

The Department of English Language and Literature

English Literature Study Tips

READING

Your teachers have always been telling you about the importance of **independent wide reading**. We totally agree. The individual encounter between reader and text lies at the heart of all literary studies. Apart from other benefits, wide reading increases your vocabulary: the more words you learn, and the more new meanings you discover for words you knew, the easier it is to enjoy whatever your authors set before you.

If you have been working to a syllabus that requires you to read ten or more texts, which you have been reading carefully, in their entirety, checking annotation as necessary, you may not have the need, or perhaps even the time, for much **extra reading**. If, however, you would like to read more, and feel in need of guidance on **what to choose**, here is some simple advice. Read whatever you like for pleasure, but, if your idea of pleasure does not yet include acknowledged literary classics, it would be a good idea to add texts by the authors you have been studying, or texts of the same type; you could dig back into literary history for the works that inspired your set authors. Or you might like to try something completely different. (You can find out as much as you need if you are curious: teachers and librarians will be glad to help, and of course the Internet often comes in handy.) As well as novels and short stories, try essays, poetry and plays; you can also see plays on the stage, or in films and televised versions.

Plan to **allow plenty of time** for reading, especially if you embark on a long or challenging work. Some of the most important books in the history of English Literature were originally published in instalments, over months, or even years: if your reading schedule is more intense than that of, say, Charles Dickens's original readers, at least you know your efforts should be rewarded by a formal qualification. Learn to pace yourself. This will help you to work out how much time you will need to read your university set texts in time for classes. It is wise to read the longest texts before term begins, especially if you have time-consuming interests on campus.

If you meet **difficult passages**, make the effort to go back over them. Sometimes just putting a few words in a different order will help. This often works with verse. **Poets sometimes abandon conventional word order** for the sake of making more powerful emotional impact, or fitting into their

chosen rhyme or rhythm pattern. If there are footnotes, it may help to consult them. **Plays are written for performance**, so do not expect to find everything you need to know stated directly in the dialogue. Pay attention to the stage directions, and see what actions are implied in the characters' speeches. Think of yourself as a potential performer, audience member, or director. If in doubt about what is happening at a particular moment, get a sheet of paper, pencil and eraser, and sketch everything on stage, using stick figures for the actors. You will soon need the eraser! (This is how directors plan and rehearse performances.)

Have you been listening? Reading texts aloud, or learning how to be aware of sound when reading silently, will always help when reading plays or anything in verse. **Verse rhythm** is a beat you have to hear inside your head; you need to trust the sound of your own voice. So practise. Persevere. A sign that you have really mastered it is when your rhythmic sense is so secure that if the verse contains the names of things and people you have never heard before, you know how to pronounce them properly. All authors try to reach their readers' ear, so sound effects extend from verse to prose. **Alliteration** is just one of them. Use it with care: if you see words that start with the same letter, please check first to hear if they begin with the same sound. If not, you cannot say that they alliterate. If you have listened hard, you might have heard this paragraph was written in blank verse.

WRITING

Examination criteria

Examination criteria vary in detail from board to board and from qualification to qualification, but all teachers and examiners of English Literature at sixth-form, Access, foundation, diploma and university level want similar things. Some students get the impression that what they are required to do is to check off a tick-list of apparently unconnected demands, including items such as 'response to tone', 'use of verse form', 'naming themes', and 'relating the work to its historical context'. Brief and superficial remarks on these matters will get some credit, but not attain the highest levels of achievement.

What everybody wants is an answer that is relevant to the question (which is itself designed to accommodate the sort of material which would be relevant to the tick-list), displaying thorough understanding and appreciation of the material. They want detail that goes to the heart of the text. In order to produce this, you would have dug deeply into your texts and looked widely into their contexts while you were studying them, so your answer would introduce elements required by the criteria as a matter of course.

