

Critical Essay

Exam Board Criteria

INT 2 | INT 1.

Criteria for a Pass Mark

- 1 A personal response is occasionally discernible, though it may be derivative or unoriginal.
- 2 The text chosen is adequate to answer the question.
- 3 The response has implicit relevance to the question but the line of thought is minimal and/or dependent on narrative.
- 4 An elementary knowledge of at least one central concern of the text is outlined.
- 5 There is some attempt to comment on the style and structure of the text.
- 6 There is some attempt at relevant reference which reveals very basic, sometimes implied linguistic/literary awareness.

Criteria for a Category 1 Mark

- 1 The stance the candidate adopts makes a genuine, personal contribution to the discussion of the topic.
- 2 The well-chosen text is skilfully used to answer the question.
- 3 A relevant line of argument is developed which responds to the question in a thoughtful way, showing real insight and/or originality.
- 4 A thorough and perceptive knowledge of the text permeates the essay.
- 5 Knowledge and understanding of the effect of the structure and/or stylistic features of the text are central to the argument presented.
- 6 The handling of linguistic/literary concepts and their effects is subtle and original.

CRITICAL ESSAY

REQUIREMENTS

The critical essay is a current demand of the second part of Paper II in the Revised Higher examination. Candidates can choose to answer a question on Drama, Prose, Poetry or Mass Media.

There are several limitations on this and you should be aware of them before the examination:

- You must not base your answer on the text used for your RPR.
- You must not answer from the same genre as your Set Text answer i.e. if you answered the Philip Larkin Set Text then you must answer a question from the Prose or Drama or Mass Media sections.
- A short story is considered as Prose.

APPROACH TO THE CRITICAL ESSAY

The Critical essay is not very well done in the exam which is a great pity because so much of it can be prepared beforehand. There is a recipe that can be followed in order to do well.

A good critical essay should fulfil the following points :

- **It should be relevant i.e. it should answer the question, ensuring that it deals with ALL PARTS**
- **It should show a thorough knowledge of the chosen text**
- **It should indicate what effect the text has had on the student**
- **It should show HOW (i.e. by what techniques) these effects been produced.**

APPROACH TO QUESTION

It may be stating the obvious, but you must take time to evaluate which would be the best question to tackle for your particular text. There is little point in answering a question on the importance of setting in a prose work, if the setting plays little part in it.

STAGE 1:

UNDERSTANDING ALL THE DEMANDS OF THE QUESTION

This stage is vitally important because from your question comes the structure, the plan for your essay. Let's look at some examples from recent past papers:

Example 1: (1995 Poetry, question 12)

'Poetry has been employed at times for very specific ends: to describe religious experience; to satirise; to record historical events; to flatter the rich and powerful; to be a form of propaganda or to tell a story.....'

Choose a poem which in your view performs a specific 'purpose'; show how the poet employs the poetic form in order to convey his/her ideas, beliefs or feelings.

There are three parts or three demands to this question:

- 1 You must select a poem which performs a 'specific purpose' and, the question implies, identify what that purpose is.**
- 2 You must show HOW the poet employs (uses) poetic techniques to convey part 3.**
- 3 You must link part 2 to part 3 to show how the chosen poetic techniques convey the poet's ideas/beliefs or feelings.**

Example 2: (1996 Prose, question 5)

'By referring in detail to any prose work which you have read, show how its setting in time contributes to the themes and ideas of the work.'

There are three parts or demands to this question:

- 1 You have to select a novel or short story where the setting in time (the period) is important.**
- 2 You have to show HOW this setting in time contributed to the themes (the recurring concerns) of the text.**
- 3 You have to show HOW this setting in time contributed to the ideas (where these differ from the themes) of the text.**

Example 3: (1997 Drama, question 3)

'Select one decision which is important in the development of a play you have studied. Show to what extent the character(s) concerned in making the decision acted in a way which you expected, or which surprised you.'

