

2015 VCE English examination report

General comments

The 2015 English examination assessed student achievement in the skills and outcomes indicated in the current *VCE English Study Design*.

It was evident that the majority of teachers and their students had a clear understanding of the requirements of the examination and how to approach each section. While there was some repetition of weaknesses and faults, there was also an overall improvement. Further advice can be found in previous examination reports, which are available on the VCAA website.

The examination consisted of three sections. The first section (Text response) offered students the choice of two distinct topics for each of the 20 texts on the text list published by the VCAA. Students were required to complete one response. The second section (Writing in Context) instructed students to compose a piece of writing stemming from a prompt for each of the four Contexts. Section C (Analysis of language use) required students to analyse the ways in which speakers Stephanie Bennett and Mathew Nguyen used language and visual features to persuade their audience.

More than 40 000 students sat for the 2015 English examination, and the skills and qualities shown by the majority of students were impressive. Most were able to respond well and present three completed pieces of writing that demonstrated an understanding of the knowledge and skills required in the study. Both the quality and quantity of work produced under the timed conditions of the examination were quite sound and, at times, impressive. The growing awareness of the value of close textual knowledge and careful management of response structure indicates sound teaching and learning.

Assessment was based upon criteria, which were applied holistically. The descriptors of the 'Expected Qualities for the Mark Range' can be found on the VCAA website by following the link to the examination criteria from the English study page. These descriptors are based on the criteria and are general indicators of what might reasonably be expected for the specified mark ranges in each section of the examination. Fine judgments are then made when the exact characteristics of responses for any one year are analysed.

Students seemed to have clear understanding of how to approach the examination and manage their time. There were very few incomplete or partial responses. It is important for students to ensure that they correctly fill out the information required in the answer books. (For example, the box indicating the text and topic chosen, another to indicate the Context selected and writing the name of the text that most informs the Section B piece of writing).

On the other hand, it should be noted that:

- there seems to be a dependence on formulaic, prepared responses. The study of English is concerned with developing students' understanding of and confidence in responding to the specific topics and prompts offered in the examination. Active engagement with texts enables students to develop language awareness, to articulate ideas and to develop communication skills. A personal engagement with the texts and ideas is neither formulaic nor predictable

- some students did not fully engage with the elements of the topics and prompts. Greater care needs to be taken in analysing and recognising the specific expectations of each topic or prompt – often this comes down to a precise understanding of the words that comprise the task
- as this is an English examination, strong language skills (including correct spelling and grammar) are expected and necessary for success
- it is recommended that students organise their time so that enough time is left to proofread their work.

Specific information

Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

Throughout the report, student responses are provided for illustrative and informative reasons, and they may form the basis of profitable discussions. This year, rather than reproduce complete responses, there is more focus on specific traits within response extracts. These examples should not be taken as ‘the best’ that is possible; none is without shortcomings of one sort or another. Readers will obviously be able to make many more observations about the quality of these responses beyond the brief comments offered in this report.

Section A – Text response

Students had a choice between two topics for each of the 20 texts that enabled students to address the key knowledge and skills as outlined in the study design. They were required to compose a sustained discussion from the initial focus on one of the following aspects of key knowledge for Units 3 and 4, Outcome 1:

- an understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed by the author and presented in the selected text
- the structures, features and conventions used by authors to construct meaning in a range of literary texts
- the ways in which authors express or imply a point of view and values
- the ways in which readers’ interpretations of texts differ and why.

There are subtle but discernible differences in the topic types and students would benefit from understanding these variations. All topics required student responses to address the full range of key knowledge and skills, and to be supported by detailed analysis and specific reference to the selected text. High-scoring responses did not rely entirely on the most obvious scenes/moments from the texts. Familiarity with the entire text and the discerning selection of scenes to support and explore ideas ensured responses that were thoughtful and that moved beyond the most predictable and superficial discussions, or simple plot summaries. The highest-scoring responses recognised the conceptual ideas and implications of the topic explored precisely, using detail from the text as a means of exploration to support and develop their discussion.

Students should be encouraged to have confidence in their own reading and demonstrate a personal understanding of their text, rather than relying exclusively on commercially produced material. All texts are complex works of art with a wealth of opportunity for exploration. There are no ‘expected’ responses to topics, and the highest-scoring pieces were those that were thoughtful and fresh. The assessor does not have to agree with the interpretation of a topic or text; the students must, however, be able to support their interpretations with insightful evidence from the

text. If students have excellent knowledge of their text and have a grasp of the topic, then they should be confident when presenting their ideas and constructing their essays.

