



A-level

# English Literature B

7717/2A Texts and Genres: Elements of crime writing

Report on the Examination

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## Introductory Comments

It was pleasing to see a slight rise in the entry numbers this year and good to see so many students and teachers enjoying and valuing the study of English Literature and Specification B.

This report will focus specifically on this year's examination and how students performed in terms of the questions. It will also offer some guidance to help teachers who are teaching Specification B to maximise success in the future. This is a specification where texts are linked by genre, where a tight focus on the questions asked is paramount and where nothing else is required of students but a complete and thorough knowledge of the set texts.

Examiners who mark the specification have reported seeing some excellent work across all four papers. Students who know that they have to focus exclusively on the questions set, who are not distracted by including extraneous material in their answers, and who know their texts so well that they can make good choices of supportive references, produce work that is a joy to mark. When students are engaging with the stories of their texts in terms of the specific genre, when they know their texts 'inside out' and know what they have to do in terms of question focus they clearly enter the exam confidently and produce good work at all levels of ability. It seems that many students have enjoyed their study of English Literature and teachers are to be congratulated for fostering enthusiasm. Most students seemed to have managed their time effectively between the three required answers on each paper and they understood the different skill-sets required for answering each type of question.

When students didn't perform so well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely or because they did not focus on the questions set, sometimes because they had their own agendas or forced what they did know into the questions. In Paper 2, weaker performances were often linked to students not using their open book thoughtfully or carefully enough to select relevant sections on which to base their arguments. Several students who struggled (across all papers) failed to focus on the grammatical subject of the sentence which forms the question. Some got caught up in loose contextual discussion, and several subverted the question choosing to write about something other than what was being asked.

## Knowing the text

The text and its story is the body of knowledge that English Literature students need to have. It is the foundation for assessment. All knowledge-based examination subjects have a body of knowledge that is prescribed and the text is what is prescribed for A level English Literature students. There is nothing outside the text that Specification B students have to know. So, they cannot sidestep the text and if they do not know it in a detailed way then they are seriously disadvantaged when it comes to answering questions. Students who only know bits of the text are unable to draw from it in the most productive way and those students inevitably find it difficult to access the higher mark bands where marks are awarded for ideas which are relevant, thorough and perceptive.

The key to 'knowing the text' is for students to be clear about the facts that happen in the stories they are studying and to be confident about the sequence of events in those stories. Although sequence is often troublesome in non-linear narratives, it still has to be known. Facts in stories cannot be disputed (unless the writer invites this to happen or self-consciously undermines what is presented as fact as is the case of *Atonement*). For readers, the facts of the stories have to be taken seriously from beginning to the end of the text. In stories the facts are the events that are shown, the actions of the characters, what the

characters say, what happens to them, who they speak and relate to, where things happen and who lives and who dies. If students get the facts of the narrative right, they are in a good starting place and do not go off course in their thinking and writing because of a premise that has not been grasped. If students only have a hazy knowledge or only know bits of texts and a bank of quotations that they think will work for any question, then they invariably struggle. So time must be spent on helping students to know their texts in their entirety.

The stories that writers tell are fundamental to enjoyment and knowing what happens in those stories, and how events are sequenced, enables students to interpret the texts with authority and to engage in discussion about genre and authorial method in a confident and meaningful way. The stories have to come first. There is little point writing about narrative perspective if students haven't got inside the story that the narrator is telling. There is also little point in writing about 'aspects' or 'elements' of genre if students haven't grasped the actual story that is being told. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers and this is surely what English Literature primarily ought to do.

### **What is getting in the way of the text**

Some students seem to think that it is more important to know things outside the text rather than the text itself. Those 'other' things might be external contextual material or critical and theoretical material and sometimes these take the place of writing about the text and get in the way of the answers.

