ENGLISH

Paper 1 – Composition

Taking the essay option

Jim Lusby, who has been teaching at the Institute for 11 years, is a novelist, short story writer, playwright and winner of a Hennessy Literary Award

Introduction

Your performance on paper 1 will more or less determine your final grade in Leaving Cert English, not only because it is worth 200 marks out of the total of 400 available for the subject, but also because the skill set you acquire in studying for it – how to express yourself and how to organise a coherent essay – is equally essential for success on paper 2. The paper sets you three writing tasks – question A, question B and composition. Although you should attempt them in that order in the examination itself, it is best to study for them in the following sequence.

Paper 1 at a glance

Paper 1 is divided into two sections. You should allow two hours and 50 minutes for this paper.

Section 1 – Comprehending – (100 marks)
Section 2 – Composing – (100 marks)

On the day of the exam you must answer three questions:
Question A – Comprehension based questions (50 marks)
Question B – Specific, functional writing tasks (50 marks)
Composition – (100 marks)

Timing
Reading and selecting questions – 10 mins
Question A 55 minutes
Question B 35 minutes
Composition 1 hour and 10 minutes

Answer sequence
Answer questions in following order:
Question A
Question B
Composition
Remember: Questions A and B cannot be answered on the same text.

Composition

STUDY AND PRACTISE

Seven essay titles are set, covering three genres – the personal essay, the discussion essay and the short story. Since you have to write only one, it makes sense to decide early in your preparation which genre best suits your abilities to give you time to perfect it.

THE PERSONAL ESSAY

The personal essay combines descriptions of your experiences relevant to the topic with your reflections on these experiences. It must have a reflective element – check out the Marking Schemes from previous years on examinations.ie to confirm this. You may reflect on other people's motivations, on your own emotions or offer philosophical reflections on life.

Sample opening

The act of leaving, and the emotions it brings with it, is one of the most universal experiences in our society. Felt on countless levels – physically, spiritually, permanently or temporarily – we have all left things, people and places, and we have all experienced things, people and places, leaving us. In almost every case there is no black-and-white emotion to sum up our feelings – leaving a loved one or losing a friend does not simply result in sadness, for instance, but often regret and anger or sometimes relief. Fully explaining the concept of "leaving" would not be possible within the boundaries of a single book, let alone an essay, but I will attempt to paint a picture of what it means to me.

Key reading

The Art of the Personal Essay, edited by Philip Lopate.

THE DISCUSSION ESSAY

The discussion essay combines your well-informed opinions on the given topic with evidence and illustrations supporting these opinions, all organised into a logical argument that gathers momentum as it goes along and concludes convincingly. Though some of the material supporting your argument may consist of personal experience, you really need to know what's happening in the world to write an impressive discussion.

Sample opening

Ladies and gentlemen. At present, Ireland stands at a crossroads. In our country, all major political parties wish to remove the provision of free education and free student fees. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party have all stated in their electoral manifestos that they support the reintroduction of fees for third-level students. It appears clear, that at present, the conviction of all political parties is that education is a privilege, not a right. They are wrong. We must stand unequivocal in our defence of free education. If this first step in dismantling our educational system is sanctioned, abhorrent consequences will permeate through Irish society. I tell you today my friends that this will lead to our destruction.

Key reading

The Oxford Book of Essays, edited by John Gross, and the columns in newspapers such as *The Irish Times* and *The Guardian*.

THE SHORT STORY

The short story is a fictional account, most successfully of a character caught in a defining situation. That is, a situation that defines the essence of their personality. The ability to bring characters alive on the page, through external appearance, behaviour and dialogue; the creation of drama through external or internal conflict; and the talent for capturing a setting with a few well-chosen descriptions – these are the essential skills of the short story writer.

In addition, the marking schemes available on examinations.ie always stress that "narrative shape" will be rewarded. Put simply, this means that your story should be shaped as: conflict, crisis, resolution.

Sample opening

Maria sat gazing at the fireplace as the luminous flames raged. Her delicate fingers clasped the large wine glass, which she had just topped up, while the half empty bottle stood perfectly parallel to the vase on the glass coffee table. She was restless.

Key reading

The Granta Book of the American Short Story (1 and 2), edited by Richard Ford, and *New Irish Short Stories* edited by Joseph O'Connor.

Eoghan MacMahon, Hannah Keavney, Inesa Cidlanskite and Yanina Munck-Fagan at the Institute of Education
Photograph: Brenda Fitzsimons

EXAMINATION TECHNIQUES

Select your composition title during initial reading of the examination paper. Jot down essential notes relevant to the genre, topic and structure: how you will open, develop and conclude the essay. Leave the writing of the composition until after you have finished question A and question B.

> **It makes sense to decide early in your preparation which genre best suits your abilities to give you time to perfect it**

WRITING

Shape the essay in bullet point form before you begin. Shape a paragraph in your head before starting it. Shape a sentence in your head before writing it. Search for the most expressive language – for example, "I walked into the room" is neutral and dull, but "I staggered into the room" or "I burst into the room" or "I strode into the room" are all much better writing because they convey more of reality in the deliberate choice of words.

Use sensory imagery: the world enters our brains through our senses – touch, smell, taste, hearing, sight – and should come back onto the page through the same route.

Aim for 750-1000 words.