There are three parts or demands to this question:

- 1 You have to choose a play and select ONE decision which is central to the development of that play.**
- 2 You have to show TO WHAT EXTENT the character OR characters concerned in making the decision acted in a way which you expected.**
- 3 Or you have to show TO WHAT EXTENT the character OR characters acted in a way which surprised you.**

(N.B: a requirement to refer to dramatic techniques is implied in the question)

Example 4: (1997 Mass Media, question 14)

From any film, choose a sequence which communicates important ideas or information in a subtle or a dramatic way. Explain the importance of the ideas or information and by closely referring to mise-en-scene, montage and soundtrack, show how the subtlety or drama is achieved.

There are a number of important choices to be made within the four parts or demands to this question:

- 1 You have to choose a film sequence which communicates important ideas OR information in a subtle OR dramatic way (you need to be clear whether your selected sequence deals with ideas OR with information and which word--‘subtle’ OR ‘dramatic’-- is more appropriate to your sequence).**
- 2 You have to explain the importance of the ideas OR the information.**
- 3 You have to refer closely to mise-en-scene, montage and soundtrack (ALL THREE TECHNIQUES) to respond to part 4**
- 4 Using the information from part 3, you have to show how the subtlety OR drama is achieved.**



APPLYING THE TECHNIQUE:

Look at the following questions and break them up into the demands / requirements of each :

Poetry: (1994, question 11)

Choose a poem which you enjoyed because of surprising features of its language. Identify the features which surprised you, and go on to explain, with close reference to the poem, how you came to enjoy it.

Prose: (1994, question 7)

From a novel you know well, select a scene, episode or chapter that is crucial to your exploration of the ideas of the novel. By close reference to this scene, episode or chapter, show why it is so important to your understanding of the ideas of the novel.

Drama: (1996, question 2)

*‘Drama is often a window on a limited area of individual experience- and yet major themes of significance to us all are explored.’
Choose a play which deals with individual experience and show how it explores both individual experience and themes of universal significance.*

Mass Media: (1995, question 18)

Choose a play, series or serial which you enjoyed because the narrative is dominated by a powerful personality. Show how this domination is achieved. In your answer you may refer to such features as the character's role in the narrative, dialogue, appearance, camera techniques, choice of star, and so on...

Having learnt to recognise what the critical essay question is asking you to do, you then need to use the question to help you to set down a structure or shape for your response. Any approach to building a structure should start with a recognition that any competent critical essay, regardless of the wording of the particular question, will conform to a certain pattern or RECIPE.

RECIPE FOR CRITICAL ESSAY:

- **OPENING PARAGRAPH**
- **SUMMARY OF TEXT**
- **BODY OF ESSAY**
- **CONCLUSION**

Let us deal with each in turn

STAGE 2

OPENING PARAGRAPH

According to the recipe, the opening paragraph should pose few problems. It must do the following:

- **Refer to title of text**
- **Refer to name of author**
- **Refer to ALL AREAS of the question and succinctly state what the essay will show. It should act as a 'coat hanger' or 'framework' or 'skeleton' for the rest of the essay.**

In addition, it might:

- **Possibly introduce some indication of personal response to the text, if there is a relevant comment to make at this point.**

For example:

Poetry has been employed at times for very specific ends: to describe religious experience; to satirise; to record historical events; to flatter the rich and powerful; to be a form of propaganda or to tell a story.....'

Choose a poem which in your view performs a specific 'purpose'; show how the poet employs the poetic form in order to convey his/her ideas, beliefs or feelings

Using the text, ‘Church Going’ by Philip Larkin, the opening paragraph might read along the following lines:

In the poem ‘Church Going’ by Philip Larkin, the poet describes a visit to a church at a point in the history of modern society when the practice of religion has declined. He uses the poetic form to record this historically important event and to convey his own feelings about what use a secular society might find for its redundant churches. I found Larkin’s choice of particular poetic techniques to convey this rather unusual topic surprisingly effective.

For example:

By referring in detail to any prose work which you have read, show how its setting in time contributes to the themes and ideas of the work.’

Using the text, ‘Pride and Prejudice’ by Jane Austen, the opening paragraph to the above question might read along the following lines:

‘Pride and Prejudice’ by Jane Austen is a novel set in a small rural community in eighteenth century England. This particular period setting offers the reader an insight into what were seen as central concerns of the rich aristocracy as well as the less well off sections of this confined social group. Jane Austen employs a number of literary techniques to help reveal the significance of these central themes to the society of the time.