Even though it has been flagged up in all reports since the inception of the specification, many students are still writing loosely about contextual factors instead of writing about the text. This continues to be a particular problem when the students are writing about *Othello*, Keats, Blake, Coleridge and Wilde though wherever it occurs it is problematic. Students should be told categorically not to write generalised (and often made up) comments about any historical period - including the 21st century - and not to write about the lives of writers or literary movements. Neither should students write about critical theory in a tangential way. In the exams, there were many students who made up comments about the 16th century (and particularly women in the 16th century) and invariably such comments took students away from the text and the questions. The 16th century, of course, spans a hundred years and one play or novel can hardly be claimed to speak for an entire century - or even a bit of it, and for students to draw conclusions about 16th century society or people's attitudes from one play of Shakespeare is unwise too. One play of Shakespeare's might well - and often does - contradict what is said in another. The same Shakespeare who created Desdemona, also created Gonerill and Viola and Bianca, so it makes little sense for students to claim that in the 16th century women were all passive or submissive or dependent on or abused by men. Students need to focus on the worlds of their texts - and not make assumptions about the world (or worlds) outside of their texts and they need to think about what they are writing. For example, even within the world of *Othello*, it is surely reductive and not accurate to write about Emilia as a proto-feminist. The character who speaks out against the treatment of women is the same character who earlier is desperate to please the fantasy of her husband and the same character who later rails viciously against Bianca and her trade. Characters are often created with some complexity, some nuances; they develop and change. While evidenced context could be valid, it is always better for students to write specifically about the texts themselves and the messages within them - to show their knowledge of that which is tangible and to think carefully about what they are writing.

## Answering the precise question set in all its detail

When students are in the exam, they need to focus entirely on the questions set. They need to identify precisely what is the subject of each question (the subject of the question sentence) and determine exactly what it is they need to write about: the intensity of Othello's love (Q3 Tragedy), happiness (in Q7 Tragedy), the setting of Illyria (Q5 Comedy), love (Q2 Crime), the criminal (Q11 Crime), endings (Q8 Political), punishments (Q10 Political). They then need to think about parts of the text where happiness, for example, is focused on by the writer(s), give details of it in its narrative context and then debate it in terms of what the rest of the question asks. Although many teachers will be doing this, if they are not, it would be really profitable if teachers could construct lessons around the question subject, to ask their students: what is it that you have to focus on in this question and which parts of the text would be best to use to exemplify it.

The first sentence that students write should hit the question head on. The focus should then remain sharp with every comment relevant to the question and the last sentence should also be on task.

All questions focus on interpretation and students are asked to either 'explore the significance of' or say to what extent they agree with a view. Students, therefore, have to use their textual knowledge to do just that. If students only partially address questions or rewrite their own questions, they cannot achieve good marks. Answering the question is our mantra and it really is fundamental in examinations. In Specification B there are no hidden requirements, no guessing games that students have to partake in about what else might be required. When students focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text, they do well. They do less well when they try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question.

In this year's exam it was noticed across all papers that some students denied the existence of a topic that is set up in the question, for example, happiness in Paper 1. To write about the absence of a topic is a most unhelpful approach for students to take. Lead Assessment Writers and all who are involved in the question paper production process have ensured that there is always material in the texts that can be used for the questions asked. Questions are not set around things that do not exist in texts. In Section C questions, given the number of texts that are available, it is naturally challenging for Assessment Writers to ensure that each text can be used for every question set, but that is what they do. What students have to do is to know their texts well and then think and respond positively. Careful thinking will help them to locate appropriate material to use for every question.

In answering the question, students also have to incorporate comments on authorial methods - how writers shape meanings. The students who produced the best responses were able to integrate AO2 comments into their writing in a seamless way. Understanding how stories are constructed is an essential part of 'knowing' the text and those students who demonstrated an understanding of narrative structure did well, ranging around the text for details, engaging with key events where they occur and thinking about beginnings and endings. In the best responses to the drama texts, students were able to imagine the stories as operating in real time: in the here and now. These students could work with a story that appears to be developing in real time on stage where a range of different outcomes are seemingly still possible.

So, to be clear - and apologies now for repeating what has been said before - but students must:

- know their texts and the stories being told
- answer the precise question asked in all its detail.