ENGLISH

Paper 1 – Comprehension

Will this be on the texts?

Although you have to answer on only one text, you cannot assume that any single genre will definitely appear on the paper, writes **Jim Lusby**

Comprehension – Question A

STUDY AND PRACTISE

Three texts are presented for comprehension on the examination paper. These may include examples of personal writing, such as the extract from Margaret Laurence's memoir in 2012, discursive writing, such as the guide to cliff-hangers in 2013, and narrative writing, such as Paul Theroux's travel piece in 2012.

Although you have to answer on only one text, you cannot assume that any single genre will definitely appear on the paper – there was no narrative text in 2013, for example. You should therefore read critically in all three areas, identifying the features that are essential to each genre – such as, anecdote and reflection in personal writing, rhetorical power in discursive writing, drama and description in narrative writing.

Most texts include a visual element – that is, photographs, reproductions of paintings, drawings, or other illustrations. Questions are usually asked on the visual element. Practise reading images rather than merely looking at them. In other words, interpret the artist's intention and technique, as well as the impact on you – much as you would when assessing a written text. Get into the habit of assessing a visual text – including the photographs of yourself that you post on social network sites – with reference to the body language of the figures within the frame, the use of colour and light, and the setting or environment.

Key reading

Read the texts on the examination papers 2009-2013, and particularly those presented over the last three years.

Identify each text as an example of personal writing (exploring some aspect of personal experience), discursive writing (presenting and supporting an argument), or narrative writing (telling a story).

Note that question A(i) is usually a straightforward content question, question A(ii) is usually on the visual text or an invitation to develop an issue introduced in the text, and question A(iii) is usually on style.

EXAMINATION TECHNIQUES

Select your Question A primarily on the basis of how comfortable you are with the questions, rather than with the text itself, although it is understood that you may have a preference for a particular genre of writing, such as narrative. Nevertheless, the texts don't vary greatly in terms of difficulty, and you are awarded marks specifically for answering the set questions.

In each question, highlight the important terms – this is what you are looking for while reading the text. Highlight passages in the text that correspond to the set questions and that you will use as quotations in your answer. In the margins opposite these highlighted passages record the points you will make in your responses – if you don't physically record all points that occur to you, then you will have forgotten a third of them by the time you come to writing your answer. Note which question – (i), (ii) or (iii) – each of your points refers to.

