisy of the man who, less than a year before, offered himself as far more than a 'friend' and who has now married her sister in such disgraceful circumstances is breath-taking!¹⁴ They talk about Pemberley and there is veiled mention of Darcy's sister ('When I last saw her she was not very promising.') and of Wickham's thwarted ambitions in the Church, ('I should have considered [giving sermons] part of my duty and the exertion would soon have been nothing.')¹⁵

He must know that she has heard the truth about him, but makes no attempt to defend himself.

11 Refers to the question and gives a personal opinion supported by good textual knowledge and well-chosen brief quotation

12 Sophisticated grasp of social and historical context

13 Good textual detail to make a clear point

14 Reaching judgements about the character — focus on task

15 Good use of short quotations to illustrate elements of irony

Austen concludes by summing up the life he goes on to lead. He soon loses interest in Lydia, but retains the hope, despite all the evil he has done, and all he already owes to Darcy, that 'Darcy might yet be prevailed upon to make his fortune.' Their 'extravagant' and 'heedless' lifestyle leads them to depend on Elizabeth and Darcy for money and Bingley and Jane for somewhere to live.**16**

16 Sums up neatly

Wickham is a perfect illustration of the theme which shows how deceptive appearances can be. Austen's method of allowing the reader to uncover the depths of his villainy alongside Elizabeth and to share her condemnation of the man who initially struck her as 'completely charming' is an interesting aspect of the novel.**17** He ends, as he began, a total contrast to Darcy, whose good qualities are emphasised by the comparison.

17 Conclusion illustrates clear focus on requirement of task

This is clearly a good A-grade answer. The task set is complex, combining a discussion of Wickham's character with investigation of the writer's style. The answer is focused, logical and very fluently expressed. Textual evidence supports all the points made and the quality of analysis and evaluation is high. There is detailed and relevant comment on social and historical context. It also shows a sophisticated grasp of authorial methods, such as use of dialogue and letters as well as choice of language.

In addition, it alludes to several of the themes in the novel, though this is not specifically required by the question. This essay demonstrates an overview of the whole text.

Review your learning

(Answers are given on page 94)

- 1** What main differences can you see between a C-grade and an A-grade essay?
- 2** What should your introduction and conclusion mention?
- 3** What does 'writing in an appropriate style' mean?



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