## AO1

AO1 skills are also essential. Clear and fluent expression helps students to communicate effectively, so time spent during an A level course refining phrasing is time well spent. Students are at liberty to adopt a formal style or a lively one – sometimes the personal, almost journalistic voice works well. But however they choose to voice their thoughts, it must be clear what they mean. For all students, it is better to go for clarity in an exam situation rather than trying to use pseudo-impressive words which are often misapplied. Clarity and communication can also be aided when students have good control of their sentences. For most students it is best not to write sentences which have multiple clauses. It is also worth stressing that the very best responses are carefully sequenced. Therefore it is best for students to think and plan before writing commences. Deciding an angle, organising the points to be made in their argument and selecting which parts of the text to use, are sensible things to do.

### Specific comments about 2A: Elements of Crime Writing

The response to this year's paper overall was very positive and students engaged with all the questions in a lively and interesting way, many gaining good, well-deserved results. Examiners enjoyed reading those scripts which featured strong personal responses to both texts and questions and they happily rewarded those answers which showed evidence of independent thinking and a genuine enthusiasm for literature. All the questions operated equally well and gave opportunities to students of all abilities to show their strengths.

Good time management was one of the keys to success in the examination. It is a long examination and those students who built reading, thinking and planning into their time management were the most successful; students were not expected to write solidly for three hours.

The importance of careful planning and organisation of ideas cannot be stressed enough. Thoughtful planning resulting in focused answers produced the best work. Some students wrote far too much and included material which was not helpful in answering the question. Assurance comes from knowing the texts and knowing what to leave out as well as what to include. Those students who just set off to write without thinking first and simply wrote anything they knew about the texts, whether it was relevant or not, did not score highly in relation to the amount of effort expended. Some of the best answers were relatively short but precise and focused.

As already indicated, clear question focus was essential to success. Precise focus on the question terms produced the best answers. Students who ensured the examiner knew how their material helped to answer the question and shaped it accordingly achieved higher marks than those who left the examiner to try to work it out for themselves, searching for implied relevance.

Successful answers also often teased out the implications of the precise wording of the questions. For example, in response to question 9 on *Hamlet*, those students who noted the use of the word 'merely' in the question often produced answers which were more sophisticated and thoughtful than those who overlooked its implications.

## Rubric Infringements

There were not many overall rubric infringements this year but there were some examples of scripts where students had attempted more than one question in Section B, in which case examiners read all the answers and awarded the mark which was the highest. In some cases an answer to a Section C question was missing. The one rubric infringement I should like to draw specific attention to, however, occurred in responses to question 2 quite frequently. The question requires students to refer to the work of at least two authors' in their answer. This meant that those students who only wrote about Browning's poetry incurred penalties for rubric infringements. It is imperative that students follow this instruction and do not lose marks unnecessarily.

## Open Book

This is an open book examination and the students whose answers were in the highest bands knew how to make good use of this. Answers in the lowest bands were often general and vague and made little use of detailed textual support. The mark scheme states that the use of textual support should be 'specific and accurate' and therefore it is expected that students will use the texts allowed in the examination to provide this. They do not have to rely on memory as in a closed book examination and so the level of expectation for textual use is higher. Significant gains are to be made by making good use of the texts allowed in the examination.

## Section A

In Section A students were required to write about the significance of crime elements in the unseen extract. There were many successful and perceptive responses to the generic aspects of the extract and the moral dilemmas raised by the crime were often appreciated by the students. There was some very good writing about motive and perspective. It was disappointing, however, that many assumed that this extract was from the beginning of a novel when the first sentence of the introduction quite clearly states, 'This extract is from a short story'. Failure to identify the form correctly led to some pointless speculation and a limited appreciation of the writer's methods.

The most successful answers were those which looked at the extract from a literary point of view. Those students which took the extract more literally or attempted a psychoanalysis of the criminal were not really exploring the elements of crime writing. Psychological analysis was not an apt substitute for close textual analysis.

Successful answers usually started with an overview, pinning down the crime trajectory, and then went on to pick out the key crime elements, not necessarily working through the extract chronologically. Some students who produced less successful answers just picked out unrelated bits from the extract with little sense of the whole, some even failing to mention the central crime of an acid attack at all.

