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A-LEVEL

# ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/2A Texts and Genres: Elements of Crime Writing  
Report on the Examination

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## **Introductory Comments**

Examiners saw much excellent work across all four papers this summer and the statistics were again very favourable: over 99% of students achieved a grade E or above in the subject overall and over 27% achieved a grade A or A\* in the subject overall. Teachers and students therefore should be congratulated on their hard work.

The best responses were seen from students who knew their texts exceptionally well, answered the questions set in a precise way and made good choices of textual detail in answering the questions. When students didn't perform so well, it was often because they did not know their texts very securely and because they did not focus on the tasks set.

Issues raised in last year's report remain relevant, and it would be advisable for teachers to revisit previous reports which are on the website for details about contexts, writing skills and for guidance on answering the different types of question.

## **The importance of students answering the questions set in all their details**

'Answer the question' is our mantra. There are no hidden requirements. Students need to answer questions that *are* set in all their details and not respond to the question they wish had been asked. Students do well when they focus sharply, keep to the task and construct a relevant argument which is grounded in the text. Arguments tend to lack direction and can become chaotic when students try to shoehorn in extraneous material, unrelated context and unrelated comments about aspects of genre that are not required by the question.

## **Knowing the texts**

It is better for A-level students if their ideas come from within the text rather than without. The students who knew their texts well were, of course, in the best position to tackle the questions and it was easy to see the confidence they brought to the exams because they knew their texts. The very best responses were seen from those students who were thinking about which material would best support the arguments they were making, rather than those who tried to use whatever they could remember and then shape their argument around that.

Knowing the text should be the first priority of students and the first priority of teaching. The stories that writers tell are fundamental to enjoyment and knowing what happens in those stories enables students to interpret them with authority and engage in discussion about genre and authorial method. But the stories have to come first. There is no point writing about intradiegetic narrators or 'aspects' of genre if students haven't got inside the stories that the narrators are telling. In the same way, although the specification places much emphasis on different ways of interpreting texts and how authors shape meanings, interpretations and discussion of authorial methods have to emerge from sound knowledge of the text. The text is 'the thing itself' and for students it is more important than what critics say about it and more important than what theorists have said about the genre to which the text belongs. It is stories which fire the imagination of readers – which is what English Literature primarily ought to do. Readers need to be enabled to enter fictional worlds in as three-dimensional way as possible and only when the story has worked the imagination can readers engage in critical thinking about their reading.

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## Know the ‘facts’ of the text

Knowing the text is essential, but perhaps something more specific that students should focus on is their knowing the *facts* of what happens in the stories they are studying. 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*). 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 a wrong fact becomes the basis for discussion, it is clear that everything that follows will get the student into difficulty. For readers, the facts of the stories have to be taken seriously. In stories the facts are the characters, what they say and do, what happens to them, who they speak and relate to and where things happen. There cannot be a debate about something that is palpably not evident in a text or a debate about factual inaccuracy. There has to be a responsible observation of what is written by the author and students have to be respectful of and responsive to it.

An example here might help. In the *Othello* extract question on paper 1A a significant number of students did not know that Iago is on stage witnessing Othello’s suicide, having been arrested by the Venetian officials beforehand and wounded by Othello. Those who were aware of this fact were able to comment on the silent and haunting figure, who bleeds as he watches while Cassio gets promoted and while Othello stabs himself and dies. Not knowing the factual detail of Iago’s presence resulted in erroneous comments being made. Not knowing the factual details of texts was also seen in other papers, for example on paper 1B some students thought that Emma is in love with Frank Churchill and is heartbroken when she discovers his engagement to Jane Fairfax and on the crime writing paper there were several students who did not know the facts of the story of *Peter Grimes* and wrote erroneously and at length about Peter’s having been abused by his father when he was a child.

## Specific comments about 2A: Texts and genres: Elements and Crime Writing

Overall, examiners read some very successful answers to all the questions on the paper this summer. All the questions worked well, giving all students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of both the texts and the genre and to debate issues which interested them. As always, success depended on the extent to which responses focused on the question.

Given that this was an open book examination, there was an expectation that students should use the text they had in front of them. The most effective responses made good use of the opportunity to include plenty of accurate, supportive quotation for their arguments and some very successful responses used detailed analysis of selected key passages to great advantage. In the least effective responses, students made little or no specific references to the text or retold the story.