Here are a few examples: we do not suggest that you should copy them, but they give some indications of the directions in which you should travel. When responding to the tone of a work, do not just say, ‘the description of Victor’s experiments in *Frankenstein* is very sinister’, but quote or make close reference to some particularly sinister elements, and say exactly what is sinister about them. You could also make relevant links to historical context by adding that, at the periods in which the book was written and set, there was a higher general level of respect for dead bodies, accompanied by more widespread and intense belief that the fate of the body affected the fate of the immortal soul, with the result that few people were willing to donate their bodies for scientific purposes, and that in Britain dissection was a shameful post-mortem punishment reserved for particularly cruel murderers, so Victor’s treatment of bodies would have aroused more horror than it does now. (You could even refer to Burke and Hare, the body-snatchers who turned into murderers to meet the surgeons’ demands.) As for verse form, you would get very little credit for mentioning rhythm unless you could quote a passage, marking it up to show you could really hear the rhythm (our students have decided to do this by putting stressed syllables in bold), and then show how the rhythm was used to strengthen the emotion, meaning or dramatic effect. This is often best done by finding variations in the regular pattern, which a poet will introduce at moments of excitement. Plus, if you wish to mention pace, remember that this, too, is a matter of rhythm: a fast pace is generally set when there is a high proportion of unstressed to stressed syllables. The same need to establish a pattern and then listen for variations applies to rhyme. For example, if you were writing about Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner*, you would get a little credit for mentioning that its rhythm was basically English ballad meter with an alternate ABCB rhyme scheme, subject to occasional variations, including the addition of extra lines and internal rhymes. You could improve on this by noting that the climactic moment at the end of Part I is heightened by an internal rhyme accompanied by a change of speaker within the penultimate line: ‘Why look’st thou so?’—‘With my crossbow/I shot the Albratross.’ The sudden break here, and the abruptness with which the Mariner makes his confession, represents the sudden, arbitrary pointlessness of his cruel and destructive action.

The candidates who meet the criteria best are those whose answers are so full, detailed and relevant both to the questions and to the authors’ concerns when writing their works that you could almost believe that they had never heard of the criteria at all.

A FEW TECHNICAL TERMS

When is Imagery Really Necessary?

There are entire books on this topic, so please regard the following paragraphs as signposts indicating areas of interest, rather than a complete map of the territory.

'Imagery' means **'figurative language'**. This is the opposite of **'literal language'**. If you give the **literal meaning** of a passage, you say what the words actually mean, with perfect exactness (literal literally means 'to the letter'), rather than what they might imply. For example, 'It's raining cats and dogs' is **'figurative language'**, expressing the speaker's view that the rain is very hard. If it were intended **literally**, the speaker would be claiming that cats and dogs were falling out of the sky.

One main branch of imagery is **metaphor**, which occurs when you say something **IS** something or **DOES** something that is not literally true, like 'Your words are poison', or 'Your words have pierced my heart'. There are many different types of metaphor, as you will discover if you explore further. One type you are likely to notice, and write about, is **allegory**. This is an 'extended metaphor' in which a story about one thing is used to convey the author's ideas about another. A famous twentieth-century example is George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* (1945), where animals represent tyrannical human dictators and their oppressed victims. Allegories always tell a story, but they can be very short: I particularly enjoy George Herbert's 'The Pilgrimage' (1633), a little poem in which a man's progress through life is represented by an uphill journey. It is a common device, but the twist here is that he has been ambitious for the wrong things, and consequently climbed the wrong mountain.

The other main branch of imagery is the **simile** (plural: **similes**). This occurs when you say something **RESEMBLES** something else that it does not resemble very closely. 'My love is like a red, red rose that's newly sprung in June' is a simile: Robert Burns, who wrote those words, did not mean that his beloved was covered in thorns, leaves and petals; his line suggests her youth, freshness, and beauty.

Many passages of purely **literal writing**, however, may be vivid, moving, or exciting. It would be inaccurate to call them imagery, and a wasted opportunity to ignore them, so make sure you have the vocabulary you need to deal with them. Useful words include **descriptions, allusions, references, questions, commands** and **statements**. In drama, you may also find, implied in the dialogue or requested by the stage directions, **special effects, make-up,**

costumes, properties and **events** that the audience can see or hear. As a reminder of how effective literal writing can be, consider William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. If asked to name the most frequently occurring image in this tragedy, you might suggest blood, darkness or black magic. Yet most of the metaphors and similes concern clothing: Macbeth's wrongful usurpation of the throne is represented as wearing clothes too big for him. Shakespeare does not need so much imagery to make blood important: characters talk about it, have hallucinations about it, shed it, plan to wash it off their hands, and appear on stage covered in it. Imagery is only one means writers use to make their effect.

'Quotation', 'Critic', and Other Ways to Write about Writing

The ability to use works of criticism and incorporate quotations from them into your own essays reveals your own growing critical skill. If you can be confident that you are using the related vocabulary correctly, you will apply this technique more often.

'Quotation' raises two problems.

Do not call it a 'quote'. 'Quote' is a verb, not a noun: you can quote me on this.