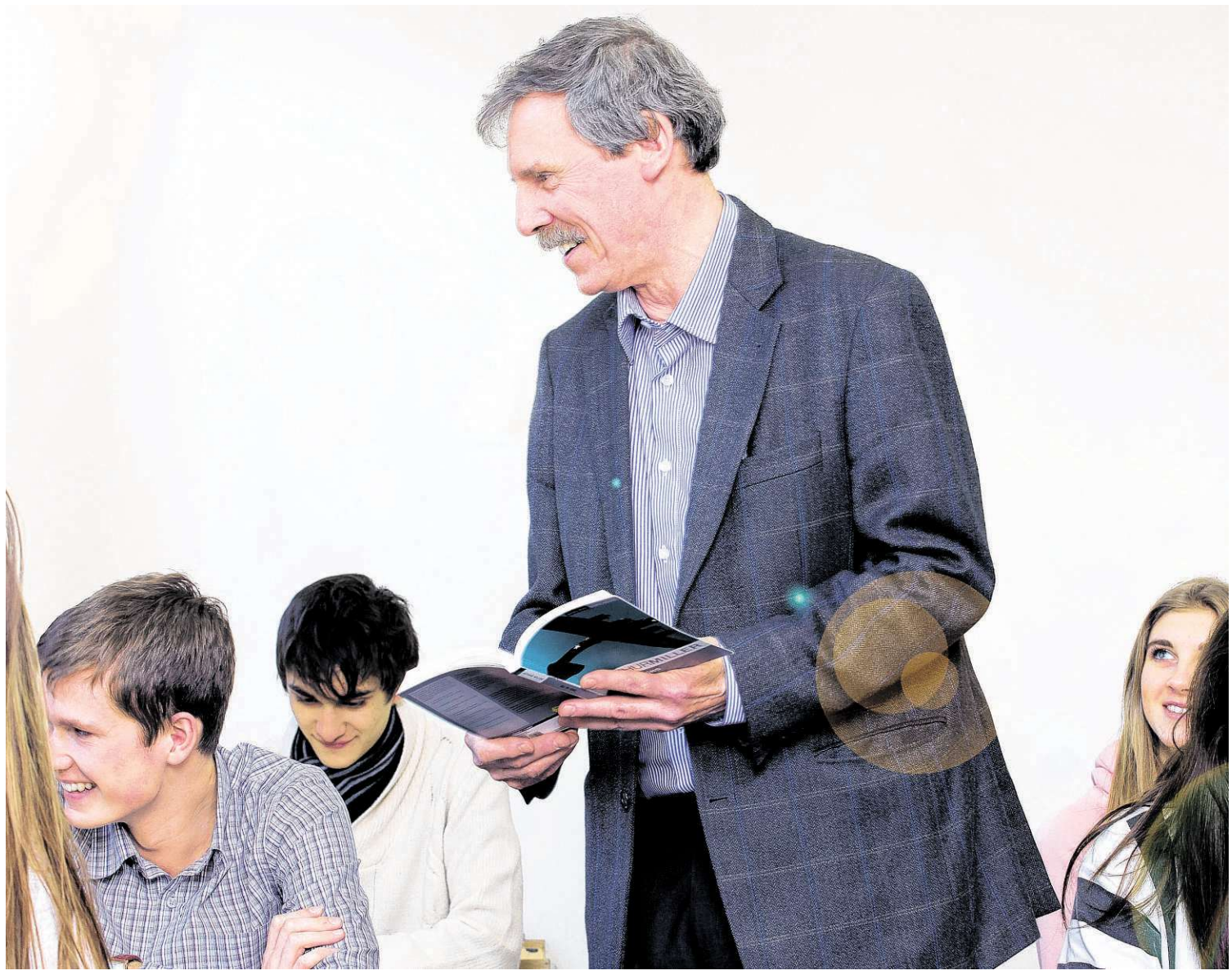
WRITING

Provide three points in support of your answer. Begin by answering the question while drawing on its phrasing. For example, if the question is: "What evidence does the writer offer to suggest that Grand Central Station has gripped people's imagination since its opening in 1913?" (Text 3 2013 (i)) you might begin: "Belinda McKeon provides a wealth of evidence to demonstrate that Grand Central Station has gripped people's imagination." Avoid specific discussion or illustration in this opening paragraph.

Each subsequent paragraph should consist of a clearly expressed point, quotations from the text to illustrate that point, and a brief discussion of the relevance and effectiveness of these quotations.

For example, my answer to Text 3 2013 (i) might continue: "The recurring references to Grand Central Station in the works of the American fiction writers referred to by Belinda McKeon testify to its timeless appeal and iconic relevance. Fiction is one of the most purely imaginative forms of writing and that so many of its practitioners have drawn on Grand Central for both setting and themes shows how powerfully it has gripped the imagination.

"McKeon quotes from both John Cheever and Richard Ford, both of whom used the setting as a crucial element in plotting stories, but her most revealing remark concerns Richard Yates, whose work, she says, explores the tensions between 'the place's everyday treadmill and its gilded promises'. After all, 'gilded promises' are the very stuff of the imagination. She calls Yates the 'poet' of the Station, and if there's one form of writing even more imaginative that fictions, it's certainly poetry. To inspire poetry is to grip the imagination."



English teacher Martin Kelly with students at the Institute of Education
Photograph: Brendan Duffy

Question B

STUDY AND PRACTISE

Question B is a functional writing task. You are given:

- A personality, for example: a student, a journalist (2013), a reader, a citizen
- A task, for example: to debate, to introduce, to offer an opinion (2013), to critically respond, to propose, to persuade
- A format, for example: a talk, a book introduction, a newspaper article (2013), a letter, a proposal, a web article (2012)

You are then asked to write an appropriate piece of 300-400 words.

You will notice that the expression and support of an opinion dominates these tasks from the last two years. At the very least, therefore, you should study and practise the communication of a point of view. Note how the best writers and speakers effectively open an address with something colourful and engaging; an anecdote, perhaps, or a quotation, or personal reminiscence. Note how they clearly express their central point early in the delivery of an article or speech and then keep repeating this essential communication. Note how strongly they end, by emphasising again the most important feature.

Key reading

The letters pages of quality newspapers such as *The Irish Times* and *The Guardian*; the texts, available online, of famous speeches, from Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' to Barack Obama's 'Yes, we can'; the best blogs online, for example Stephen Fry's at stephenfry.com.

EXAMINATION TECHNIQUES

Select your question B and question A in tandem, since you cannot do both on the same text. You may find it most efficient to choose question B first. Make your choice on the basis of whether or not you can write a piece that feels real – this is the main criterion for question B: that it has an authentic feel to it. During your preparation, jot down the personality you are asked to assume, the audience you are asked to address, the task you are asked to perform, and the format you are asked to use.

WRITING

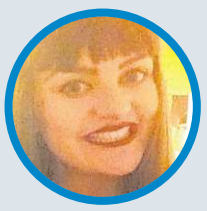
Follow the same advice in terms of structure and expression as for the composition, set out on the previous page. Imagine yourself really in the situation you have been asked to work within. Before committing them to paper, assess every word and every sentence in the light of this. Does it sound right? Does it fit?

The task is to use language appropriate to a specific situation. This may require a neutral vocabulary and tone - as in a purely informative document - or a passionate vocabulary and tone - as in a polemic (a strong attack) against the influence of social media.

Paper 2 – Overview

Clarity and insight

How to get your A1 ENGLISH



Ellen O'Connor

To be successful in Leaving Cert English you must be organised, dedicated and above all smart with your time management.

For question A in paper 1, look through the past exam papers as the same questions repeat year after year – what insight do we gain into the author's personality or lifestyle, stylistic features etc. Read the questions first, highlighting the key words and read the passage at least three times.

Choose your comprehension based on the questions that are asked, not on the content of the passage that most interests you.

For question B, make sure you familiarise yourself with the layout of a letter and a diary entry as these are easy marks on the day of the exam. For the composition section, I would advise you to do the "light hearted/popular" magazine article, as nowadays we are all familiar with the language and style of blogs and magazines therefore it is an easy language to use on the day of the exam.

For paper 2, the key to conquering the single text question is to know your quotes inside out as themes and language are much easier to study when you have quotes to back you up.