The area that still requires the most work is the understanding, deconstruction and organisation of responses in relation to the set topics. Students need to look critically at the wording of the topic and to consider what implications and assumptions are being made within that topic. It is still a problem that too many students want to respond to their own question rather than grappling with the ideas of the topic as it is presented. Students should have the confidence to challenge the position of the topic without changing the topic itself. Students would benefit from further practice analysing and distinguishing different topics and approaches to topics.

It is important to remember that a great deal of thought goes into the exact wording of each topic, and students must think carefully about the implications of the question or proposition that is put forward.

Too often students launch into a response if it looks familiar to another topic they have explored in class. Rarely will a topic be identical to another and subtle differences in a topic may often direct students in a different direction. The exact wording of each topic is carefully crafted by the examination setting panel, so students may assume that the words that make up a topic have been purposefully selected.

One such example can be found in the second topic on *Medea*, which was: 'There is more than one villain in *Medea*.' Do you agree?. Interestingly, the topic does not designate Medea as a villain, yet invites students to explore the shared villainy that ends in tragedy. Many students seemed to want to write an essay that simply talked about Medea herself, ignoring other villains that were implied within the topic.

Students must also ensure that they explore all of the elements presented in the topic. Too often a key point was taken from the topic and a response produced, omitting a significant idea that had a major bearing on the topic itself. On other occasions students ignored a key term that may have played an important part in understanding the topic's implication. For example, the first topic for *Stasiland* was: 'In *Stasiland*, Funder exposes a world both cruel and absurd.' Discuss. However, many students ignored the word 'absurd', which was essential in responding meaningfully to this topic.

Likewise, careful reading and consideration of the first topic for *All About Eve* gave astute students the opportunity to consider the implication of the word 'must'. The topic was: Margo says, "...funny business, a woman's career". 'All About Eve is about the roles that women must play.' Discuss.

Careful reading was also important when considering the implication of the word 'determined' in the first topic on *The War Poems*: 'In *The War Poems*, Owen is determined to tell the truth.' Discuss.

The following is an extract from a high-scoring response to the first topic for *The War Poems*. This response carefully considered the topic and its implication as the essay began and unfolded. This excerpt from the introduction illustrates the way this student intends to examine the implications of the topic, looking not just at Owen's truth-telling, but also the effect of that honesty, which is to dispel the myths of battle and reveal its horror. By establishing the parameters of their essay in this way, the student provides themselves with opportunities to think in a sophisticated and conceptualised way about the text, signalling an intention not to limit themselves to a simple discussion of whether Owen is concerned with the truth.

From the introduction:

In his commitment to truth, Owen dispels the glorified, honourable myths surrounding battle. Owen is forcefully determined to reveal the futile suffering, the immorality and betrayal of authorities and the unnatural moral degradation that war causes.

In the extract below, the same student examines the text closely and considers in detail the way the example chosen illuminates the topic. The student perceptively notes the way an image as unreal as squid-like men can convey a truth as powerful as the horror of war. Not only is the student observing that Owen strives for truth, but that he does so ardently. The student moves beyond the surface of the topic to arrive at a position on the effect of the poetry, contending that Owen is successful in his efforts to 'debunk' the lies he saw.

Body paragraph:

Owen describes the torment of the soldiers which 'bulged-huge' like 'squids'. This horrific simile captures the dehumanised, demented and abject man that was hidden from Britain and indeed the world. In this way, Owen attacks and debunks the 'old lie', claiming it is not sweet and fitting to die and suffer for one's country – it is pitiful.

Topics were purposefully open to allow students to form a view and then support it. It is legitimate for students to challenge aspects of a topic and many students took exception to the suggestion that Rosemary had not been a good parent in the second topic on *This Boy's Life*: 'Rosemary is unable to be a good parent to Toby.' Discuss. There is, however, a fundamental difference between challenging a topic and ignoring the topic and substituting it with a topic the student wishes to write about.

Some students who selected the first topic on *Medea* saw it as an invitation to write broad character discussions. The actual topic ('*Medea* is about extremes of human emotion.' Discuss.), however, focused closely on the idea of 'extremes of human emotions'. It appeared that some students did not comprehend the significance of the term 'extremes'. Others responded briefly to the essence of the topic but then spent the majority of their response beginning with such phrases as 'it is not only about extremes, it is also about...' and then proceeded to write about themes they had prepared.

Students and teachers must also be aware of the list of stories or poetry that appears on the VCAA text list. In some cases, not all stories or poems in an anthology are on the list, and students are expected to use only those listed. Likewise, a student must not study more than one multimodal text as their major texts. A student who selects a multimodal text for Section A and then uses a multimodal text as the primary text for Section B will be penalised.