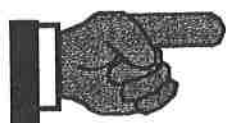
For example:

Select one decision which is important in the development of a play you have studied. Show to what extent the character(s) concerned in making the decision acted in a way which you expected, or which surprised you.

Using the text, ‘Macbeth’ by William Shakespeare, the opening paragraph to the above question might read along the following lines:

At an early point in William Shakespeare’s play, ‘Macbeth’, the character, Lady Macbeth makes a crucial decision to murder King Duncan, a decision which she then forces her husband to accept. What is decided at this point in the drama has a major impact on the development of the rest of the play. By skilful use of key dramatic techniques, the playwright helped me to see the importance of the decision taken by both characters and to judge to what extent their behaviour was both predictable to some extent and yet surprising.

These paragraphs have achieved the three points in the recipe and have set out the order, the structure, of the essay.



APPLYING THE TECHNIQUE

Working with your own chosen texts, try writing suitable opening paragraphs in response to at least two of the questions above or those given on page 3.

STAGE 3: BRIEFLY SUMMARISING THE TEXT

After the introduction the next paragraph should give a **BRIEF** outline of the content of your text. This can be prepared beforehand and learned; it will be your second paragraph regardless of the question.

Example 1: 'Death of a Salesman' by Arthur Miller

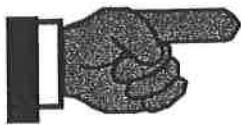
The drama centres on the conflict between reality and fantasy, set against the background of The American Dream. At the heart of this conflict is Willy Lowman, a middle aged, failed salesman whose inability to accept the truth of who he really is finally leads to his tragic suicide which he is convinced will persuade his sons that he has left behind something worthwhile on which to build their futures.

Example 2: 'To Kill a Mockingbird' by Harper Lee

The story, set in the State of Alabama, with its history of slavery and racial conflict, revolves around a white lawyer, Atticus Finch, who finds himself defending a black man wrongly accused of raping a white girl. The story, seen through the eyes of Scout, Atticus's young daughter, very powerfully explores the drama of one man's brave stand against the prejudices of a narrow minded community.

Example 3: 'Hawk Roosting' by Ted Hughes

The poem focuses on revealing the nature of the hawk as a powerful killing machine. The bird is presented as an arrogant, unfeeling creature whose sole reason for existing is to kill with awesome perfection. At a deeper level, the hawk could also be seen as representing metaphorically those humans whose desire for absolute power turns them into megalomaniacs.



APPLYING THE TECHNIQUE

Now, try writing a brief paragraph that concisely summarises the content of your chosen text. Do this for more than one text. Keep your final versions: you may choose to use one of these selected texts in the final examination.

STAGE 4: BODY OF ESSAY

The body of your essay is where you attempt to analyse the use of techniques and this should be made clear to you when you are reading through exemplars. Here the recipe is:

- **STATEMENT**
 - **EXAMPLE/EVIDENCE**
 - **ANALYSIS**
- (SEA for short)

The body of your essay will consist of a number of carefully linked paragraphs, each one developing a main point which will then be illustrated by a number of examples. These examples should then be teased out by adding comments which attempt to analyse selected details. These areas where you demonstrate your ability to analyse present very important opportunities to pick up extra marks. Let's look at some practical examples of how the given recipe SEA works.

Example 1: Poetry (1994, question 11——using 'Hawk Roosting')
Choose a poem which you enjoyed because of surprising features of its language. Identify the features which surprised you, and go on to explain, with close reference to the poem, how you came to enjoy it.

Statement:

The poem relies heavily on startlingly direct use of language to capture the personality of the hawk.

Example/evidence:

For example the hawk tells us in his sleep he 'rehearses perfect kills' and that:
'My manners are tearing off heads-
The allotment of death.'

Analysis:

In the first example, the word 'rehearses' suggests a desire to get things just perfect, like an actor striving for his best performance while the phrase 'perfect kills' creates a chilling effect with its harsh sounds. It startles us by suggesting that the hawk sees killing as an art form, like acting or dancing which require constant practice to be perfected.