There were few rubric errors this year but students should remember that two texts must be addressed in Section C. Students who have studied the Selected Poems should be particularly careful to remember that this constitutes one ‘text’ so by writing about a Browning poem and the Crabbe poem in Section C, they are only covering one ‘text’ so one further text must be considered.

A hallmark of the most effective responses was the construction of a clear, coherent argument in which examiners did not have to struggle to see the relevance to the question or to look for implicitly relevant points. Those essays which started with a clear overview of the argument gave the answer a sense of purpose and were more likely to be coherent, ordered and persuasive. Clear, accurate syntax was important when accurately conveying meaning and those answers

where the syntax was loose, inaccurate and too long were self-penalising because meaning became obscure. Length was not synonymous with quality and some students would have been better advised to spend more time planning and structuring their responses. AO1 also requires students to use associated concepts and terminology. Where these terms were used as tools in the arguments these proved beneficial, but where complex and sophisticated terms were dropped into the argument simply to demonstrate knowledge of them, they were not used to advantage and sometimes misunderstood.

All questions contained a prompt for AO2 in the form of the reminder for students to include detailed exploration of authorial methods in their responses. In the most effective responses this exploration acted as evidence for the argument, but in less effective responses this sometimes seemed to be regarded as an end in itself and bore little relation to the task set.

Generally speaking students seemed to realise that there is an expectation for contextual points to arise from the text itself and not to be artificially tacked on to the essay. There were a few exceptions where students were led astray into Coleridge's opium addiction or Christie's biography but these were few and far between. This suggests an improved understanding of the ways in which this specification regards AO3.

AO4 asks students to explore connections across literary texts. In the most effective responses these connections were well-integrated into the arguments and generally informed and underpinned the essay without being made specifically obvious. In the least effective responses, students sometimes digressed into potted histories of a specific sub-genre or tried to pin a genre on the text which did not really apply. Names and definitions of sub-genres rarely aided the arguments and sometimes detracted from them.

AO5 which requires students to explore interpretation and debate is at the heart of the questions on this paper. Questions in all sections included prompts for exploring meaning and interpretation. In Section B all the questions included a critical opinion which invited debate while in Sections A and C, the questions asked students to 'explore the significance'. The most effective responses engaged in lively and sometimes thought-provoking debate or argued their particular case very cogently. In less effective responses, interpretation was less secure or persuasive and there was a tendency just to go along with the premise of the question without having the courage to challenge it.

## **Section A**

The extract in Section A proved accessible to the full range of abilities. Responses in the top bands successfully teased out the nuances in the dialogue between Lucia and Levy and the underlying subtle implications, often with some very sensitive and thoughtful interpretation. More effective responses frequently explored the structure of the passage, looking at the implications of setting and the possibilities offered by the last line. The most successful responses started with the extract and worked from that outwards to the genre. Responses in the lower bands tended to come to the extract with a set of generic expectations which they tried to impose upon it. This usually resulted in comments which were of limited value.

Some of the least effective responses looked at the date and made assumptions from that, trying to force the extract into sub-genres for which there was no hard evidence in the actual text. Such attempts to label the text were of little critical value. The assumption that because the text was published in America in 1947, it was therefore of the 'hard-boiled' genre resulted in students trying to make Levy a typical or an atypical 'hard-boiled' detective. This proved, in many cases, to be

positively misleading and sometimes resulted in erroneous interpretation which the actual extract disproved.

The most successful responses began with an overview of the situation and did not plunge straightaway into analysis of minute detail. Responses which did the latter tended to lose sight of what was actually happening and the wider view of the generic features. Linking specific words to features of the genre and pursuing them did not always result in convincing interpretation. For example, seizing on the word ‘policeman’ or the word ‘time’ in isolation and pursuing those often led to tangential and irrelevant digressions.

It is worth commenting here on the use of the introduction given before the extract. The introduction is intended to aid students’ understanding of the extract and give them necessary information. It should be read and can be used in comments. It did appear that some students had not read the introduction as they speculated about information which had been given there. At the other extreme there were some answers which seemed to be based primarily on the introduction and did not look at the actual extract itself. Careful reading of the introduction and extract is essential to success. Careless reading in less effective responses even resulted in some confusion about the characters: confusion between Lucia and Bee, for example, the belief that Lucia was a young person or that she was the murderer.

The most effective responses managed to remain aware that they were exploring an extract but did not waste time speculating about what might happen in the rest of the text. Responses in the lower bands sometimes seemed to regard the text as complete and showed little awareness that they were only dealing with a small part. Negative observations about what was not in the extract rarely proved fruitful.