Finally, almost without exception, students demonstrated an understanding of writing a text essay. Clear introductions, appropriate paragraphing and the ability to embed quotations appropriately were features of most pieces. These basic skills must be continually reinforced, including building more sophisticated vocabulary, continuing to improve grammar and placing more focus on sentence structure.

Data on text selection and averages is supplied at the end of this report.

Section B – Writing in Context

The task in each Context required students to write an extended piece for a specified purpose and audience, exploring ideas and using detail from at least one text selected from the English Text List 2, published in the *VCAA Bulletin*. All students were able to produce a piece of writing as described in the instructions, and it was clear that some very interesting approaches and interpretations to creating and presenting were studied in classes.

Assessors were not looking for a specific response or approach. Most students demonstrated that they had gained a number of insights about the Context they had studied, and many demonstrated the capacity to present those insights in a controlled, fluent and well-written manner.

Assessment was based on the interrelationship among:

- the quality of writing in relation to the specified purpose
- the quality of ideas (this is formed by the study of the Context and from the texts studied)
- the handling of the prompt.

Most pieces of writing could be described as expository, although it seemed that more students were prepared to attempt more varied approaches to writing. Many successfully employed a heading and wrote with a lively voice that was appropriate for the piece itself. Some of the more imaginative pieces were successful, but those pieces that did little more than tell a story without exploring the ideas of the prompt were not successful. There were few incidents of a bland textual response, although these still exist. Responses with a singular textual approach, hardly distinguishable from a Section A response, tended to be awarded low marks. It was pleasing to see the varied and imaginative ways that students were able to explore the Context, the nominated text and the prompt.

As has been written in previous examination reports, there is no good writing without good ideas. Students who have spent the year exploring the ideas of their selected Context should have thoughtful insights into both the Context and to what their texts have offered in relation to that Context. High-scoring students were able to explore sophisticated ideas that emerged from their study and from the prompt.

While students are free to create a response that is ‘an expository, persuasive or imaginative piece of writing’, the piece itself must explore the nominated Context and respond to the prompt offered for that Context. In addition, the instructions are quite clear about the expectation of the connection of the response to the student’s nominated text: ‘Your writing must draw directly from **at least one** selected text that you have studied for this Context and be based on the ideas in the prompt.’

It is a requirement of the examination that the piece of writing be informed by the nominated text in ways that are apparent to the reader. This does not mean that the text must be referred to directly, but must draw from the text. Those who compose creative pieces with little exploration, simply labelling one of their characters or demonstrating little connection to the nominated text have not fulfilled the requirements of the task.

Students may also utilise material beyond the set texts, and many effectively incorporated contemporary issues or personal experiences to enhance their exploration of the Context and prompt. Occasionally, however, students included reference to a historical figure or text that did not contribute to the ideas being offered. In many cases it would have been more beneficial to explore the set text in greater depth than to offer several simple examples that offer little distinction.

Students may not come into the examination and write whatever they wish. Some students composed stories or narratives that seemed to have no connection to the ideas that the text offered in relation to the Context and the prompt. Assessors make every effort to discover the relationship between the piece of writing and the nominated text, but ultimately the onus is on the student to ensure that the connection is discernible. There is no provision for a statement of

intention or a reflective commentary in the examination and thus students must make the connections between text and prompt clear.

Some students wrote prepared scripts that neglected to respond to the prompt. For example, the prompt for Context 4 – Exploring issues of identity and belonging, was: ‘An individual’s sense of identity and belonging changes throughout life.’ Responses that explored changes in social attitudes about gender roles throughout time but neglected to address ‘an individual’s sense of identity and belonging’ were not, in fact, responding to the prompt.

This section of the study encourages students to write with flair and to experiment with language, and the use of metaphor to illustrate an interesting point is often a feature of high-scoring responses. It is important, however, that the comparisons are appropriate. The following is an example that did not show great insight.

Throughout our life and generally in our younger years, many like to experience and try out different identities like they are a hat or a handbag. When we find the right hat or handbag we might decide to stick with it for a little while and then six months later change.

It was clear that students who completed excellent scripts had thought about the prompt at hand. They used their understanding of text(s) and concepts from their Context study to inform the ideas they explored within their writing. Low-scoring scripts did not show critical thinking about the idea the prompt was communicating or ignored the prompt altogether. High-scoring responses explored the core ideas of the prompt instead of treating it like a text response. Students need to be reminded that there is an important distinction between the Context they have studied and the task they have to complete in the exam. They are asked to ‘explore the idea’ that is represented in the prompt; students should not present prepared responses that relate to the concepts/issues central to their Context study and ignore the idea the prompt is communicating. While the prompt can be seen as a springboard for effective writing, the ideas of the prompts must be explored. It is important to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the core of the prompt.