Example 2: Prose (1994, question 7——using 'Sunset Song')
From a novel you know well, select a scene, episode or chapter that is crucial to your exploration of the ideas of the novel. By close reference to this scene, episode or chapter, show why it is so important to your understanding of the ideas of the novel.

Statement:

Another reason why this particular scene is so important is because it gives us further insight into the idea of change that runs throughout the novel.

Example/evidence:

For example, when Chris is standing by her father's grave side, she cries out:
'Father, father, I didn't know!'

Analysis:

In a flash of realisation, Chris sees that she has been so preoccupied with her own affairs that she has not recognised that the harshness of his life on the croft has changed her father from a man who once had some fine qualities into a brutalised individual. Chris shows a great capacity for forgiveness here when she acknowledges her own ignorance of what was happening to her father.

Example 3: Drama (1996, question 2——using ‘Romeo and Juliet’)
‘Drama is often a window on a limited area of individual experience- and yet major themes of significance to us all are explored.’
Choose a play which deals with individual experience and show how it explores both individual experience and themes of universal significance.

Statement:

One dramatic technique which Shakespeare employs to illustrate the intense nature of Romeo and Juliet’s private passion is language, words and images which reach beyond the individual experience to embrace the universal.

Example/evidence:

This is particularly well illustrated in Act 1, Scene 5 when the two young lovers first meet at the Capulets’ party. Both use religious imagery such as in the lines spoken by Juliet:

‘For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.’

Analysis:

The reference to pilgrims going on holy journeys to visit the shrines of saints captures the idea of the couple’s love at first sight experience. Like the pilgrims, they too are going on a journey, a journey of love and they too will touch each other’s hands with the reverence that a pilgrim would show to a saint. The choice of religious language to express the emotion of their first meeting strikes a chord with a young audience, in particular, who may well have experienced something of Juliet’s awe and wonder when she first meets Romeo. These images give their meeting a reverential, almost holy quality.



APPLYING THE TECHNIQUE

Now, using one of the past paper questions set down on pages 2 and 3 or another one of your choice, make three statements about your chosen text that relate to the question. (S)

Back each statement up with an example, either in the form of a quotation or in the form of a reference to a particular part of the text. (E)

Add a comment that shows your ability to analyse particular details of the given example in a relevant way. (A)

STAGE 5: PARAGRAPH LINKS

As in all writing, paragraph links are very important in critical essay writing. Good links give your essay relevancy and cohesion as well as reminding you and the examiner of the question you are answering.

Perhaps the most obvious approach to effective linking is to use the wording or part of the wording of the actual question to link the various stages of the essay's structure. But beware! It can become a repetitive and mechanical device unless you try to vary the actual expression used while retaining the meaning.

For example question 1:

'Choose a play which explores the status of women in society and show to what extent they are seen as victims or as dominant figures.'

Link A:

During the course of the play, a number of women are represented as victims within a society where their status is very low.

Link B:

Not all the female characters, however, are seen as passive sufferers and do, in fact, have respected positions in society.

Link C:

Most of the women do not rebel against their subservient position in society but some do struggle against their victim status.

For example question 2:

'Choose a poem that appealed to you because it is striking. Show which techniques the poet has used to capture your interest and engage your feelings.'

Link A:

This striking poem appealed to me because of a number of effective techniques used by the poet.

Link B:

My feelings were engaged by the poet's skilful use of imagery.

Link C:

The poet succeeded in capturing my interest by skilful choice of language.

Another way of providing links is to use a summarising word or phrase that links back to what has just been said. The way to do this is to use what we call

demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these and those) on their own OR combine them with a noun to make summarising phrases such as:

- this topic/subject/theme etc.
- that argument/point of view/opinion etc.
- these qualities/features/techniques etc.
- those characteristics/elements/aspects etc.

Remember to use **and**, **another** or **also** sparingly because they tend to be weak links.

Yet another method of providing relevant links between points is to employ the kind of linking vocabulary that you should already be familiar with from writing reports or discursive essays.

