

2018 VCE English examination report

General comments

The 2018 English examination assessed student achievement in the skills and outcomes indicated in the current *VCE English Study Design*, accredited until 2020 for Units 3 and 4.

The examination consisted of three sections. Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text 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 a response to one topic. Section B – Comparative analysis of texts instructed students to ‘write a comparative analysis of a selected pair of texts in response to one topic (either i. or ii.) on **one** pair of texts’. Section C – Argument and persuasive language required students to analyse the ways in which argument and language were used by the writer to persuade his audience through a review that appeared in a local newspaper column.

Assessment was based on criteria published on the last page of the task book, and the criteria were applied holistically. Scores were awarded that reflected the assessors’ judgment of the whole answer on balance, and students were scored over the full normative range of available marks. The descriptors used for assessment 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.

More than 42 000 students sat for the 2018 English examination, and the skills and qualities shown by the majority of students were impressive. Most students 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 indicated effective learning.

It was clear that students were aware of the requirements of the examination and they were able to apply their knowledge and skills in responding.

It should be noted that:

- many students did not fully engage with the elements of the topics. Greater care needs to be taken in analysing and recognising the specific expectations of each topic – often this comes down to a precise understanding of the actual words that comprise the task. This is true in both Sections A and B
- strong language skills are expected and necessary for success
- it is recommended that students organise themselves so that enough time is left to proofread their work
- there is little need for summary in any of the three sections. While the context of a particular point or indeed the text itself may need to be established, some students used too much of their available time presenting the plot. Students may assume that assessors have an intimate knowledge of the texts.

It was evident that students had a clear understanding of the expectations for each section of the examination and, for the most part, students responded to the tasks appropriately. Improvement can occur with greater practice and mastery of the skills required.

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.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Throughout the report, student responses are provided for illustrative and informative reasons, and they may form the basis of profitable discussions. There are no complete responses but more focus on specific traits. These 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 comments offered in this report.

Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text

Students overwhelmingly demonstrated a competent awareness of the selected text on which they chose to write in the examination. The highest-scoring responses revealed an assured capacity to analyse the text closely, as well as to directly address and fully resolve the chosen topic. Such students were readily able to demonstrate high-level writing skills across the four assessment criteria:

- knowledge and understanding of the text, and the ideas and issues it explores
- development of a coherent analysis in response to the topic
- use of textual evidence to support the interpretation
- control and effectiveness of language use, as appropriate to the task

Students needed to show an awareness of the textual form, which recognises its impact on the reader, viewer or audience. In the case of multimodal texts such as *All About Eve* or *Rear Window*, students needed to reveal an understanding of the diverse ways in which multiple elements convey meaning. In the second *Rear Window* topic, 'How does Hitchcock create an atmosphere of suspicion in *Rear Window*?' such skills were overtly required. This also applied to the second topic for the graphic novel *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, 'How does *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* explore what it means to live in fear of persecution and oppression?'. The focus here was on the word 'how'; it was expected that students would offer insights into the manner in which Marjane Satrapi created meaning both through her words and through the images drawn on the pages.

Likewise, students writing on collections of poetry needed to be able to analyse the ways in which language is used to create impact; for example, both topics on Donne's *Selected Poems* invited students to move inside the form of poetry with topics 'In his poetry...' and 'How does Donne explore...'.

It is imperative for students to both dissect and fully analyse their chosen topic, as well as to construct an essay that addresses this consistently. Students cannot be dismissive of portions of a topic, nor effectively rewrite the topic to suit their own preconceived approach. It must be apparent to an assessor that the selected topic has been focused on unequivocally.

As in recent years, three styles of topic were utilised: propositional, quotation and direct. Students and teachers should ensure that they are well acquainted with the nature and demands of each approach.

Consider the following topic on *Frankenstein*, 'The world of Shelley's novel is characterised by 'injustice and ingratitude'. To what extent do you agree?'. The topic invited students to challenge or qualify the idea that injustice and ingratitude are at the heart of the novel. The following high-scoring introduction shows a student who is confident with their understanding of the text as well as the topic, including the invitation to comment on 'the world of Shelley's novel'.