Secondly, 'quotation' is one of a group of words that need careful treatment because they define other words. Language about language can be difficult to use; as a literature student you need to acquire this skill. Suppose you answer this question:

'If Shakespeare had never been born, Marlowe would be the best dramatist in the Renaissance.' (Mary Smith, *Renaissance Drama*, 1997).
Discuss with reference to two plays on the module.

You could refer to the words in quotation marks as a 'quotation' by saying 'The quotation from Mary Smith's book raises some interesting points.' It would be preferable, however, to use fewer words. You could, for example, say 'Smith's statement', or, if you wished to imply that her ideas were unfounded, 'Smith's assertion'. NEVER say 'Smith's quotation', because she was not quoting anybody when she wrote those words.

'Critic' should be used with care. Do not use it as a form of introduction (as in 'The critic Smith makes high claims for Marlowe') or a title (as in 'Critic Smith does not pay enough attention to characterisation'). Just use the name. You can, however, say things like 'Grace Ioppolo is one of the critics who have attacked Smith's view.'

The more familiar you become with critical works, the more examples you will find of correct usage, and the more relaxed you will feel when thinking and writing about critics.

Collect a list of **nouns** that you can use to denote groups of other words, and practise using them. Examples might include ‘**statement**’, ‘**command**’, ‘**assertion**’, ‘**observation**’, ‘**remarks**’, ‘**suggestion**’ and ‘**question**’.

Do the same thing with **verbs** that denote different ways of writing or speaking. Examples might include ‘**argues**’, ‘**claims**’, ‘**asserts**’, ‘**states**’, ‘**suggests**’, ‘**describes**’, ‘**discusses**’, and ‘**portrays**’. Take care to use these words correctly. The first five in the list can be used in a variety of ways. You can say, ‘As William Blake **suggests**, orphan children are cruelly treated.’ You can also say, ‘William Blake **suggests** that orphan children are cruelly treated.’ The last three, however, always need a **direct object** (some thing or person upon whom the action is performed) to complete their meaning. So you CANNOT say, ‘As Wordsworth describes, the countryside has healing qualities’, or ‘Wordsworth discusses that the countryside has healing qualities’: you should say ‘Wordsworth describes the healing qualities of the countryside.’

Some other awkward words

‘**Century**’ raises two problems.

You need to be very sure **which century** you mean. If you tend to get muddled, start by remembering which century you are in now, and then apply the principle (add one century) to whichever century you are writing about. Thus 1547 is in the sixteenth century, 2012 is in the twenty-first century and 52 is in the first century.

Secondly, distinguish between ‘century’ used on its own as a **noun**, and when it is used as the second half of a **compound adjective**. Like many grammatical concepts, this is simple once it has been explained. Observe: ‘eighteenth’ is an **adjective**. ‘Century’ is a noun. So you can say ‘*Gulliver’s Travels* was written in the eighteenth century.’ ‘Eighteenth’ describes ‘century’. If, however, you join ‘eighteenth’ to ‘century’, using a hyphen, you create a compound adjective that can then be used to describe something else. Here is an example: ‘*Gulliver’s Travels* is an eighteenth-century book.’ So, if you ever forget and say something like ‘Swift wrote in the eighteenth-century’, your readers will be left asking what eighteenth-century thing he wrote in.

‘Connotation’ is best understood alongside its unjustly neglected companion, **‘Denotation’**. Do not be too quick to turn to a text’s ‘connotations’, that is, things that the language suggests or seems to symbolise, before working out exactly what the text ‘denotes’: its literal meaning. Connotations can arise from single words, so you may feel tempted to launch into them immediately, especially if the passage within which these words appear is so complex that you cannot grasp its full meaning on a first reading, but connotations that cannot be related to the literal meaning of their context are unlikely to be of much critical value. Denotation must come first.

‘Hypocrisy’ should not be used to denote all wickedness and inconsistency. It means pretending to be more virtuous than you really are, so should be reserved for people who are aware of their failings and trying to conceal them.

‘It’s’ is short for ‘it is’ or ‘it has’. **‘Its’** is the possessive of ‘it’. ‘Its’ is not short for anything. Remember this and you should never mix them up again.

‘Juxtaposition’ means ‘putting next to’. It comes from the Latin words *juxta* = ‘next to’ and *ponere* = to place. Contrasts often arise when things are juxtaposed, but do not take this for granted. If you mean ‘contrast’, please say ‘contrast’.