## **Section B**

Many of the points made earlier in this report inevitably apply to this section. The most effective responses used detailed textual knowledge and specific references to support their arguments. The most successful responses to question 8, for example, on Christie, used a wealth of textual detail, considering the greed of a range of characters to give conviction to their responses and did not depend solely on discussion of Sheppard. Some even saw Poirot as greedy for truth! Misunderstandings were rare but the most frequently occurring one was in relation to Peter Grimes. Some students seemed to think Peter Grimes was abused by his father when the poem clearly states otherwise. His father was a god-fearing ‘good old man’ abused by his son.

Equally, the most effective responses engaged in interesting interpretation and debate. The inclusion of ‘to what extent’ invited students to engage with the critical proposition in the questions and many did. Question 4 on Atkinson was particularly successful in inviting students to agree or disagree. Many saw Joanna as a victim in the murder of her family at the beginning of the novel but then saw her as emerging strong and becoming a murderer herself, disengaging the reader’s sympathy. The word ‘everyone’ in question 8 was also a good prompt for debate as was the word ‘ultimately’ in question 3 on Coleridge. Responses to Fagin in question 6 gave rise to some interesting discussion. Students who studied this text obviously engaged vigorously and usually very successfully with the generic issues to be found there.

As this shows, reading the question terms carefully and precisely often inspired the most effective responses. Addressing the word ‘appropriately’ in question 2 on the Selected Poems, for example was the key to the top bands. More modest responses simply talked about punishments but the most effective responses explored their appropriateness. Similarly in question 5 on McEwan, the

word ‘presented’ in the question was the key word. Less effective responses simply discussed the seriousness of the various crimes whereas the really effective responses considered the ways in which McEwan *presents* the crimes.

Focus on the question, therefore, continued to be important in this section. In question 3 on Coleridge, for example, it was important to spend some time discussing the Mariner as he was the focus of the question. Responses which simply dismissed him and only discussed other potential victims bypassed a crucial element of the question requirement. Similarly responses to question 2 which simply consisted of an exposition of the poems did not score highly as they did not answer the question.

Top band responses also unpicked the slightly subtle differences in some of the question terms. Question 9, for example, on *Hamlet* contained the words ‘guilt’ and ‘remorse’ and the most effective responses acknowledged and explored the differences between the two. Some less effective responses did not seem to know what remorse meant and so did not appreciate the distinction.

Responses in the top bands also showed a willingness to explore subtlety and ambiguity. Tentatively teasing out different meanings was a hallmark of more effective responses. Less effective responses tended to be far more assertive and less happy with ambiguity, often making assumptions about what authors intended or how readers would receive a text. An example of this occurred in answer to question 7 on Greene, where less successful responses were often prone to assert that Pinkie committed suicide and was punished by God whereas the event in the novel is far more ambiguous and subtle.

It is also important to stress that examiners do not expect students to go outside the text for readings. This particularly happened in answers to question 2 where some responses talked at length about the unfairness of Wilde’s punishment for homosexuality when this is not the actual issue in the poem. The text is about the Guardsman’s punishment, alongside the harsh treatment of his fellow prisoners and does not refer to homosexuality.

## Section C

Students must use two texts they have studied when responding to questions in this section and must not use the same text as they did in Section B. While they do not have to write equal amounts on each text, it is important to remember that they should address each text substantially. In some cases, responses failed to gain marks by not addressing a second text substantially enough.

In this section question 10 was far more popular than question 11. There were many effective responses to question 10. Some students assumed that order and justice were the same thing and wrote responses based on that assumption. While these were not irrelevant, more effective responses usually explored different kinds of order. In addition to the more obvious types of social order some students explored literary order in relation to the reader’s expectations of the genre, for example, which inspired some particularly interesting responses. Some students writing on *Hamlet* effectively explored the order expected in the revenge tragedy and moral order was often engagingly debated with reference to Atkinson and Christie. In responses which used *Oliver Twist*, the demands for restored literary order according to the expectations of the Victorian reader were aptly pointed out in some effective responses.

Question 11 allowed students to choose appropriate examples of mystery and the unknown from the texts they had studied for themselves. Success depended very much on the choice of examples. The least effective responses simply listed examples of mystery and the unknown,

sometimes choosing rather tenuous examples as opposed to the most obvious. The most effective responses actually explored the significance of these examples and did not just list them.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.