Carefully examining each prompt can help students understand the notion of the core meaning of a prompt. For example:

- The prompt for Context 1 – The imaginative landscape was: ‘Every place offers imaginative possibilities.’ The core notion here is the possibilities that are offered by every place.
- In Context 2 – Whose reality?, the prompt was: ‘We create our own reality, but we are never completely in control.’ There are two ideas to deal with here. Firstly, that individuals create their own realities, and, secondly, that we are never completely in control.
- The prompt for Context 3 – Encountering conflict, was: ‘The strength of our beliefs is tested when we encounter conflict.’ Many students failed to focus on the core notion of beliefs being tested.
- The prompt for Context 4 – Exploring issues of identity and belonging, was: ‘An individual’s sense of identity and belonging changes throughout life.’ The core idea here is in relation to change.

The highest-scoring responses drew thoughtfully from the text; the low-scoring responses used only a scene or a feature of a character in a superficial way or retold the plot of the text. These approaches were not always relevant to the prompt. There can be no definitive advice about the success of relying on a single text or employing both (or more) of the studied texts. Some students used the two texts expertly to demonstrate exceptions and qualifications, while others did little more than use the second text to add more of the same examples.

When students used more than one source for illustration of their ideas, the highest-scoring pieces had a strong sense of unity and purpose. This cohesiveness was contrasted by pieces where one idea followed the next, as students went through their list of examples. The product was more a plan for an essay than a thoughtful, finished piece.

Information on assessing the Context

Context	%	Most popular text
Encountering conflict	44	<i>A Separation</i>
Exploring issues of identity and belonging	24	<i>Skin</i>
Whose reality?	25	<i>The Lot: In Words</i>
The imaginative landscape	7	<i>Peripheral Light – Selected and New Poems</i>

Advice for teachers and students

- Formulaic approaches were limiting.
- Avoid memorised responses.
- Students should use texts as vehicles for exploring/stimulating ideas, not as the centre of the task.
- Avoid retelling the plot of the text and presenting it as a piece of writing.
- Work on the transference of ideas that are offered by the texts.
- Explore a range of ways to incorporate texts meaningfully into writing.
- Students should practise writing using a range of approaches. If they become too comfortable with just one approach, they may find that it does not suit the task and the prompt in the examination.
- Ensure there is adequate practice and strategies for exploring the prompt.
- Aim to develop greater sophistication with creative pieces.
- Work on developing well-crafted pieces.
- Discourage superficial personal stories that offer little depth to the piece of writing.

Section C – Analysis of language use

Most students understood the task of analysing how language is used in an attempt to persuade. It is worth carefully studying the wording of the task: 'How is written and visual language used to attempt to persuade the audience to share the points of view of the speakers?'. Note that the task focuses on the intent ('attempt to persuade'), not on the result. Some students spent time making judgments about how the audience would react. This is not necessarily incorrect, but it does move away from the essential task.

In the same vein, it is important for students to be aware of the intentions of speakers in respect to the contention. Some students commented on the amount of money, suggesting, for example, that '*it is the volunteers that will never see this money this is the sacrifice that they make so that others will be better off, it is this evidence that may deter those at home watching on the TV*'. Surely it is not the intention of Bennett to deter viewers from becoming volunteers; in fact, it is the opposite of her intention.

Students should always consider the background information and the contention as they analyse how the speakers attempt to persuade their audiences. It was evident that Stephanie Bennett was ensuring credit is given to her company 'bigsplash, a large Australian financial institution', as well as extolling the virtues of volunteering. She uses the name of the company eight times, and the company logo appears on the banner. In addition, it is evident that she is creating a distinction between the 'under-recognised' volunteers and her company's contributions. Typical of a number of high-scoring responses, the following student response cleverly incorporates this idea while closely analysing the exact language used by Bennett.

From the outset of her presentation, Bennett seeks to persuade the audience of both presentation attendees and viewers at home, that bigsplash acknowledges the often 'undervalued and under-recognised' work of volunteers. Opening her speech in a formal manner by addressing the 'distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen and volunteers around the country'; Bennett proudly declares 'it is [her] great privilege' to present this award, with the adjective 'great' accentuating the positive connotations of 'privilege' and in doing so, positioning her listeners to view the company as one that does not take for granted the contributions volunteers make to our society.

Mathew Nguyen's acceptance speech is humble and highlights the personal gratification enjoyed by those who volunteer. While Bennett's response is more corporate – and therefore claiming that volunteers are undervalued – Nguyen focuses on the more personal response to their work, for example, 'people we help are always grateful'.