‘Negative’ and **‘Positive’** originally had very objective, simple, clear-cut meanings, like ‘Dissent’ and ‘Assent’, ‘Absent’ and ‘Present’, ‘Minus’ and ‘Plus’. These meanings still occur and you need to be on the alert for them, especially when reading anything written before the 1970s, when a widespread fashion developed for using ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ as **euphemisms** for ‘bad’ and ‘good’, in contexts where ‘bad’ and ‘good’ were felt to be too judgmental. One problem with euphemisms is that they often succeed in confusing the meanings of words, but not in changing the ideas and feelings that underlie them. A further problem with this pair of euphemisms is that people who would not dream of describing something complex, like the atmosphere of a passage in a poem, as ‘bad’ or ‘good’ because they would consider the words too simple, feel no hesitation in using ‘negative’ or ‘positive’. So when you wish to describe something in this way, think carefully about exactly what is bad or good about it, and see if you can use another word, or group of words, or even branch out into a few more sentences. This will help you to enlarge your vocabulary, sharpen your critical response, and keep your readers interested.

‘Would have’ appears in sentences like this: ‘I would have caught the bus if I had got to the stop in time.’ Even the most brilliant students need to be told things, so, just in case, I shall now say, once for all, that **‘Would of’** is

ALWAYS wrong. (The same is true for 'might', 'could', 'should', and all other verbs.)

Essay structure

Before embarking on any essay, exam answer, or dissertation, there is one **BIG DECISION** all writers in this discipline have to make: **text or topic?** Are you going to divide your work up into consecutive investigations of individual texts, or sections of your text if there is only one, or are you going to organize it on a topic-by-topic basis, selecting relevant points from the full range of material in each section? A two-text answer is generally better done topic by topic, especially in an exam, when time might otherwise run out before you have a chance to do justice to more than one text. It can also lead to more interesting perceptions of your material, and you should also bear in mind that when examiners ask you to write on two texts at once, they know a lot of interesting connections can be made.

There is no single pattern for structuring essays, but a certain 11-point outline has been circulating since the 1700s and can be useful if you need something to start you off. A lot of people consider it outmoded, mechanical and restricting, but it has lasted this long for a reason, and you can always add your own variations. With suitable adjustments, it can be used for critical work of almost any length: it works for examination answers, essays, dissertations, articles and books.

Point 1: Introduction. You can use this to indicate what texts you are going to write on, and what aspects of them you are going to deal with, in order to answer the question. This shows that you are going to answer on the right number of texts, from the right part of the right module, and that you have understood the material and question, and how they relate to each other. Indicate the approaches you intend to adopt throughout the essay but do not go into much detail. In coursework it often helps to write the introduction last. In an exam write it first, but you might feel happier leaving an introduction-sized space before the beginning of your answer so that, if you have time, you can go back and rewrite it after finishing the rest of your answer. (When you have finished this second version, **AND NOT BEFORE**, strike through the original introduction with a single straight line, which makes it invisible to the examiner.)

[**Point 1 and a half.** This is one personal variation. The introduction does not accommodate detail, but you often need to provide precise contextual information, or define some key terms, before your discussion can move any further. If so, take care of this business in a short paragraph immediately after the introduction.]

Points 2, 3 and 4. This is where you state one side of the argument, or, if it is more appropriate, you can examine one aspect of the material. Each point should be supported by quotations from or very precise reference to the material under discussion and some detailed analysis of that material to show how it relates to the question and supports the point you are making. These can be longer or shorter depending on the word limits, and the views of other critics can always be accommodated and discussed as relevant.

Points 5, 6 and 7. State the opposing side of the argument, or examine another aspect of the material.

Points 8, 9 and 10. Originally, this was the ‘synthesis’, or combination, bringing both sides of the argument together into a balanced solution. Of course, some questions cannot be answered by a straightforward debate, and not every argument can be solved by a compromise. If compromise is inappropriate, or you were not conducting a debate, you can examine a third aspect of your subject, or perhaps turn round on the question and reconsider its terms in the light of your findings.

Point 11. Conclusion. Survey the process that has led to this point, but avoid simply providing a summary of the previous essay, or rewriting the introduction in the past tense. Ideally, you should show that you have arrived somewhere new and say something briefly about the view from there. Could you, perhaps, ask a question?

Use fewer words: the seven-word rule

Try to introduce into every paragraph one sentence of seven words or less. It displays your grasp of the subject.