This advice is also applicable to the comparative section of the course, but make sure you use comparative language in your answer as this is what the examiner will be looking for.

For the poetry section, study six poems by five poets, don't listen to predictions and have one page of notes per poem to study during the year.

Every weekend set aside an hour or two to complete some questions from a past paper, and mark it yourself using the official marking schemes

I think the most important piece of advice I can give you is that you must always know what the examiner is looking for and you can do this by reading and highlighting key words in the questions that are asked.

Cian Hogan is the author of *Poems*, a new anthology of Leaving Cert poetry and *Hamlet*, an ebook exam guide written for the iPad

Paper 2 – An overview

Paper 2 is divided into three sections.

Section 1: The single text (60 marks, 50 minutes)
You will be required to attempt a question on one of the prescribed single texts. Two questions will be set on each of the texts.

Section 2: The comparative study (70 marks, 60 minutes)
You will be required to answer one question from this section. Normally two questions are set on each of the modes of comparison.

Section 3: Poetry (70 marks, 60 minutes)
Poetry is worth 70 marks on the higher level paper. 50 marks are available for seen poetry and 20 marks for unseen.

Understanding the PCLM marking scheme
On a general level, the corrector will be looking for four different qualities in your answers in paper 2.

1. CLARITY OF PURPOSE

The first of these is clarity of purpose. Here, the corrector will want to see that your answer engages with the question asked. This is worth 30 per cent of the available marks.

In order to get the full marks available for clarity of purpose, you will have to:

- Provide an original answer. (Slavishly learnt-off material can often damage your prospects in the exam.)
- Show that you understand the concept of genre. This means that your essays demonstrate an awareness of, for example, how drama differs from poetry.
- Focus clearly on what the question is asking from you. You must always justify your statements by providing examples from the texts on your course. According to the Chief Examiner's report of 2005: "Answers were most successful where candidates made good use of the text to reinforce a point of view or response."

Most marks available for clarity of purpose are lost by:

- Retelling the story of the text. This is known as paraphrasing. Remember, you are expected to know the content of your texts, but the content of the text is only useful insofar as it illustrates a point that addresses the question asked. Paragraphs that concentrate too much on the events in a novel, play, poem or film tend to lead to paraphrasing.
- Reproducing an essay that you learnt off by heart that does not address the question fully.

2. COHERENCE OF DELIVERY

The second area that the marking scheme addresses is your coherence of delivery. Here, the corrector wants to see an ability to sustain your response throughout the entire answer. This is worth 30 per cent of the available marks.

In order to gain the full marks you need to sustain your essay in a manner that demonstrates:

- Continuity of argument: your ideas need to follow on from one another.
- Management of ideas: you must control the manner in which you present your ideas in an essay. The easiest way to ensure this is to write in focused paragraphs. A focused paragraph deals with one aspect of the question. This one aspect can be technical, eg use of rhythm, or thematic, eg death, love, etc. Remember, your paragraph must always be relevant to the question asked.
- Engagement with the texts: you must show that you understand how the texts function and achieve their impact. It is not simply enough to know what the text is about.

You will lose marks available for coherency of delivery if you:

- Fail to shape and order your argument. Remember, your essay must have a beginning, a middle and a conclusion.

EXAM TIMES ONLINE

For more Irish Times/Institute of Education Exam Times, see

irishtimes.com/examtimes

"Focus clearly on what the question is asking from you. You must always justify your statements by providing examples

- Write in disorganised paragraphs that lack focus. Remember, the definition of a paragraph is a group of sentences dealing with one idea.
- Use the wrong register. While you should try to write in a natural style, the fact that you are writing an essay implies a certain degree of formality.

3. EFFICIENCY OF LANGUAGE

The third area that the corrector will concern him/herself with is efficiency of language. The corrector will want to see clear evidence of your ability to manage and control your language with a view to achieving clarity in your communication. This is worth 30 percent of the available marks. If you want to obtain the full marks available for efficiency of language, you must:

- Control your expression. This means that your sentences should flow naturally. Avoid very long sentences and ensure that the syntax (word order) of your sentences is logical.
- Ensure that your paragraphs are structured correctly. You must write in ordered paragraphs that work together to answer the question. Try to link your paragraphs where possible with words like nevertheless, however, etc.
- Use lively, interesting language and phrasing. Try to vary your sentence length and avoid repetition of words and phrases.

You will lose marks for your language if you:

- Fail to write clear and logical sentences that make complete sense to the person reading them.
- Use learnt-off material that does not logically fit in with the rest of your argument or address the question asked.
- Write an essay that does not contain ordered paragraphs.

4. ACCURACY OF MECHANICS

The final area that the marking scheme addresses is called accuracy of mechanics. This is basically spelling and grammar. Ten per cent of the available marks are given for this.

ENGLISH

Paper 2 – Comparative

Comparing notes

Martin Kelly, who has been teaching for over 30 years, offers some practical guidelines for the comparative section

Comparative study

Time one hour. Marks 70.

Range of responses

Unlike your core text and poetry questions, the comparative study allows for such a wide range of responses that the challenge may at times seem daunting. So, here is advice on building focused and effective comparisons.

1. DON'T JUST LIST YOUR TEXTS

Provide a brief overview as well of what each is about.