It is important to stress the necessity of devoting some time to a careful reading of the extract as, unfortunately, there were some notable misreadings. Some students seemed to think a murder had taken place and some did not seem to understand who the child that died was or who Elizabeth was and some thought that she was a child. Some thought Mary had murdered her baby. Careful reading of the extract would have clarified these issues.

Lastly in regard to this section, it is important to stress yet again the futility of wasting time trying to fit the extract into a sub-genre. There is nothing to be gained by such taxonomic pursuits when analysis of the extract would have been more fruitful. It is not even possible to determine a sub-genre from a short extract and to try to claim it shows features of hard-boiled crime is patently pointless and wrong. Some time was also wasted on unconvincing generic assumptions. Declarations that this extract was atypical because, it was thought back then that women couldn't be criminals' gained little credit.

## Section B

The questions in Section B produced a range of good answers. As already stated, focus on the key question terms was vital to success and answers in the higher bands dealt with critical distinctions in questions and demonstrated evidence of supported personal responses. There were some very good responses to question 3, for example, on Coleridge where the differences and interlinks between mental and physical suffering were teased out. Ignoring part of the question produced answers in the lower bands. In question 5, for example, on *Atonement*, those students who just dealt with whether Briony is forgiven and overlooked 'able to understand her motives' really only produced partial answers.

Whilst it was always good to see personal responses and read different interpretations of texts, there is a word of warning here. Interpretations should always be reasonable and based on good textual evidence. If interpretations are more extreme it is even more important to give support and perhaps express the view more tentatively. For example, in response to question 2 on the Poetry Selection, there were some very extreme interpretations of *Porphyria's Lover* which were offered very assertively. For example, it was sometimes stated that her name, Porphyria, meant she had a very serious disease and so the lover killed her out of love to stop her suffering from the disease. There seems to be very little textual evidence for this.

Finally I should like to draw attention to some frequent misunderstandings which occurred in response to *Peter Grimes* in question 2. Far too many students seemed to think that Peter Grimes has been the victim of child abuse by his father when all textual evidence suggests the contrary. His father is a 'good old man' 'reviled' by his son and, it says of Peter, 'his father's love he scorned.' It is clear from the poem that Grimes rebels and kills a caring parent so an interpretation of Grimes as a victim of child abuse is simply wrong.

## Section C

There were some good responses in this section to question 11 but responses to question 10 were sometimes disappointing because students did not really seem to understand the meaning of suspense and therefore had problems in discussing its significance.

Success in question 11 often depended on the student making a good choice of character for discussion. The best answers pinned down the criminal action of the character and then went on to consider whether they were victims or not. Failing to pin down the criminality in the first instance often led students down unproductive or even irrelevant avenues. Rose, for example, from *Brighton Rock*, was not the best choice of character for discussion here unless her criminality was first proved – her support of Pinkie could be deemed criminal but this needed explaining. Similarly, Robbie, in *Atonement*, may be a victim but is not actually a criminal, only accused of being one, so again, he was not the best choice for lengthy exploration.

## Looking forward

While this report focuses specifically on what happened in this year's examination, there is much in it that can help teachers as they prepare for the future. For teachers new to report reading, new to teaching, new to Specification B and those preparing for teaching in September, there is also much support available on the AQA website (Go to 'subjects' - select 'English' - select 'AS and Level Lit B') and Centre Services (use the tile for teacher support and then the filters). On the website you can look at all training materials and previous reports to help you to understand how best to support your students.

Students are at their best when they take ownership of their writing, when they have the confidence to think and respond independently and when they are not constrained by thinking they have to include material regardless of the question.

The best responses seen were by students who looked at questions independently and creatively, focused on the key words and stayed on task throughout. Such responses were a joy to read.

As teachers prepare for the 2025 examinations, they might like to give the following quick tips to their students:

- Know your texts thoroughly
- Focus on all the words of the question set, and base your argument on the subject of the question
- Root your arguments in details of the story itself
- Do not write about critical theory or critical views in a detached way
- Do not write about worlds or society outside of the text
- Think before you write anything
- Make sure that your first sentence is relevant to the question - and that you never veer from it.

NB: Please look out for the Autumn courses which will be available in the new term.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.