

# Teaching how to study prose: tips from the exam boards

## 1. General activities

Review past papers for questions on the chosen text and questions on similar prose texts.

The length of some novels makes it impossible to cover in lesson time each page with the same thoroughness one would have for the study of, say, a poem. It is not always practical (and some would add, desirable) to study texts exhaustively. Useful practice at this stage is to select a number of extracts from the novel. These extracts should be drawn from significant moments in the novel in respect of:

- # plot development
- # character development and interaction
- # the treatment of themes
- # structure (e.g. openings and endings of chapters)

## 2. Passage-based questions

Studying how to answer passage based questions leads to a more effective study of the text than, say, reading the book from the first page to the last without considering the types of question which will come up in the examinations. The purpose of these questions is to enable students to show their detailed appreciation of the writing. It is useful to look at the wording of passage-based questions in recent past papers, and apply similar wording to the passages chosen for close study. Questions often use words such as the following, designed to elicit personal responses to the writing: *memorable, vivid, moving, dramatic, tense, striking, amusing, ironic*

*There are two types of passage-based question:*

- those which have an almost exclusive focus on the extract (e.g. How does Bronte convey the strength of Jane's feelings here?)
- those which have a primary focus on the extract but which also invite consideration of elsewhere in the novel (e.g. How does [the writer] make this such a powerful moment in the novel?)

### **Helpful activities:**

- # chart where the extract appears in the wider context of the novel (or short story): identify what happens immediately before and after the extract. If the passage has been selected for its interest in the way a particular character has been depicted, then it would be useful to compare the depiction of character here with elsewhere in the novel.
- # explore the detail of the choice of language and its effects. A disciplined approach to the analysis of language needs to be taken from the start. Students could highlight on a copy of the extract the words and phrases they find particularly vivid or striking, then explain why they find them vivid or striking. The key focus must be on the **precise effects** created by the writer's use of particular words and phrases. Before proceeding to extended essay responses, students should have opportunities to practise their analytical writing in short responses (e.g. a couple of paragraphs) to three or four words/phrases. As part of their planning, students should be encouraged to draw up lists of Quotations and Comments. The comments should be longer than the quotations. Quote only those words necessary to make the point!
- # explore the way the passage is organised. Students should be encouraged to consider the structure of the extract: how it begins, develops and ends. They could use their copy of the extract to indicate the various sections of the passage. It is useful to indicate how much of the extract is comprised of dialogue, description or development of the plot. This will enable them to consider the writer's use of form as well as structure. The effect of the passage as a whole on the reader should also be considered.
- # explore the way the narrative is told and the effects created. Students sometimes find this a difficult area, but it is an important aspect of studying prose texts. The key question is 'Who is telling the story?' (consider: who the narrator is ; whether the narrative is told from first or third person viewpoint; what information the narrator provides (or withholds) within this particular extract; the reliability of the narrator and his/her views.

### **Written responses**

Practise responding in writing to passage-based questions. The earlier exercises will require a degree of scaffolding: the question stem could, for example, be followed by bullet points offering prompts which ensure they cover important areas of enquiry. The level of scaffolding can be gradually reduced as students become better versed at 'interrogating' extracts for themselves. Activities might focus on the selection of relevant, as opposed to peripheral, detail found in the extracts. Annotation of the extract will always be helpful to students in identifying those aspects of the writing they will analyse in their answers. Set Texts papers will print the specified extract, and students should be encouraged to spend about five minutes reading and annotating the passage before answering the question. This will remind them of the importance of using brief and apposite quotations in their essays and aiming for '**much well-selected reference**'.

### 3. General essay questions

Work on the carefully-chosen extracts from the prose text will cover a good deal of important territory – such as plot development, characterisation, themes, writer’s use of language, structure and form. Activities should be designed to increase knowledge and understanding of the text, in particular, how the writer presents characters, themes and setting.

Activities could include:

- # drawing mind maps indicating a **character’s** actions, key dialogue and what other characters say about them
- # compiling QUOTATIONS and COMMENTS tables for the main characters. The QUOTATIONS column would include concise, pertinent quotations. The COMMENTS column would include longer analyses of the key words in the quotations, including commentary on their effects. This will enable students to collate material, which will be useful for later written work and revision for the examination. Tables such as these can be amended, or added to, at later stages of the course and will help students to develop and fine-tune their own informed personal responses.
- # drawing mind maps for the main themes. The theme should be in the centre of the map (e.g. DOUBLE STANDARDS in Jekyll and Hyde) and the branches out should relate to key incidents in the text, the ways characters represent different aspects of the theme, recurrent imagery, symbolism, and so on
- # compiling list of quotations for particular settings, with comments on their significance within the overall text

#### *Students’ written responses*

Practise the type of critical writing required in general essays. The requirement to write analytically is the same as for passage-based questions. The key difference is that, in general essays, the students are themselves responsible for selecting relevant points or moments in the text and the textual evidence to support them. By thinking about specific moments in the text, students are encouraged to consider the role of form and structure in creating and shaping meanings. They will have 45 minutes for all questions in the set texts papers, and they should be aware that the selection of relevant detail is essential. They cannot be exhaustive in 45 minutes. This should reassure them.

Students should experience the widest possible range of general questions in the time available. On character questions, for example, practise questions which ask for some judgement to be made on a particular character. Questions sometimes ask to what extent it is possible to admire or sympathise with a character. Occasionally questions will offer, in the form of prompts, opposite verdicts on a particular character (e.g. ‘Selfish’ v. ‘selfless’) before asking for a student’s own response. Other questions ask how the writer memorably (or strikingly, or vividly, etc.) conveys a specific aspect of the character. Students should tackle all these types of question, which lend themselves to speaking as well as writing activities; not all questions should require a full essay response.

All the questions set require an **informed personal response** to a particular slant. Rehearsed character sketches would not, therefore, receive high reward. The greater the practice and variety of tasks, the more students are equipped to ‘think on their feet’ in the examination. Another type of question allows the student much flexibility in *determining the territory* of their answers. Students might be asked to select one or two key moments from the text, and explore what makes them so memorable, amusing, powerful or disturbing etc. Students might be asked individually to select a suitable ‘moment’ and write down the reasons they find their chosen moment so memorable (or amusing, powerful, disturbing etc.), remembering to focus on the writing. (Note: what constitutes a ‘moment’? Students must have enough to say if they are to sustain the level of response required for high reward).

Activities should also focus on effective planning: five minutes might be spent on each question highlighting the key words of the question and writing a plan (e.g. bullets or mind map). Without such a plan, students’ writing can become formless, as the points appear random and unconnected. Some students write over-elaborate plans, to the detriment of their actual essays. Time spent learning planning can root out bad habits. In your writing, identify

- # irrelevant points (which perhaps narrate or describe)
- # repeated points (which do not earn any credit)
- # unsupported assertions (which is not the same as analysis)
- # long quotations (which indicate a lack of clear focus)

#### *Note on the use of literary terms*

Far more important than the ability to use literary terms is the ability to probe the effects created by a writer’s use of language. Analysis is required, not the mere identification of literary devices. Of course, students will pick up the more useful terms such as metaphor and irony as they study a range of texts over the course. Helpful words relating to prose texts are chapter, novel, narrator, viewpoint and character. The key thing to remember is the quality of the analysis, i.e. **the comments on effects**. There are no marks for employing the more exotic literary terms!