Example

The three texts I have studied are *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, a tragic story of family break down as a result of a father's decision to put money before morals; *Foster* by Claire Keegan, a moving account of a young girl's bonding with relatives who have lost a child and the film, *I'm Not Scared* by Gabriele Salvatores, the story of another young protagonist whose secret friendship with a kidnapped boy leads him into a life-endangering confrontation with his family.

(If you were answering a theme question, then you would mention it at this point.)

Comment

The short overview tagged to each title, sets the scene and makes for an effective lead-in. Abbreviate the title as you see fit. Alternatively, you could refer to texts saying, "whereas in Sons..." or "'Scared..." or "in Miller's text..."

2. THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

In structuring your answer from this point onwards, look at the following steps as they are presented in this cultural context question. Two texts are used: *Empire of the Sun* and *I'm not Scared*.

Sample question

"A reader can feel uncomfortable with the values and attitudes presented in texts." Compare the extent to which the values and attitudes that you encountered, in at least two texts on your comparative course, made you feel uncomfortable.

Let's take it that you have already listed your texts with short overviews and given a brief explanation of the mode; now, with the wording of the question in mind, begin with a "topic sentence". This acts as a signpost for an examiner letting him/her know where your discussion is going. It also gives each paragraph a focus.

Sample paragraphs

Brief explanation of cultural context:
The cultural context is the world or society of the text with which people interact through social institutions and find fulfilment. (Use your own words)

(Topic sentences in *italics*)
Many of the attitudes and values in my texts made me uncomfortable even as the setting was presented. In *Empire of the Sun* (EOS) for example, Jim lives in the international settlement, a privileged ex-pat community. He is chauffeured to school and, from the comfort of the car, witnesses the dire poverty of the ordinary Chinese and their struggle to survive. The contrast is dramatic and vulgar. The beggar outside his house is of minimal interest even when the Packard goes over his foot. This indifference to the plight of others showed me how wealth might paralyze any empathy for others. In *I'm not Scared* (INS), on the other hand, it was not so much the setting as the opening scene that made me feel uncomfortable. Even though it was a child's game, the confrontation that takes place between Skull and Barbara, where he demands that she expose herself in front of the other children, reveals an attitude to women that is exploitative and humiliating. I wondered what values had been handed on to Skull that allowed him to treat the girl in such an unfeeling way. Michele's intervention only partly relieved my concerns about this picture of rural childhood in 1970's Italy.

It was in examining the roles of men and women that other anxieties I felt, came to the surface. In EOS men began the wars and women and children were the victims. Women, to be fair, took their domestic duties seriously. Jim's mother helped with his Latin but then there were the more vulnerable like Mrs Vincent, who seemed in a daze once the war started, unable to reach out to young Jim in the prison cubicle. Similarly, in INS, men instigated the kidnappings: they were the exploiters. Women, if we are to judge from Michele's mother, were the passive ones, reacting to events, the ones who had no choice but to agree with what males decided and to bring up their families as best as they could. Anna revealed a lot, I thought, when she whispered to Michele to promise that when he grew up, he would leave the village. Thinking back now on this text, I feel the elegant high heel shoes she bought, perhaps symbolised private unfulfilled dreams after discovering the kind of man she married.

Comment

These paragraphs are firmly centred on the wording of the question and there are numerous examples of personal engagement. Of course you could argue that there were aspects as well that you felt positive about. For example, Michele, despite his parents influence, grows to be a fine moral young man.

English teacher Cian Hogan and Molly Corbet at the Institute of Education
Photograph: Brendan Duffy

> **Unlike your core text and poetry questions, the comparative study allows for such a wide range of responses that the challenge may at times seem daunting**

3. THE GENERAL VISION AND VIEWPOINT

As in the cultural context question, start here with a brief explanation of the mode.

Explanation

The general vision refers to the overall impact a text makes on the individual. What happens to people through their own actions or through circumstances outside their control and how they deal with those challenges, will decide whether the general vision is optimistic or pessimistic.

You may of course point out that the general vision changes at certain points but overall, it is a good idea to come down on one side for a sense of unity.

Possible approaches

- Look at the way a text opens: what is it saying to you? *How Many Miles to Babylon?* is particularly bleak.
- Through the characters: what they say and do. Keller in *All My Sons* is a significant agent of the pessimistic vision of the text.
- In the relationships that people have: in *How Many Miles to Babylon?* Alicia's and Frederick's marriage is particularly pessimistic. In *The Road*, the father and son relationship makes for an optimistic vision.
- By examining the society people live in: money for example, is pre-eminent in *I'm not Scared*, family influences are also very negative.
- Through a key moment: in *Foster* it is only when the Kinsellas are leaving the farmyard that the girl realises the extent of her loss.
- Through patterns of imagery: religious imagery in *Children of Men* contributes to an optimistic vision.
- By examing the ending: in *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine's telling Ilsa to join her husband on the plane shows his generosity and the sacrifice of his own happiness but the act also is wonderfully optimistic about human nature.

