AQA and Edexcel English Literature GCSE

How to plan and write a top mark essay Grade 8+

This work by PMT Education is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

How to Approach Planning your Essay

Step 1 | Highlight and Annotate

It is important to **highlight or underline** the important key words in the question and extract that you are given to help you **focus on the particular theme or character**.

In the extract, you may **highlight important quotes** that relate to the question at hand.

Using an example from **AQA Paper 1 2017** this guide will show you how you should **approach highlighting or underlining your question** and **extract** to help to construct your plan and eventually writing your essay. Additionally, the guide will also show you what you should be thinking about to **enhance the sophistication** of your response.

Romeo and Juliet

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet* and then answer the question that follows.

What is the significance of where the extract is found in the play? What comes before this moment? What comes after this moment?

At this point in the play, the male servants of the house of Capulet have seen the male servants from the house of Montague and a fight is about to start.

SAMPSON
My naked weapon is out. Quarrel, I will back thee.
GREGORY
How, turn thy back and run?
SAMPSON
Fear me not.
GREGORY
No, marry, I fear thee!
SAMPSON
5 Let us take the law of our sides, let them begin.
GREGORY
I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.
SAMPSON
Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it.
ABRAM
Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
SAMPSON
10 I do bite my thumb, sir.
ABRAM
Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
SAMPSON
[*Aside to Gregory*] Is the law of our side if I say ay?
GREGORY
[*Aside to Sampson*] No.
SAMPSON
No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.

Phallic symbol sparks images of male sexual violence which creates an aggressive tone

Aggressive tone continued through this insult

Male aggression shown through confrontation between the men. Repetition of insult reinforces the impression of male aggression and confrontation

Starting with this conversation, explore how Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour in this conversation
- how Shakespeare presents aggressive male behaviour in the play as a whole.

Jot down any other acts that come to mind when you think of male aggression

In the question above, we have **underlined the important key words in the question** and also important parts of the **extract** as you would do in the exam. You can also see how you can **annotate** the exam paper to help construct a plan and stimulate relevant ideas.

It's a good idea to **read the question first** so that when you read the extract you are able to quickly highlight the quotes from the extract that are the most relevant to the question without wasting time.

Assessment Objectives

AQA says that students must…

AO1 (37.5% of whole GCSE)

Read, understand and respond to texts.

Students should be able to: maintain a **critical style** and develop an **informed personal response**, use textual references, including **quotations**, to support and illustrate interpretations.

AO2 (42.5% of whole GCSE)

Analyse the **language, form and structure** used by a writer to create **meanings and effects**, using relevant **subject terminology** where appropriate.

AO3 (15% of whole GCSE)

Show understanding of the **relationships between texts and the contexts** in which they were written.

AO4 (5% of whole GCSE)

Use a **range of vocabulary** and **sentence structures** for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate **spelling and punctuation**.

Edexcel says that students must...

AO1 (37% of whole GCSE)

Read, understand and respond to texts.

Students should be able to: maintain a **critical style** and develop an **informed personal response**, use textual references, including **quotations**, to support and illustrate interpretations.

AO2 (42% of whole GCSE)

Analyse the **language, form and structure** used by a writer to create **meanings and effects**, using relevant **subject terminology** where appropriate.

AO3 (16% of whole GCSE)

Show understanding of the **relationships between texts and the contexts** in which they were written.

AO4 (5% of whole GCSE)

Use a **range of vocabulary** and **sentence structures** for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate **spelling and punctuation**.

As you can see, **both AQA and Edexcel** (and all other exam boards) **use the same assessment objectives** to measure their student's essay writing capabilities (although between papers the weightings for each AO differ).

If you would like to know more about how the AO's are assessed in each paper for your particular exam board then you should take a look at the **PMT GCSE English Literature guides** for each paper for your specific exam board, as these have more detailed information about how to approach each section of each paper!

How to Write Your Plan & What You Should Include

Step 2 | Writing Your Plan

Although you don't have a lot of time to annotate and plan in the exam you should still spend **at least 5 minutes** annotating and planning your essay. **Don't just start writing!**

Examiners have identified that a **lack of planning proved to be an issue** when students wrote their essays. This is because **without a plan** many students tend to **repeat their points** and not show a **clear link between each paragraph** which is what we want to avoid if you are aiming to get the **top grades**. From your annotations you can now begin to **construct a plan**.