Cemented in a period transition from neo-classical ideals to a Romantic age of Enlightenment, Mary Shelley's 1818 gothic horror, Frankenstein embodies the injustice and ingratitude of society to primarily affect the rights of women. Thus Shelley reflects her experience with proto-feminism, adopted from her mother, and explores its oppression within a society plagued by prejudice. However, Shelley does present the persecution of Frankenstein by his own 'hideous progeny' as a pursuit of justice rather than revenge and suggests the existence of heroic notions in contrast to absolute villainy depicted through injustice. Conversely, the embarkment of Walton on his own pursuit of glory, similar to Frankenstein's odyssey, elucidates the ability for acts of injustice and gratitude to co-exist. Consequently, whilst Shelley portrays a society plagued by prejudice and thus injustice, she highlights the evidence of pure pursuits of 'poetic justice' and thankfulness within individuals detached from society.

Effective text response essays show a close and perceptive reading and interpretation of the text in relation to the topic. Often, the appropriate use of the writer's symbolism can demonstrate close reading. It can also show the ability to make sharp and discriminating selections from the text to support the ideas being made in the essay. This is evident in the third paragraph of the following upper-range script in response to the first topic for *Burial Rights*.

Despite her visceral portrayal, Kent illuminates how Agnes is brave amidst adversity. Blondal's exercise of propaganda, in his plan to execute Agnes and Fridrik for their 'grave misdeamours' sets the premis of the text. Within the prologue Agnes refers to herself as a 'greasy, bright candle flame' inextricably linking her courage to fire. Kent intentionally affiliates the power of bravery through the symbolism of fire, as the writer tenets that courage is a means to secure an individual's sense of self. Agnes' monologue stating that she is 'determined to close herself off to the world' and 'hold onto what' she knows, demonstrates Agnes' readiness to endure suffering. Integral to the novel's message is that courage is the only coping mechanism which serves to allay fear and alleviate anxiety.

Students are required to write Section A essays in analytical/expository form, so a clear and definite sense of structure should be apparent. There should be careful consideration of how best to develop and sequence a unified and consistent case with which to resolve the chosen topic. In addressing the first topic on *Rear Window*, the following paragraph set the direction for exploration in the introduction of this upper-middle script.

Set in the claustrophobic environment of a sweltering Manhattan apartment block, Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film Rear Window explores the life of its passively observant, yet immobile protagonist, who is in a 'plaster cocoon' confined to his wheelchair. Stuck in his apartment as a result of a work accident, L.B. 'Jeff' Jefferies spends his days and nights watching the lives of his neighbours through his window. Their actions and relationships become a source of entertainment and interest, and through this, Hitchcock positions the viewers to reflect upon the morality of Jeff's behaviour, and whether or not he is neglecting to truly see himself. Ultimately, as Jeff becomes absorbed in his murder theory, he finally can see the true picture of himself and those around him, yet initially he is stuck in his plot of obsession.

This can be compared to the opening of a lower-middle script that sets out a response in relation to the first topic on *The Golden Age*, but that does so in a simplistic manner. The remainder of the response does little more than list examples with little exploration.

The novel 'The Golden Age' by Joan London explores the idea of belonging means everything. In which through the childrens isolation a community is created in order to help each other. Belonging is also explored through places that are represented in the novel such as Hungary, The Golden Age, Elsa's tower & Franks bay window.

It is evident that the first step in responding to Section A is to have detailed knowledge of the text itself and ideas that stem from various readings. Only then can a student have the confidence to make meaningful conclusions and develop the capacity to explore themes and ideas that emerge in a topic.

The most popular text in 2018 was *Medea*. This was followed by *Rear Window*, *Frankenstein*, *Burial Rites*, *The Golden Age* and *The White Tiger*. The least popular texts were *Stories We Tell*, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Section B – Comparative analysis of texts

Students well understood the essential task for this section. Very few students strayed from the two prescribed texts and brought in outside material.