4. THEME – ADDRESSING KEY PHRASES

- If there is one phrase that has appeared in different guises on a number of occasions, it is how a theme "can offer valuable insights into life". We see it in "narratives can broaden our understanding of a theme or issue" and in the phrase, "allows the reader/viewer to gain a variety of viewpoints on that theme".
- In *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, for example, taking the theme of relationships, we might say that valuable insights are:
  – The realisation that friendship provides an important anchor in the face of opposition from family and authority (Glendinning);
  – The self-sacrificing aspect of human behaviour when a friendship is important to the individual – Alec is prepared to sacrifice his own life for Jerry's sake;
  – Family relationships can have powerful influences on behaviour: Jerry had such love for his mother that he was prepared to desert and face the consequences, while Alec was the product of a loveless marriage that left him emotionally stunted until he encountered Jerry: "I love no living person".
- Have at least three insights per text ready for this type of question.

5. FINAL WORDS OF ADVICE

- Know at least four key scenes from each text and why they are so important.
- Start into comparisons immediately after listing texts and providing the short overviews.
- There is no set number of comparisons to be made in any answer as a whole or on any single page.
- It is the quality of your comparisons that will decide what marks the examiner will give you and that is dependent on the level of your engagement with the texts. Be sensible about the amount of space you give to any one text. Remember you are writing in the comparative spirit.
- It's a good idea to have quotations that crystallise a point succinctly. For example, anyone studying *Babylon* will know the quote that sums up the key event when Alec is told about Frederick, "dispossessed in a sentence". You should have a number of key quotes ready in each text.

Paper 2 – Single text – Macbeth

Something wicked

Paul McCormack explains that knowing the sequence and details of the play's events is your priority – only then can specific topics be prepared

The single text

The single text is on paper 2 of the exam. Two questions will be set, and you are required to answer one of these questions. The single text question is worth 60 marks.

THE OPTIONS

Nine texts are prescribed for examination in this section. The prescribed texts for 2014 are:
Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen(H/O)
Circle of Friends by Maeve Binchy (O)
Empire of the Sun by JG Ballard (H/O)
Translations by Brian Friel (H/O)
Never Let Me Go Kazuo Ishiguro (H/O)
How Many Miles to Babylon? by Jennifer Johnston (O)
Sive by John B Keane (O)
Home Before Night by Hugh Leonard, (O)
Macbeth by William Shakespeare (H/O)

MACBETH

It is compulsory at higher level to study a Shakespeare play either as a central or a comparative text. The large majority of students study the Shakespeare play in this section. *Macbeth* is the prescribed Shakespeare text for examination in 2014.

The most important thing to emphasise when preparing for this section is to know the text. Get a hold of a good set of act and scene summaries and read them. Know the sequence of events in the play. Students often focus exclusively on trying to learn off points relevant to particular topics. While it is good exam technique to prepare for specific topics, you cannot predict the specifics of a question. Learning off material has the effect of limiting your scope and imagination when answering a question and that is a mistake.

Your focus should be on establishing a thorough understanding of the action of the play and building up a collection of quotes that you can use in your answers. If you find it difficult to learn quotes, try recording them on your smartphone and listening to them as you journey to or from school. You will find you will remember the quotes in the same effortless way as you remember the lyrics of songs you listen to repeatedly. Never try to learn a quote unless you know exactly what it means. Quotes are used to support points in your argument. If you don't know what they mean, you cannot use them.

At higher level, the questions will require you to answer by writing an essay in response to a statement. For example, in 2013, the following questions were set:
(i)"The variety of significant insights that we gain into Macbeth's mind proves critical in shaping our understanding of his complex character."

Discuss this view, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the play, *Macbeth*.

or

(ii)"Shakespeare makes effective use of disturbing imagery in the play, *Macbeth*."

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the text.

The Three Witches from Opera Ireland's 2009 production of Verdi's Macbeth Photograph: Anthony Woods

An effective answer

It is important to remember that you are being examined not only on your knowledge of the play, but also on your abilities as a discursive writer (a writer using the language of argument.) Your answer must have a clear purpose and all of the reference and quotation you provide must be relevant and clearly support that purpose.

Each question contains key words that must be addressed in an effective answer. Failure to deal with an aspect of the question will result in the loss of marks in the purpose section of the marking scheme.

For example, a candidate answering question (ii) above may have written an essay in which they clearly illustrate Shakespeare's effective use of imagery in the play. However, that candidate may neglect to explain why the selected images are disturbing. That omission constitutes a failure to answer a key aspect of the question.

Similarly, question (i) contained the key words "significant insights" and "complex character." This question asks you to explain how Macbeth's soliloquies and interaction with other characters show how he thinks and what his motives are. However, a candidate who doesn't explain how this insight "shapes our understanding" of his character will have ignored a key aspect of the question. In other words, it is not enough to merely summarize an aspect of the play, no matter how deep your knowledge. You must use your information to analyse and come to conclusions. You are using the language of argument, not the language of information.