What you should include in your plan:

Jot down your **main argument** that you are going to employ in your **introduction** (thesis paragraph) and throughout your whole essay – this will help you to have a real **focus** on what you are going to write about in your essay so that you do not fall off track or contradict yourself.

If you cannot think of a specific argument just jot down your main ideas and this will get you thinking.

Try to jot down **at least 3 topic sentences**. In simpler terms, a topic sentence is a sentence that you can **start off your paragraphs with** that will include your argument and **sign-post** to the examiner what you are going to speak about within that paragraph and **where in the text** you are referring to.

Under each topic sentence you should roughly jot down any relevant **contextual factors** that you can include in each paragraph.

As well as this, you should include **relevant quotes and scenes** that you are going to talk about under each topic sentence.

You should also be thinking about key **analysis** and **relevant subject terminology** that you can write about in your essay in regards to the **quotations** that you are going to employ.

After you have **roughly outlined** how you will be able to touch on each **assessment objective** in your essay, you should begin writing your **introduction**.

REMEMBER: Do not worry if your plan is not **legible**, and if you do not write in **full sentences**. Your plan is for you only, the examiner will not judge you for spelling anything incorrectly in your plan as it is **not marked**!

Topic Sentences

When you are planning your **topic sentences** you should be making sure that they **link** so that your essay comes across as **fluent and well structured**.

For example, if your first topic sentence for your first paragraph is something like this:

"In the extract, Shakespeare highlights the violence between the males of the Capulet family and the males of the Montague family to enforce the impression of male aggressive behaviour from the outset".

Your next topic sentence should **smoothly follow** on from the first one, for example:

"**As well as** highlighting aggressive behaviour at the beginning of the play, Shakespeare highlights how aggressive male behaviour **becomes increasingly** potent **in Act 3 Scene 1** when Tybalt kills Mercutio".

Writing Your Essay

Step 3 | Writing Your Introduction/thesis

Your introduction should **briefly outline** what you are going to write about in your **main body paragraphs**.

For the top grades, examiners are looking for your introduction to be **coherent** as a whole which means that your main argument must be **strong** and not **too complex**.

CC BY NC ND

What you should include in your introduction/thesis:

Your **main argument** that will be proved throughout the rest of your essay.

You could write about the **writer's purpose** if you can think of any.

If it makes sense to you, you could include a **quote** from the text that perfectly **encapsulates the theme** of the question or character. However, you should only do this if you feel as if this is a **relevant quote** that would strengthen and/or back up your argument, not just because you know the quote.

If there is an opportunity to do so, you could include an **alternative argument.**

If relevant, you could make a **sophisticated link** between your main argument and a **contextual factor**.

Use the **wording of the question** to make it clear that you are addressing the **question** and not talking about a random theme or character.

CC BY NC ND

Example Introduction: Grade 8+

Assessment objective colour key:

AO1 AO2 AO3 AO4

Although the examples that I have written are based on an **AQA question**, the same guideline can be used for other exam boards as **all exam boards assess the same AO's** and essentially expect the same thing from students.

Here, I am sign posting to the examiner that I am going to be writing about both the extract and the whole text in my essay

I am clearly using the phrase that is in the question 'aggressive male behaviour' to show the examiner that I am writing about the question and not losing focus

In the extract, and also within the text as a whole, Shakespeare allows aggressive male behaviour to heavily contrast with his main theme of love from the very outset. It is clear that as male aggressive behaviour increases, so does Romeo and Juliet's love and thus Shakespeare could be using his male character's aggressive behaviour to highlight the potency of true love within the play, as it is not destroyed by the male aggression and violence that surrounds them. On another level, throughout his play, Shakespeare could have implemented aggressive male behaviour with its tragic consequences to perhaps challenge the institution of absolute male authority within Elizabethan society.

This sentence is my main argument

Here, I have added an alternative interpretation to explain what Shakespeare's purpose could be

Relevant contextual information

Step 4 | Writing Your Main Body Paragraphs

Your analysis paragraphs will be the main part of your essay. Through these paragraphs you are given the opportunity to show off your essay writing skills and **prove your main argument that you have stated in your thesis**.

Students should try to **avoid implementing contextual factors that are clearly not relevant** or are just 'bolted on' at the end of your paragraph.

