



A-level

English Literature B

7717/1B Literary genres: Drama: Aspects of Comedy

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 1B: Aspects of Comedy

This year's 1B Comedy paper gave rise to many exceptional responses that contained perceptive thoughts and arguments that were detailed and engaging. In general, students who opt to follow this component tend to be clear and fluent writers who have a good understanding of how the genre operates and the key comedic ideas that are central to the texts they have studied. Responses that were less successful this year tended to reveal a surface-level grasp of the text and offer arguments that were light on detail or unfocused.

Section A

The purpose of Section A is to focus attention on a specific segment of dramatic action and the question invites students to comment on the comedic events and ideas arising from it. Therefore, close focus on the printed passage is expected. Where students gave a lot of time and energy to the passage, they tended to do well. Section A invites students to see the position of the passage in the play, and to appreciate how the ideas within the passage are echoed elsewhere, but it is essential that responses spend most of their time on the passage. The best responses identify the events of the passage, select some key comedic moments and ideas to explore and proceed to make detailed and thoughtful comments on them.

Last year's report offered this advice on structuring the opening of the Section A response and it will remain the case for the duration of this specification:

Students are...advised to commence their responses by clearly and economically identifying what happens in the extract. This encourages them to think about possible aspects of comedy they might explore, and also immediately demonstrates that they have a grip on the text – they reveal text knowledge. It also has a practical effect in an exam situation in that it acts as a 'settling' activity at the beginning of the paper. Students should also contextualise the extract by stating briefly what happens before and after the extract.

Examples of the types of things that might be included are contained in the first two bullet points of the mark scheme under AO5.

The term ‘significance’ is a central one in this specification. Most students understand that it means the ideas and meanings arising – ‘what is being signified by the events shown. It is an invitation for students to show their view of the events of the story. For instance, it might lead to comments on the characters’ words and actions, the attitudes and values of the world of the text, the way in which the comedic narrative is shaped and many other ideas. In Section A, students are invited to explore the significance of the printed passage in terms of its *comedic* significance. Successful responses therefore anchored their comments on comedic elements such as courtship, deception, disguise, heartache, misinterpretation, amusement, irony and other comedic ideas. Clearly, it would be difficult and fruitless to attempt to cover every aspect in a passage, so the key is to select two or three central aspects arising from the passage and write about them in detail. When things go awry, it is often where students select a minor aspect of the passage and labour a small detail over several pages, or where they light upon a character and offer an old-fashioned character study rather than looking specifically how that character is presented in the comedy of the passage.

Successful responses to *The Taming of the Shrew* passage tended to explore the ideas of role-playing and subterfuge in the scene. Some students posited that Petruchio’s manipulative approach provokes comic amusement through his overblown descriptions of Kate and his chutzpah. Others focused on the darker aspects of the horse-trading of Kate and the patriarchal and economic values explored in this scene. Many students focused on the disguises being adopted and how desire (for love or money) provokes absurd behaviour. Likewise, an exploration of the role of the older comic butts in the scene proved fruitful. Successful comments on these areas were accompanied by an appreciation of how the comedy is being shaped, and in most regards, it is structural aspects that are most useful to include. For instance, a key method in many comedies is the use of dramatic irony. The differing levels of knowledge that the audience and some characters possess is very often at the heart of how comedy operates. A lot of the comedy in the passage can be explained by the audience’s prior knowledge of Petruchio’s intentions, Kate’s previous behaviour, and the disguise plot to secure Bianca’s hand. It is this superior knowledge that creates laughter when we hear Petruchio’s description of Kate or see the disguised tutors because the audience are in on the joke. Likewise, Baptista’s ignorance of such prior knowledge has the effect of presenting him as dupe. Focusing on these types of structural ideas (such as the ones contained in the first few bullets of the AO2 mark scheme) is often more insightful than microanalysis of individual words.

The *Twelfth Night* passage also relied heavily on dramatic irony to provoke entertainment and sometimes pity. The audience’s knowledge of Viola’s disguise – and Orsino’s ignorance of it – informed the way in which students read the events of the passage. Many students drew attention to Orsino’s changeable character, his emotional immaturity, and his comic inability to interpret Viola’s words or see through her disguise. Thoughtful comments were made about the satirical presentation of the lovesick fop, the comparative shallowness of his feelings compared to Viola’s, and the various ways in which ideas about love are presented. Many students began their observations by exploring Feste’s departing words to Orsino and their pointed meaning. This was clearly apt, but on occasion, less successful responses used them as a springboard to write three sides about Feste, often rehashing material from a previous task about the fool as a playful truth-teller. While this has some relevance, it illustrates the dangers of ignoring the main events of a passage in favour of importing a lot of pre-learned material. Knowledge is obviously important, but the selection and wise use or rejection of such knowledge is key; the choice of what to focus on – and which bits of pre-learned knowledge *not* to use – is important. Viola’s disguise and the complications it provokes were sensible areas to write about. Here, thoughtful ideas about the veracity of feelings and the loyalty and heartache of the character were made. Perceptive students could

see how the very thing that causes audience amusement – Viola’s disguise – could also be the wellspring of pain for the character. One particularly thoughtful response argued that the passage (and the whole play) was centred around the idea that comedy and melancholy were never far apart.