Once you have established a thorough understanding of the text, it is wise to prepare some specific essay topics. These will include detailed analysis of the character of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, as well as of the role of the Witches. You should also examine a number of important themes. These include:
– Kingship
– Loyalty and betrayal
– Deception
– The Supernatural

Exam technique

You should aim to complete your Macbeth essay in 60 minutes. In that time you should:

- **Read both questions before selecting one to answer.**
- **Plan your answer, working out a clear structure for the essay.**
- **Write a clear opening paragraph in which you outline your response to the statement in the question and suggest some of the points you will develop later in the essay.**
- **Write a number of development paragraphs in which you explain your argument and contextualise your points with reference to the key words in the question.**
- **Write a brief closing paragraph in which you reiterate the main points of your answer.**
- **Re-read your work to check for basic errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation.**
- **You should write between 1000-1500 words for your Macbeth essay. The length of the essay is less important than the quality of the argument and your ability to sustain that argument in a structured manner.**
- **An A1 essay should contain plenty of quotations. A good idea is to aim for a count of two per paragraph in an 7-10 paragraph essay.**
- **A1 grade requires a score of 54 or more out of 60.**

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ENGLISH

Paper 2 – Poetry

Theme and technique

Denis Creaven been teaching English at the Institute for over 30 years. Here he examines the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Philip Larkin

Poetry in the Leaving Cert examination is worth 70 marks – 50 marks for prescribed poetry and 20 marks for unseen. To write a successful essay in the prescribed poetry section you need to address all aspects of the question asked. In order to do this, you need to be familiar with the backgrounds, themes and styles of the poets on your course.

Students may find it useful to organise their study of each poet under relevant headings as seen here in the case of Dickinson and Larkin.

Emily Dickinson

Some interesting aspects of Dickinson's poetry:

Content

The Emily Dickinson poems prescribed for Leaving Certificate 2014 are mainly concerned with states of mind – inner mental and spiritual states. Dickinson's poetry explores the highs and lows of human thought and emotion: the extremes of happiness and hope; the mental pressures of pain, despair and desolation. Dickinson also writes on the themes of death and of nature; she exposes original and unusual aspects of these themes through the distinctiveness of her poetic style and through her unique, and sometimes eccentric, ways of looking at life and death.

Unusual punctuation

A Dickinson poem is immediately recognizable on the page because of her original and unorthodox punctuation. Her frequent use of capitalised words and dashes make it easy to identify her characteristic style.

Capitalised words

The use of capitals is Dickinson's way of giving importance to certain words – it is her way of drawing our attention to words that are central to the meaning of the poem. When capitalised, the words stand out on the page in a dramatic, arresting manner. Notice how, in the poem, *The Soul has Bandaged moments*, the use of capitals brings into focus and adds dramatic weight towords like "Soul", "Bandaged", "Goblin", "Fright", "Horror", "Escape", "Paradise".

Employment of the dash

The use of a dash is another feature of Dickinson's unorthodox punctuation; she frequently employs dashes to mark off and isolate ideas and images, thus causing us to pause, focus on the images, and absorb their full impact. In the line, "Salute her – with long fingers –" from the poem *The Soul has Bandaged moments*, the use of the dash frames, dramatises and deepens the image in a way that a simple comma would not. This works with other images in the same poem: "– Long Dungeoned from his Rose –" and "when bursting all the doors –".

Look for this feature in other poems such as *Hope' is the thing with feathers*, and in *There's a certain Slant of light*. In all of these poems, the punctuating dashes frame the images, thus intensifying their impact.

At times, the dash has the effect of achieving a conversational rhythm – illustrated in the opening stanza of *I could bring you Jewels – had I a mind to*:

"I could bring you Jewels – had I a mind to –
But you have enough – of those –
I could bring you Odors from St Domingo –
Colors – from – Vera Cruz –"

Read these lines aloud, pausing at the dash and then move on: you will hear the rhythm of conversational speech. Through the act of reading, pausing and moving on, it seems that Dickinson's own evolving thought processes reveal themselves in all their freshness and originality.

Above: Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830- 1886) circa 1850; right: Philip Larkin (1922-1985) with his muse and mistress Monica Jones
Photographs: Getty

Condensed, economical style

Dickinson's style is economical: she never wastes a word or an image. Sometimes her poems read like diary entries: the marking off of phrases by the use of dashes gives the poems the fragmentary quality of diary recording. It is important to remember that Dickinson was writing for herself, with no view to publication; she would never have envisaged having a wide readership.

Dickinson's style is sometimes elliptical – meaning that she tends to omit words that are not absolutely necessary. The poem, *There's a Certain Slant of light* is a good example of Dickinson's condensed, elliptical style:

"There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes – "

Stanza three of this poem is even more cryptic:

"None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air – "

EXAM TIMES ONLINE

For more Irish Times/ Institute of Education Exam Times, see

irishtimes.com/examtimes

Unique approach

In a poem not on this year's course, Dickinson wrote "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant". She often has her own unique approach to subjects, her own angle on things. For example, in the poem *I heard a Fly buzz – when I died* she takes a most unusual approach to death.

Usually poems about death view it from the perspective of the living. Not so with Dickinson. She seems to write from beyond the grave. In the poem just mentioned, she is recalling imaginatively the experience of dying. In a strange, eccentric manner, she

"Dickinson's approach to nature is also unusual... she often takes a microscopic view

enters imaginatively into the experience of dying. Again, in the poem, *I Felt a Funeral in my Brain*, her approach to death is eccentric; she imagines herself in her coffin at her own funeral service.

Dickinson's approach to nature is also unusual. Rather than focusing on the "big" traditional aspects of nature, she often takes a microscopic view. In the poem, *A Bird came down the Walk*, she observes nature in the small frame – little nature going about its little business:

"A Bird came down the Walk –
He did not know I saw –
He bit an angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow raw

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass –"

Concrete similes/metaphors

Many of Dickinson's poems deal with states of mind – spiritual and mental states. These are, by their nature, abstract. To communicate these abstract states she uses concrete similes and metaphors. In this way she renders the abstract concrete and gives it an almost tangible quality. For example, hope is expressed as a bird perched in the soul singing forever. Feelings of being spiritually hurt and psychologically wounded are conveyed in the metaphor of the soul having "Bandaged moments".