CC BY NC ND

What you should include in your main body paragraph

A topic sentence that clearly **signposts** to your examiner where in the play you are talking about, and what your **argument** is.

Relevant quotes.

Relevant contextual factors.

Analysis of **language and/or structure**.

Identification of **correct subject terminology**.

For top levels, **alternative interpretations** that are not forced.

Consideration of **where in the text** you are talking about, you should consider what happens **before or after** this moment and why this could be **significant**.

Remember that context should be implemented to inform but **should never dominate** your reading of the text. The text comes first. *(AQA Examiners report 2017)*

Alternative interpretations show an examiner that you are a top student who has really engaged with the text at hand, as they show that you have a **sophisticated and broad understanding of the writer's purpose**. Some example sentence starters that you could use to show the examiner that you are engaging with **multiple interpretations** are:

"On one level the writer could be revealing that...Yet, on another level it could be that the writer is trying to show the audience that…"

"In one way this could show… In another way this could also show…"

"Alternatively…"

"Explicitly, the writer is trying to show us that...however implicitly the writer could be showing us that…"

Recognise that writer's methods means **anything the writer has done deliberately**. While this does include the writer's use of **language** and techniques to present their ideas, it also refers to the ***structure*** of the text – i.e.:

- **the order of events**
- **the juxtaposing of events**
- **the use of characters as contrasts or foils** (so that what one character does illuminates and comments on the actions of other characters)
- **characterisation** (how characters **develop** and **change** over the course of the text and how the writer portrays this)

(AQA Examiners report 2018)

CC BY NC ND

Example Paragraph: Grade 8+

Topic sentence

In the extract, Shakespeare successfully highlights the violence between the males of the Capulet family, and the males of the Montague family to enforce the impression of aggressive male behaviour from the very outset. It isn't surprising that Shakespeare portrays a conflict between the male servants from the Montague and Capulet families because within the Elizabethan era family honour was extremely important to most individuals, and it would have been looked down upon if an individual were to go against their families and therefore Shakespeare allows the male servants of the Capulet family show hostility towards the male servants of the Montague family to convey how important family honour is to them. Such aggressive male behaviour can be witnessed in the extract when Sampson says that his "naked weapon is out" when seeing the Montague family's male servants. Shakespeare cleverly employs the phrase "naked weapon" as this serves as a phallic symbol which sparks images of male sexual violence, creating an aggressive tone from the very outset of the play and thus this illuminates aggressive male behaviour. Additionally, this aggressive tone develops within the extract as Sampson say's "I will bite my thumb at them". Shakespeare continues the aggressive tone through the repeated insult "bite my thumb" to further highlight aggressive male behaviour and conflict between the two families and this aggressive tone saturates the whole extract as the men begin to argue when Abram asks "Do you bite your thumb at us sir?", which reinforces the impression of confrontation and male intimidation. Perhaps, Shakespeare employs this scene at the very beginning to reveal the importance of aggressive male behaviour within his whole play. This is because, it is this confrontation between the two families that is an awfully important factor within the play as although it does not stop Romeo and Juliet from loving each other, it is this male aggressive behaviour and confrontation between the two families that leads to many deaths within the play, and also the deaths of Romeo and Juliet themselves. Interestingly, this scene where male aggressive behaviour is powerful juxtaposes with the next scene where Paris confesses his adoration for Juliet, and Romeo ponders on his forsaken romance with Rosaline. Perhaps, Shakespeare has done this to effectively highlight the potency of his main theme love, as it is not destroyed by the male aggression and violence that surrounds the main characters.

Relevant context

Relevant quotes from the extract

Relevant subject terminology and analysis. Notice the other sentences following about the aggressive tone. I have shown how this tone develops and becomes increasingly aggressive throughout the extract.

Structural analysis

Writer's purpose, linking back my last sentence to main thesis argument

CC BY NC ND

Step 5 | Writing Your Conclusion

Your conclusion **shouldn't be a complete copy of your thesis**, but it should **depict the same ideas** and **summarise** what you have spoken about in your essay as a whole alongside the **writer's main purpose**.

Understandably, this can be a tricky thing for students to grasp but not too much time should be spent on the conclusion. Here are some examples below to help you out.

What you should include in your conclusion

A **summary** of everything that you have spoken about.