Use more words: avoid muddle

Sometimes students will write very obscure, confused sentences, and in the tutorial they will explain, in great detail and with perfect clarity, what they meant, then say, ‘I can’t write it down.’ The problem is that they cannot fit it into a single sentence: in a paragraph, it would be fine. Sometimes you will have a thought that needs several sentences to do it justice. Break it down into stages. If you express some of these stages in short, simple sentences, you will probably be praised for your brevity!

State the obvious

Either you have seen something that is obvious to everybody else, so people might think you had failed to notice it if you left it out, or the thing that you

see so clearly is something nobody else has spotted, and if you left it out you would miss the chance of making an original point. This applies particularly to passages of text supplied for analysis or discussion: if you are provided with something containing spectacular talking points, please treat it as a gift, not a trap.

Analysis is not paraphrasing

At this level, you do not need to demonstrate that you understand a passage you have quoted by providing a paraphrase. This will be regarded as a waste of words. Instead, you should provide a short **critical commentary**, showing in detail how the passage supports your argument. Ultimately, this will demonstrate a deeper level of understanding, since you will be showing why it has that particular meaning.

Sentence Structure

As soon as you work out what your grammatical problems are, you are well on the way to solving them. There are many sources of help, in hard copy and on the Internet: the most difficult task can be finding out exactly what you need. Being absolutely sure **where your own sentences begin and end** is vital. Short sentences with solid structures are desirable. Make sure embedded quotations do not spoil the grammatical structure of your sentence: one good tip is to have only **one quotation per sentence**, unless they are just one or two words long. If your quotation is any longer, start your sentence with it or finish your sentence with it: substantial quotations in the middle of sentences often cause trouble. As a general rule, the shorter the quotation, the better. Sometimes quotations can be fitted in quite simply by cutting words, or punctuation, from the beginning or end. NEVER just leave quoted material lying around without trying to incorporate it into your own writing. Choosing suitable quotations, and working them properly into your own work, takes time, skill, and practice, so do not expect to achieve this in a hurry.

A common source of trouble is failure to realise that, although you have more to say on a particular subject, you have completed your sentence. If you then put in a comma and allow your sentence to run on, you have a case of **'collapsed sentences'** or **'comma splicing'**. Just for once, reading aloud does not help because a sequence of words ending with a comma sounds just the same as if it ended with a full stop.

Punctuation

Always use a colon to **introduce material** not otherwise connected with the grammatical structure of the rest of your sentence: like now! This works well with lists and short quotations that do not form whole sentences.

When punctuating **before and/or after a quotation**, follow this simple rule: apart from quotation marks, use the punctuation you would use if the words were your own.

Use **quotation marks** correctly. If you start with single quotation marks, then stick to single, and use the alternate form for quotation marks within quotation marks. If you start with double, it's the other way round.

Remember to use **apostrophes** correctly. 'The cats appeared.' (The cats are in the plural and nothing in the sentence belongs to them so they do not have an apostrophe.)

'The cats' eyes were green.' (The eyes belonged to two or more cats.)

'The cat's eyes were green.' (The eyes belonged to one cat.)

Presentation

Use **12-point type** at least. It makes your work easy to read.

Use **double spacing**: if the lines are not sufficiently far apart, it is impossible for markers to write legible comments, and they like to express themselves!

Leave **wide margins** at each side of the page, and plenty of space at the **bottom and top**.

Indent the first line of every paragraph: simply leaving a blank line creates ambiguities, especially where indented quotations are involved or pages end.

Do not use contractions (like 'don't' or 'isn't') in formal academic writing.

Number all your pages.

Do not use **dots** at the beginning or end of quotations. They are meant to show when you have cut something out of the middle.

Do not put quoted material in italics unless the material you are quoting is already in italics.

If you are writing **by hand**, indicate italics by underlining.

Titles of books, plays, long poems, newspapers, films, operas, and anything else that, by its nature, could be published independently, should be written **in italics** and not put in quotation marks, **wherever they appear**.

(Consequently, a play's title should always be **in italics**, even if the edition you are using appears in a book containing a collection of plays.)

Titles of chapters, journal articles, short poems, short stories, and anything that is, by its nature, part of a larger unit, should be put in **Roman ('regular') type and quotation marks**.

p. is short for 'page' and should be used when giving a single page number.

pp. is short for 'pages' and should be used for 2 or more page numbers.

The same applies when you are quoting verse: l. is short for 'line' and ll. is short for 'lines'.

c.d.lyle 16/1/12