Section B

Question 3 proved a popular choice for *The Taming of the Shrew*. The debate focused on whether the play had an unsatisfying ending. It’s worth restating that the tasks in this specification are constructed to incorporate the assessment objectives, so by simply answering the task, students automatically address the assessment objectives. For instance, by writing about a play’s ending, students are thinking about a narrative idea – endings – which means they connect with AO2. By thinking about the satisfaction arising, they are exploring a big comedic idea (AO4) during which they offer their views (AO5) and naturally touch on other contexts (AO3) such as gender, power, morality or performance. Examiners never think about AOs in isolation – they don’t give separate marks per AO and don’t refer to them in annotations with the exception of AO1 – a shorthand for the clarity of the student’s expression. Examiners are simply interested in how well the actual question has been answered. Therefore, question focus – sticking to the task – is vital.

Students were at liberty to decide with Question 3 whether it meant the ending was unsatisfying for the audience, unsatisfying for the characters, or perhaps both. All of these approaches were valid. There was plenty of material at the end of the play that students could have focused on, such as Kate’s apparent capitulation (or simulation of it), Petruchio’s apparent success, the wager scene, Bianca’s refusal to comply and many other moments from the play’s conclusion. Close focus on these events usually led to a successful response. Things become problematic to assess when a response spends a lot of time looking at other parts of the play. While it may be helpful to reference the initial impression of Kate, the journey scene, the account of the wedding, or the Induction to build a case for the ending, it’s important for students to realise that the question focus is the *ending*, and so a lot of material about other parts of the play runs the risk of warping the question focus. Fortunately, the vast majority of responses were on task, and showed a real variety of views. Perhaps the most interesting response was the one which argued that the ending was deeply satisfying in that it celebrated sparky women getting one over on the men in their lives through play-acting, non-compliance and wit.

Question 4 invited a specific exploration of the sisters, asking students to consider whether the comic presentation of these two characters shows them to be more similar than different. The best answers here viewed the sisters across the sweep of the narrative, seeing how at various points the perception of these characters differs, and how some of the comedy emerged from the audience’s knowledge of Bianca’s private character and her apparent transformation in the wager scene. Once again, students who thought about method at a structural level could see how the apparent reversal of the sisters by the end of the narrative is a rich source of irony, and also how the earlier indications of Bianca’s role-playing leads the audience – but not the suitors – to anticipate her transformation. Less successful answers tended to offer accounts of both characters rather than getting stuck into the debate – whether they were more similar than different – so it became harder for examiners to reward this absence of opinion. There were many perceptive answers to this task. One in particular suggested that the sisters shared similar goals and desires for control, and although they go about it in different ways, both successfully manipulating situations to their advantage. One less successful aspect to this and other Section B responses was the citation of critical opinion along the lines of ‘As Alain de Botton noted...’ or ‘C L Barber contends that...’, often followed by views that were not relevant to the task or more often, simply made up. Reading critical opinion is obviously a part of academic study and something to be

encouraged, but in exam responses it tends to get in the way, usually because the student doesn't know enough critical opinion to cover any potential task (and there is no expectation that they should) and because it just sounds like name-dropping for the sake of it. It's best avoided in favour of students simply offering their own view or other potential views in clear, well-argued prose.

Question 5 offered the opportunity for students to consider the significance of Illyria. Settings in any genre of text are ripe sources for exploration as they reveal much about the values and attitudes of the world of the text, and comedic settings are particularly rich in significance. With these types of setting tasks, it's important that students realise they don't simply invite a narrow account of the geographical or spatial features of settings. In Shakespeare's drama, which relies so much on staging, this would be a difficult thing to ask! Students who knew that 'significance' invited a consideration of ideas and meanings did well with this task. They focused initially on Illyria as a place where the comedic action occurs – a place where Viola is washed up, where Sebastian is lost and found, and where the heroine is forced to engage with a new world in order to find happiness. A range of ideas and approaches were offered in successful responses. Many explored the topsy-turvy qualities of Illyria, a world where those with social status behave oddly, where the underlings put one over on their masters, where a type of midsummer madness reigns. The exploration of the carnivalesque aspects of Illyria and its link to the play's time setting and title proved fruitful areas to explore, as well as the idea that Illyria offers a kind of safe space where sexuality can be explored. The best answers got at the idea that comedic settings tend to offer rebellious, experimental and fantastical places where the usual rules of life are played with or subverted, at least for a while.

