

A-Level English Literature

How to Answer Every Question - Exam Technique Guide

Edexcel English Literature (9ET0)

A-Level

8 question types

THE NILE METHOD - every question, every time

1. Read the COMMAND WORD first - it tells you the skill (state / explain / evaluate).
2. Check the MARKS - roughly one developed point (or mark-scheme line) per mark.
3. Match the ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES the marks reward (AO1 knowledge / AO2 application / AO3 evaluation).
4. PLAN before long answers - jot points, then write in clear PEEL / chain-of-reasoning paragraphs.
5. Use precise terminology, evidence and (where relevant) named studies or data.
6. For evaluation, write developed chains and a justified judgement - not a list.

P1 Sec A Shakespeare essay · “Explore”

TESTS	AO1, AO2, AO3, AO5 - 35 marks
METHOD	1. Read the question and printed extract from your studied play. 2. Build a clear thesis answering the precise focus. 3. Anchor in the extract, then range across the whole play (AO2). 4. Embed context where it shapes meaning (AO3), not as fact dumps. 5. Engage with a critical interpretation or alternative reading (AO5). 6. Write a sustained argument with embedded quotation and conclude on intent.
STRUCTURE	Thesis -> extract analysis -> whole-play development -> contextual link -> critical view -> conclusion.
MODEL	<i>Arguing a character embodies a theme, analysing dramatic method in the extract, tracing it across the play, weighing one critical reading and linking to its original context.</i>
PITFALLS	› Staying in the extract instead of using the whole play › Context bolted on with no link to interpretation › No alternative critical reading, weakening AO5

P1 Sec A Critical anthology application · “Apply criticism”

TESTS	AO5 (with AO1, AO2) - integrated
METHOD	1. Recall a relevant critical idea or lens for the focus of the task. 2. State the interpretation clearly and attribute it to a critical position. 3. Test the idea against specific moments in the play. 4. Show where the text supports and where it resists the reading. 5. Keep critical material woven into argument, not a separate paragraph. 6. Use the critical view to deepen, not replace, your own analysis.
STRUCTURE	'A (critical) reading suggests... and the play supports this when... yet it can also be read as...'
MODEL	<i>Using a critical lens to argue a scene can be read two ways, then weighing which reading the dramatic methods most support.</i>
PITFALLS	› Name-dropping a critic with no application › Letting criticism replace personal analysis › Forcing a lens that does not fit the question

P1 Sec B Other drama essay · “Explore”

TESTS	AO1, AO2, AO3 - 25 marks
METHOD	1. Read the question on your studied tragedy or comedy (no extract). 2. Form a thesis on how genre conventions shape the focus. 3. Recall precise references and analyse dramatic method (AO2). 4. Discuss genre features: tragic flaw, catharsis, comic resolution, as relevant. 5. Embed context that illuminates the play's meaning (AO3). 6. Sustain a clear argument and conclude on the dramatist's purpose.
STRUCTURE	Thesis -> genre-aware point + method + effect -> contextual link -> conclusion.
MODEL	<i>Arguing how a comedy uses disguise and reversal to expose social hypocrisy, supported by remembered quotation and the conventions of the genre.</i>
PITFALLS	› Ignoring the genre framing the question demands › Plot retelling instead of dramatic analysis › Vague references with no precise textual detail

P2 Prose comparative essay · “Compare”

TESTS	AO1, AO2, AO3, AO4 - 40 marks
METHOD	1. Read the themed question covering your two prose texts (open book). 2. Plan integrated paragraphs comparing the texts point by point (AO4). 3. Compare authorial methods: narrative voice, structure, form (AO2). 4. Link both texts to their contexts and the chosen theme (AO3). 5. Use comparative connectives and balance coverage of both texts. 6. Conclude with a comparative judgement on how each treats the theme.
STRUCTURE	'Both authors present... but whereas Text A uses..., Text B... reflecting their contexts of...'
MODEL	<i>Comparing how two novels present power: one through an unreliable first-person narrator, the other through omniscient irony, each shaped by its period.</i>
PITFALLS	› Treating the two texts in separate halves (weak AO4) › Comparing theme but not authorial method › Unbalanced essay favouring one text

P3 Sec A Post-2000 poetry comparison · “Compare”

TESTS	AO1, AO2, AO4 - 30 marks
METHOD	1. Read the named post-2000 specified poem and the comparison task. 2. Select a second poem from the specified collection that links well. 3. Plan integrated comparison of poetic method, form and structure (AO2, AO4). 4. Support each comparison with short embedded quotation from both poems. 5. Use comparative connectives and analyse effect on the reader. 6. Conclude on how each poet treats the shared focus.
STRUCTURE	'Both poets explore... but (Poem A) uses..., whereas (Poem B)... creating...'
MODEL	<i>Comparing two contemporary poems on memory: enjambment in one suggests flowing recollection while end-stopped lines in the other suggest fixed, fragmented images.</i>
PITFALLS	› Comparing content while ignoring form and structure › Two poems handled separately, not integrated › Choosing a second poem with a weak link to the focus

P3 Sec B Studied poetry essay · “Explore”

TESTS	AO1, AO2, AO3 - 30 marks
METHOD	1. Read the question on your studied poet or collection. 2. Form a thesis spanning several poems, not just one. 3. Select poems that best serve the focus and analyse method (AO2). 4. Embed context of the poet or movement where it deepens meaning (AO3). 5. Build a coherent argument across the chosen poems. 6. Conclude on the poet's characteristic concerns and methods.
STRUCTURE	Thesis -> poem one method and effect -> poem two developing the idea -> context -> conclusion.
MODEL	<i>Arguing a poet repeatedly uses natural imagery to explore loss, drawing on three poems and the poet's biographical and historical context.</i>
PITFALLS	› Relying on a single poem when range is expected › Description of poems with no overarching argument › Context detached from the poetry's meaning

Context integration (AO3) · “Contextualise”

TESTS	AO3 across exam essays
METHOD	1. Identify which contexts the question and text actually invite. 2. Choose contexts of production, reception or genre that shape meaning. 3. Weave context into the analysis, never as a standalone paragraph. 4. Show how the context changes how a moment is read. 5. Keep context proportionate: it supports argument, not replaces it. 6. Avoid biography or history for its own sake.
STRUCTURE	'Written in a period of..., this moment would have struck readers as... deepening the idea that...'
MODEL	<i>Linking a play's treatment of authority to the beliefs of its first audience, so the contextual point sharpens the analysis rather than sitting beside it.</i>
PITFALLS	› Context as a detached block with no link to meaning › Listing historical facts that the question does not need › Letting context crowd out close textual analysis

NEA Comparative coursework essay · “Compare”

TESTS	AO1 to AO5 - coursework
METHOD	1. Choose two texts and a focused comparative question or theme. 2. Plan a sustained comparison integrating both texts throughout (AO4). 3. Analyse authorial methods in detail for each point (AO2). 4. Weave in context and at least one critical view (AO3, AO5). 5. Write a clear, well-referenced academic argument (AO1). 6. Conclude with a justified comparative judgement and reference correctly.
STRUCTURE	Introduction with thesis -> integrated comparative analysis by theme -> critical and contextual layers -> conclusion -> bibliography.
MODEL	<i>A comparative essay on two self-chosen novels that argues a thesis, integrates method analysis, weighs a critical reading and concludes with a clear judgement.</i>
PITFALLS	› Texts compared in separate blocks, not integrated (AO4) › Critical and contextual material added but not used (AO3, AO5) › Poor referencing or a question too broad to sustain