At the same time, many students understood that Nguyen was also aware of praising his organisation, as the following student response neatly suggests.

Nguyen graciously asserts 'We'll use the money' to assist the wider community, and proceeds to hypothesise where this money should be allocated. Indeed, he also entrenches the 'global scale' of his company by stating 'we've expanded and we also go overseas.' This perhaps intends to build the reputation of his own volunteer group.

The amount of the response dedicated to analysing each speech was entirely up to the students. Where there are two pieces presented, students are expected to deal with both, but there is no requirement for the analysis to be equal. The student's role is to offer insights into their understanding of the task by using the material that has been offered.

Likewise, the task instructions are very clear in the expectation that students must deal with the visuals ('How is written **and visual** language used...'). Again, the key is to demonstrate that students have an understanding of how the visual(s) is being used. Care must be taken, however, not to place too much emphasis on the visuals at the expense of the written word. This was the case for a few responses where more than two-thirds of a response was dedicated to the visuals. High-scoring students found an appropriate balance between the two speeches and between analysis of the visual language and written language.

Many students were able to offer thoughtful insights into the role of the visuals and what they suggest. Some students who struggled to offer a meaningful analysis were able to give thoughtful insights into the banner hanging on the lectern. It may be useful for students to consider how to transfer astute insights into visual analysis into meaningful analysis of the language used. For example, *'the title and logo provide the audience with information about the event while the subtitle gives the tone or feeling or motivation for it. The hands are poised in a manner that suggest that hand from the right is reaching down and clasping the hand on the left to lift it up. This plays into the event's theme of volunteering and charity.'*

Likewise, few students had problems understanding and offering insights into the image projected on the screen behind Mathew Nguyen. *'In contrast to the banner, the hands in the second image are placed in a circle and the action denotes the solidarity more than aid. Where the banner depicts one side of help, the application picture shows the audience the unity of the volunteers. The clothing of the people in the second picture is also of note...'*

It was clear that strategies to develop deeper insights into language use had been devised throughout the year. While few students simply identified techniques, some students seemed intent on searching for language devices they expected to find on the examination and offering a comment without carefully considering its relevance. A number of students wrote responses similar to the following example: *'this shows us the factual evidence of how this benefits us, but it is also an appeal to the hip pocket nerve'.*

Ultimately, the quality of the analysis is the key to success. The following is an illustrative group of responses to a section of the given material that many students used in their analysis. The samples are paraphrased and offer a breadth of quality in showing how Bennett used language to persuade.

During Bennett's speech, she often poses questions to the audience such as 'What would we do without them?'. This:

- is a rhetorical question that looks like a question but is really a statement
- helps her to get her message across
- makes readers question their value
- challenges readers to contemplate the impact of their absence
- is a dramatic plea that implicitly creates a co-dependency between the volunteers and the community.

Table 1 shows the Section A texts selected by students in the 2015 English examination and the average scores achieved by students for the associated text. The table also shows the scores for Section B and Section C for the same grouping of students.

From this table it can be seen that students achieved the highest scores on average for *Henry IV, Part I*. However, it can also be seen that on average this same set of students achieved well in other sections of the English examination. Conversely, students who selected *No Sugar* had the lowest average score in Section A but also had lower scores, on average, in Sections B and C.

Table 1: Text selection from Section A of the 2015 English examination and average scores for Sections A, B and C

Section A text	% of students	% Average score – Section A	% Average score – Section B	% Average score – Section C
<i>Medea</i>	13	55	54	54
<i>All About Eve</i>	10	58	56	56
<i>Stasiland</i>	8	60	56	57
<i>This Boy's Life</i>	8	54	53	52
<i>The War Poems</i>	7	64	56	56
<i>Mabo</i>	6	54	50	50
<i>Burial Rites</i>	6	56	56	57
<i>Henry IV, Part I</i>	5	70	66	66
<i>No Sugar</i>	5	52	50	50
<i>Brooklyn</i>	5	56	55	54
<i>The White Tiger</i>	4	55	51	53
<i>The Complete Maus</i>	4	59	53	53
<i>In the Country of Men</i>	4	53	53	53
<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	3	65	61	62
<i>Selected Poems</i>	3	65	58	59
<i>Cloudstreet</i>	3	56	54	56
<i>The Thing Around Your Neck</i>	2	55	53	52
<i>I for Isobel</i>	2	60	51	53
<i>Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?</i>	2	58	55	55
<i>Cat's Eye</i>	1	67	65	65
<i>No text</i>	1	0	30	33