This includes words and phrases such as:

- similarly
- in addition
- furthermore
- moreover
- however
- although
- nevertheless
- despite this
- in contrast
- consequently
- subsequently
- with the result that
- the former
- the latter
- initially
- primarily
- in conclusion
- finally
- therefore



APPLYING THE TECHNIQUE

Using your introductory paragraphs to help you, write suitable linking sentences that would lead into the first paragraph of the main **body** of your essay.

Now write suitable linking sentences that could open the second and third paragraphs of the **body** of your essay. Remember to check that they relate back to the question. Use your opening paragraph to remind you about the order of points you have set down in your structure.

STAGE 6: CONCLUSION

An effective concluding paragraph should do the following:

- refer back directly to the question
- sum up the main points made in the essay
- arrive at a final conclusion about the aspect(s) of the text highlighted in the question
- try to provide an interesting personal summative response.

If we go back to **STAGE 2** on pages 4 & 5 dealing with opening paragraphs, we can use these questions and texts to compose suitable conclusions.

Example 1:

Using the text, ‘Church Going’ by Philip Larkin, the concluding paragraph to the stated question might read along the following lines:

This poem, therefore, does perform a specific purpose in that it asks important questions about the purpose of churches in an age when fewer people are practising religion. Larkin’s use of imagery, tone and symbolism effectively explore his feelings about the role that holy places fulfil, particularly in what he sees as today’s sterile, suburban environment. The poem’s conversational and, at times, irreverent tone surprised me and made me listen more carefully to what was being said about a topic that struck me as an unusual choice for a poem.

Example 2:

Using the text, ‘Pride and Prejudice’ by Jane Austen, the concluding paragraph to the stated question might read along the following lines:

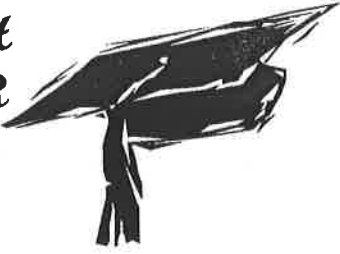
Thus it is clear that the period setting of Jane Austen’s novel, ‘Pride and Prejudice’ contributes significantly to the reader’s understanding of the novel’s central themes and ideas. Plot design, characterisation and authorial comment all combine to highlight the central themes of marriage social class and the status of women which characterise this work. It gave me a very entertaining insight into the lives of families like the Bennets living in the narrow social world of rural England in the eighteenth century. What struck me most was the fact that, despite the differences in time, the issues that concern Jane Austen in ‘Pride and Prejudice’ are still very relevant issues in today’s fast moving, modern society.



APPLYING THE TECHNIQUE

Now, using your own choice of texts, try composing suitable concluding paragraphs in response to those questions for which you have already written opening paragraphs.

H
R
C



Using Appropriate Critical Vocabulary

For the purposes of analysing and evaluating the text of a poem, you should be familiar with the following terms:

alliteration: alternate rhyme: assonance: ballad: connotation:

contrast: denotation: dramatic monologue: figurative

language: form: hyperbole: imagery: juxtapositioning:

lyric: metaphor: mood: oxymoron: paradox: pararhyme:

personification: rhyming couplet: rhyme scheme:

rhythm: simile: sonnet: stress: structure: syntax: tone

For the purposes of analysing and evaluating a prose text you should be familiar with the following terms:

anti hero: atmosphere: authorial voice: climax: chapter:

characterisation: denouement: dialogue: first person narrative:

flashback: genre: interior dialogue: irony: key incidents: language choice:

narrative voice and narrative techniques: plot: rhyme: rhythm:

setting: structure: symbolism: syntax: third person narrative: tone:

turning point

For the purposes of analysing and evaluating a drama text you should be familiar with the following terms:

Act: action: actors: atmosphere: audience: catharsis: character: climax: Comedy: costume: dialogue: drama:

dramatic irony: dramatic structure: dramatic tension: entrance: exit: hero: heroine: lighting: melodrama: music:

off-stage: pace: plot: scene: minor/secondary character: setting: soliloquy (Shakespeare): sound effects: stage:

stage directions: sub-plot: symbolism: theme(s): tone: Tragedy: tragic hero: villain