Question 6 gave rise to some fantastic responses to a task which took a specific aspect of *Twelfth Night* – songs and music – and the students producing these responses explored their comedic significance. Students who read this task carefully were cued to note that rather than simply focusing on Feste's songs, the whole idea of music could be explored too. There were many excellent responses that commenced with an exploration of Orsino's performative opening reference to music as the food of love and how his attitude towards music was a reflection of his fickle nature. Many students noted how the play begins and ends with music and song, and how the sung entertainment is part of comedy's range. The quotation from Feste's final song cited in the task offered students several starting points for considering how the songs, far from being celebratory, are often tinged with melancholy. Students who produced other ideas that emanated from this snippet explored song as a way of reflecting, mocking or undermining characters or situations, or explored how the final song invites the audience to view the play as entertainment, or offers an anti-comic view of life. One brilliant response focused on the rebellious singing in Olivia's house of mourning and how it is both celebratory and irreverent, with Malvolio's attempt to silence things an indication of his outsider role – his disharmonious refusal to enter into comedy's carousing a reflection of his joyless demeanour. In all of these ideas, the focus is on *significance* - there was no expectation on the part of examiners that students should be able to cite the close lines of Feste's songs (although impressively, many did). As ever, it is ideas that are important in an answer, rather than the minutiae of quotation, which in a closed-book exam is far down the list of priorities.

Section C

The final part of the paper invites thoughts on a specific comedic element and/or debate. The texts in Section C offer very different ways of doing comedy, so these tasks are always going to focus on broad areas that are applicable to all of the six Section C texts. Given that students will only write for approximately 25 minutes on each text, choices of *what* to write about become even more important. Most centres and students have understood that the structure of a Section C response is best when each text is dealt with in turn. This advice from last year's report still stands:

...this response is not intended to be a comparative one; there is no need for students to compare how different writers treat a comedic aspect. It is better to think of this response as one where a connection is made by the question, and all students need to do is explore how one writer presents a comedic aspect and then explore how a second writer presents that same aspect. The connection is therefore with the genre, rather than the texts. Thankfully, most students have approached their Section C response in this way and felt the liberation that this essay structure brings, rather than tying themselves in knots using comparative discourse markers and trying desperately to find ways to compare two very different texts.

Question 7 invited consideration of comedic openings. It is clearly futile to attempt to define when an opening ends, so examiners were content to accept students' definitions of 'openings' as long as most of the response wasn't centred on something from the centre or end of a narrative. That said, many excellent answers showed how comedic problems initiated in the opening segment were developed and resolved during a narrative. This was a valid approach. The task itself invites immediate consideration of a structural aspect of a text, so responses that dwelt on how comedic characters were established, how comedic challenges were initially set up and shown, the use of amusing voices to open a story, and the depiction of initiating comedic events were all sensible areas to explore. Once again, students who understood that significance invited a consideration of meanings did well, often showing how initial entertaining narrative voices set the tone for a tale, or how some darker events seem to play with the supposed light-hearted nature of the genre, or how a character's initial internal problems are set up as the main challenge to be overcome by the end of the journey.

Question 8 was a popular choice with many students, inviting a consideration of characters' flaws and in particular, the view that nobody cares about these flaws. There were some students who overlooked the debate here, and simply offered an account of flaws, or asserted agreement with the view without showing their reasoning. Fortunately, most students took the debate on and were able to argue that, for example, Mr Knightley clearly does care about Emma's flaws and sets about aiding her development, or that readers are alarmed by Bernard's racism, or that the mendacity in *The Importance of Being Earnest* only temporarily affects the men's would-be partners, because in the end, everyone simply ignores such issues. As mentioned earlier, choices are important – the things that students select from their texts to focus upon can significantly impact the success of their arguments. For those students writing about the *Comedy Anthology* poetry, some poem choices were better than others. For instance, students found it easy to identify Tam's flaws, or the boy's flaws in *Not My Best Side* and proceeded to say insightful things. Those who choose to focus on *Sunny Prestatyn* or *The Flea* found it harder to convincingly identify a flaw and their arguments tended to falter. Centres hopefully realise that in Section C tasks, there are always some poems that lend themselves to some tasks better than others and that students should be encouraged to be confident with all poems and select the best one(s) for the task.

The 2024 series once again showed how well-prepared and thoughtful 1B students tend to be. There were some very impressive answers which suggest a real engagement with the genre and the texts. Both students and their teachers deserve much praise for such successful outcomes.

Looking forward

The purpose of this report is to focus specifically on what happened in this year's examination, but for teachers new to report reading, new to teaching, new to Specification B and those preparing for teaching in September, it is important for you to go to 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) and 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 of 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 imagined 16th century audiences and their values
- 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.