You could include a relevant **contextual factor** to help summarise your main argument.

Could include the writer's overall purpose.

Conclusion paragraph starters could be:
"To conclude", "Overall", "As a whole".

Try to **AVOID** adding **irrelevant context** to your conclusion. It is best to avoid adding context into your conclusion unless you can **cleverly link it to your overall point** to strengthen your argument.

Below there is an example of a **good and a bad conclusion** to give you an idea of what you should and should not write.

CC BY NC ND

Example Conclusion: Grade 8+

Also, I have clearly sign posted that I am summarising my essay now with the use of 'Overall'

Summary of what the whole essay is arguing.

Overall, aggressive male behaviour is shown by Shakespeare to become increasingly potent as 'Romeo and Juliet' progresses. It is clear that as male aggressive behaviour increases, so does Shakespeare's juxtaposing theme of love, as although male aggressive behaviour between the two rival families are prevalent, the love between Romeo and Juliet only gets stronger until they both die. Perhaps, Shakespeare chooses to reveal the tragic consequences of aggressive male behaviour within his play to criticize the absolute institution of male authority within the Elizabethan period. Ultimately, Shakespeare shows how the aggressive male conflict between the two families leads to tension within Romeo and Juliet's relationship and therefore this aggressive behaviour arguably leads to their deaths.

Writer's purpose linking in with relevant context.

Low Level Example

This summary sentence is very vague and doesn't summarise effectively the overall argument that has been argued in the main body.

I show in my essay how aggressive male behaviour can be seen in 'Romeo and Juliet' which could be because all men in the Elizabethan era were stereotypically known to be angry due to their obsession with possessing their wives and also family honour. Ultimately, Shakespeare shows how the aggressive male conflict between the families leads to the destruction of Romeo and Juliet's love leading to their deaths. Therefore, aggressive male behaviour within the play is shown to be dangerous.

We should be avoiding sweeping generalisations when it comes to context ("All men"/" All women"). Also, this context is vague and not sophisticated enough to hit the top levels as it seems artificially bolted on and doesn't really link to the main argument.

Writer's purpose is too vague. What makes this behaviour dangerous?

CC BY NC ND

Grade Boosters!

To reach the **top marks** for the most important AO's here are a few tips that will come in handy for when you are writing your essays:

AO1 GRADE BOOSTER

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS

If you are looking to get a **grade 7 or above**, examiners are looking for you to show a **development in your ideas** as you write each paragraph.

You can **show this development through your argument**. For example, if the question you are given is about the theme **love**, you could state at the beginning of your second paragraph that the theme of love **develops** and becomes **increasingly potent** at a later stage in the text, and then in your final paragraph you could state that this particular section of the text is where love is **arguably the most potent**.

This clearly shows that you are writing about how the particular character or theme **develops** within the play by simply changing a few words at the beginning of each of your paragraphs!

AO1 GRADE BOOSTER

RELEVANT QUOTES

Try to avoid remembering **large chunks of text** because not only does this **waste time**, but it also makes your writing look messy and decreases the fluidity of your essay.

Instead, examiners are looking for you to **employ relevant quotes** that are not **too lengthy** to increase the effectiveness of your response.

AO3 GRADE BOOSTER

RELEVANT CONTEXT

The contextual factors that you employ must be **relevant!** Therefore, you must try to avoid bolting on **irrelevant contextual information** that does not correlate with your **argument** or the **question**, as this will decrease your essay's level of **sophistication**.

AO2 GRADE BOOSTER

AVOID IRRELEVANT TERMS

For the top grades, examiners are looking for students to **AVOID** simply identifying the writer's nouns or verbs, as this may limit the effectiveness of your analysis. For example, the 2017 **examiner's report** urges students to compare:

*"Shakespeare **uses the verb** "bite" in "bite my thumb" to…"*

with

*"Shakespeare creates an **aggressive tone** through the insult "bite my thumb" to…"*

The report states that it is the **quality of your explanation** which determines your level, rather than the inclusion of a 'term'.

AO3 GRADE BOOSTER

AVOID GENERALISATION

For the top grades, examiners are looking for students to **AVOID** making sweeping generalisations such as "**all Elizabethan women** were controlled by men".