The opposite state, when we experience joy and elation, becomes almost palpable in the metaphor of the soul "bursting all the doors –" and dancing "like a Bomb, abroad". Hope is "Sweetest in the Gale" – "the Gale" being a concrete metaphor for the very troubled times of our lives. Although reared in a strict, teetotal puritan household, Dickinson has the daring to express the joy she found in nature through the concrete image of alcohol. In *I taste a liquor never brewed* she is drunk with joy, "Reeling – /thro endless summer days".

Philip Larkin

Some interesting aspects of Larkin's poetry:

Subject matter
Many of Philip Larkin's themes emerge from ordinary events and scenes: two retired racehorses in a meadow at evening time; a new-mown lawn in June; ambulances weaving through city streets; trees coming into leaf in early summer; wedding parties seeing off newlywed couples on railway station platforms; a visit to a church.

Themes
In these ordinary events, Larkin finds universal themes: love, marriage, old age, death, transience, hope. *At Grass* introduces the fleetingness of fame and glory, and escape from the pressures of life as themes.

Visual quality
Larkin's poetry is remarkable for its vividness of description; his keen eye for detail is shown in the opening lines of *Church Going*:

> "Once I am sure there is nothing going on
> I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
> Another church: matting, seats and stone,
> And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
> For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
> Up at the holy end; the small neat organ."

Accessibility
Larkin stated that he was writing for ordinary people. His execution of this can be seen in his ordinary subject matter and accessible language; his poetry usually reflects the rhythm of normal speech, giving it an almost conversational, narrative quality. In *MCMXIV*, the enlisting men are described as "Grinning as if it were all/An August Bank Holiday lark". In *The Explosion* "*men in pitboots*" are "Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke"; and he writes that "One chased after rabbits; lost them;/Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;".

Pessimistic view
A gloomy, pessimistic view of life typifies much of Larkin's poetry: In *Cut Grass*, "young-leafed June" reminds him of the fragility of life and the certainty of death:

> "Cut grass lies frail:
> Brief is the breath
> Mown stalks exhale.
> Long, long the death."

In *Ambulances*, his focus is on the finality of death: "the solving emptiness/That lies just under all we do".

Yet, Larkin admits the occasional gleam of positivity. In *An Arundel Tomb*, he hopes that "What will survive of us is love". In *The Explosion*, "wives saw men of the explosion/ ... One showing the eggs unbroken", offering the possibilities of new life. In *The Trees*, woods, that will also come to their end, seem to say "Begin afresh, afresh, afresh". In *Wedding Wind*, he celebrates the joy and happiness of a newly wed bride.

Traditional poetic skills
Throughout his poetry, Larkin demonstrates complete mastery of the traditional poetic skills:
– Regular beat
– Rhyme
– Alliteration
– Assonance
– Sibilance
– Onomatopoeia

Although his poems are perfectly structured, with regular beat and regular stanza patterns, they also maintain a natural, conversational quality.

How to get your A1

ENGLISH

- Liam Cowley
- Trinity College Dublin
- History and Political Science

Getting an A1 in English takes patience, hard work, focus, clarity and a spark of originality.

A problem that is often encountered by students is remaining focused on the question at hand. This problem can be dealt with by taking a set amount of time to plan each answer and think about what you are going to write. There is no need to go into details in any plan. It's simply a way to get the mind engaged with the question so that you know what you are going to say in each part of your answer and to make sure what you write is relevant.

For paper 1's functional writing and composition questions, it's wise to note down a quote or specific event that you feel will really give power to the purpose of what you are saying in your plan so that you don't forget about it in your essay.

If you have a passion for something in life, include aspects of it in your essays. It makes your essays sound real, it makes the examiner know that you care about what you are saying. This was particularly helpful for me. Having a great interest in modern politics and Irish history, I used an array of quotes from figures like Patrick Pearse and James Connolly to give force to my arguments about the current state of Ireland and the wider world.

Use concrete examples to show the relevance of your answer. Write as if what you are doing is real, as if you are a professional writer, whether it is a piece on a tourist site or an account of a football match.

For paper 2, understand the characters of your drama and comparative study texts, understand why they feel the way they do and how their world impacts on their feelings and actions, as well as how they impact on their world.

Similarly with poetry, try to empathise with the poets, their difficulties and their emotions. Plan what you are going to write for between five and ten minutes before you begin your drama, poetry and comparative study essays. Link your paragraphs and conclude strongly.

With regard to learning quotes, I made recordings of myself reading poetry, lines from my play and key sentences from my comparative study texts on my MP3 player and listened to them on the bus, at night time and going for walks.

Above all, practise writing essays on an array of questions for each section of the course. Write your essays in the time you will have on the day of your Leaving Cert. Build up a collection of adjectives and verbs so that your essays are not written in limited vocabulary. This will give you marks for appearing as a confident writer.

If short stories are your thing, prepare a set of plots and a number of characters. Develop them over time so that by June, you will be able to slot them into whatever short story you choose to do.

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