Instead, examiners are seeking for students to make **sophisticated links** between **relevant contextual factors and the question**. For example, if you were speaking about Juliet in 'Romeo and Juliet' you could say instead that "it **perhaps** wouldn't be surprising for Shakespeare's audience to see that Juliet's father attempts to gain control over her, as **usually** within Elizabethan England most women were seen as properties of their husbands and fathers".

Essay Structure Template

If you are struggling to structure your essays, here is a solid template on how you could structure your response. However, remember that **you do not have to follow this template or the examples rigidly**; you **should try to make your essays flow in a way that is not artificial**.

The examples and templates that we make are just top level guidelines that should show you how you could structure your essays in a **sophisticated way** whilst remembering to hit all **assessment objectives**.

Introduction

First Sentence

Introduces the topic of the essay as stated in the question.

'Class conflict is a topic that is raised frequently by J.B Priestley in An Inspector calls.'

Second Sentence

Describes what you will argue in your essay.

'The tensions between the classes within the didactic play can be seen to reflect the differences between society's class system.'

Context

Bring in how the context of the play explains/backs up your argument

'The play is set in 1912, where a rigid class system was in place, yet it was written in 1945, where societal structure was changing post-war, therefore the views of the characters portray conflicting views of class.'

Technique Sentence

How does the writer do the things you have argued?

'These conflicting time periods are portrayed through the characters opinions; particularly those of Arthur Birling's and the Inspector. Ultimately, the class system is portrayed as an indirect cause of the death of Eva Smith, who symbolises the lower classes'

Last Sentence

Concludes your introduction, what you will be looking at and what the writer is using the piece to do.

'This essay will explore how class conflict is a central concern within the essay. Moreover, it will argue that Priestley uses the play to share his socialist views of how he thinks society should be'.

CC BY NC ND

Main Body

There should be at least **3 paragraphs** which make up the **main body of your essay**. You could…

- Examine **relationships** between characters (conflict between Mr Birling & the Inspector and class, Eva & Gerald's relationship and gender)
- Examine a **specific character** (Sheila and social mobility/gender, Eva the fallen woman/working class)
- Compare two contrasting characters (Mrs Birling & Sheila and gender roles)
- Use your sentences at the beginning and end of the paragraphs to make your essay flow. Remember to use **LINKING WORDS** to help you do this.
- Furthermore, moreover, conversely, etc.

Paragraph Structure

First Sentence (point)

Introduces the point you are making in this paragraph and how it relates to the question

'The conflict between Mr Birling and the Inspector demonstrates the contrasting views between capitalism and socialism, a class system versus an 'idealised' classless system.'

Technique

What technique is used to do this?

'Priestley's use of dramatic irony makes the modern day audience object to Mr Birling. Here, Birling's archaic opinions and arrogant attitude towards the Inspector creates an aggressive tension in the room, which reflects the friction felt within society.'

Evidence

Insert a quote to back up your argument

'I don't like your tone' (page number) … 'looks down on the Inspector' (Stage Directions)

Explanation

What effect does the technique used have?

'The use of stage directions amplifies the conflict between the characters. Although Mr Birling considers himself to have more authority than the Inspector, it is the inspector who represents the voice of reason and morality within the play. He is a spokesperson for the lower classes.'

Connect to the Writer

Has the writer done this for a specific reason?

'The inspector could be seen as a mouthpiece through which Priestley conveys his socialistic views'.

Signpost

How this point has related to the question?

'Priestley has used the conflict between the characters in the play to exaggerate the tensions between the classes.'

CC BY NC ND

Conclusion

First Sentence

What has this essay shown.

'To conclude, this essay has examined how Priestley has explored issues of class within An Inspector Calls.'

Summary

A sentence per paragraph explaining what you have shown.

'First we explored the uneasy interaction between Mr Birling and the Inspector, which Priestley uses to exaggerate the tensions between the classes within the play. It also emphasises the friction between capitalist and socialist views on how society should be structured. Then we examined the character of Eva…'

Context

Bring a bit of context back into it.

'The wider context of the play creates an ideal backdrop for this struggle. The insight the 1945 audience has looking back on the play set in 1912 emphasises the class struggle and need for change.'

Concluding Sentence

Try to link the specifics of the question to a wider social question.

'Ultimately, Priestley has not only exposed the flaws of a class based social hierarchy, but he has also raised questions about the validity of a class system in society at all.'

CC BY NC ND