Similarly to Section A, there were three essential aspects to the descriptors for Section B. The first dealt with insights into the texts and the way the two texts compare ideas and issues. The second dealt with the topic and the structure used to develop comparison in responding to the topic. The third dealt with the student's ability to demonstrate fluent and effective use of language in their writing. This task, however, can be best appreciated by considering that by carefully studying one text, students can gain a greater understanding and insight into the other text.

Most students showed very good textual knowledge, but some struggled to compare the texts within an essay. Many students offered much textual information that may have been relevant to the topic but showed little attempt to compare the two texts with detail and insight. This is at the heart of the Section B task. Simply using the words 'conversely' or 'similarly' and then offering more information about the second text is not an effective means of comparing the two texts.

The capacity to set up a point that explores the topic in a way that demonstrates true comparison is a primary focus of the task. All responses do not have to be constructed in the same way, but they must fulfil the task through comparison. The following is an example in response to the second topic for Pair 2 (*Invictus* and *Ransom*) of a well-constructed paragraph that develops the topic through comparison.

*A leader must overcome the internal restraints posed by ingrained societal ethos in order to promote positive change. Both Priam and Mandela face internal conflict as they combat ingrained doctrines of life that they long abided by. Previously, it was Priam's 'kingly role' to retain 'ceremonial stillness' that contradicts and 'unaccustomed' way of life. This is indeed problematic given the ephemerality of human existence. Malouf suggests that acquiesce to the terms of an unchanging life merely warrant a negative outcome for an individual, as the 'grip' of youthful existence will eventually become 'shaky', unable to leave an influence on each – in fact, to oppose an ingrained societal ethos is perhaps fundamental to our existence, and indeed of a 'king's career', as the 'image' and individual 'leaves behind' will be what 'other men remember' long after death. After all, Priam's propensity to expose himself to the 'unaccustomed' empowers him, allowing him to feel 'bold and defiant' in the midst of a mundane, unchanged existence. This is echoed to a similar extent in *Invictus*, as Mandela too is haunted by the wave of cultural difference – the division of the apartheid era. On his presidential inauguration day he confronts himself in the mirror, his slumped shoulder and perturbed facial expression as overseen by a barred window in the background. Here, we see how the woes of past division continue to 'rock' Mandela even after his 'triumph' of obtaining presidency. However, in spite of a woeful past, Mandela elevates himself above these restrictions by turning to the 'world of others'. Whereas Priam must overcome internal restraints on his own, by*

defining his own humanity, Mandela is able to sue existent common humanity to move past social difference. He asks himself 'how do we inspire ourselves when nothing less will do?', exemplifying his cognisance of humanity's ephemerality – he must enact change in a limited time frame. Thus by '[finding] inspiration in a poem', - the common humanity – we see Mandela become the 'captain of [his] soul' and the 'master of [his] fate', allowing him to 'inspire others around'. Both texts therefore stress that it is common humanity that can elevate an individual above social differences – they both empower themselves by considering the ephemeral existence whilst also defining their objectives by this fundamental humanity.

The following is an upper-middle script in response to the first topic for Pair 5 (*The Crucible* and *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*) that sets up comparison in relation to two reverends in the texts and uses them as contrasts in exploring the notion of leadership. While there is room for greater depth and development, it does offer insights through comparison and is part of the exploration of the set topic.

'Figures of leadership are developed to different extents throughout Miller's 'The Crucible' and Brooks, 'Year of Wonders'. Initially perceived as a 'youngster' by the critical occupants of Eyam, Reverend Michael Mompellion can be interpreted as one capable of thriving under the pressure of the circumstances he is presented with. After the harsh reality of 'so many dead' following the outbreak of the bubonic plague, Mompellion exercises his capacity as a leader to convince the vast majority of the village to isolate themselves to the 'wide green prison' of Eyam so as to prevent the further spread of the horrifically 'fatal' condition. Knowing that this self-isolation could potentially result in the death of himself and his wife, Mompellion continue to 'convince the people' to agree with his view. In severe contrast, as presented by Arthur Miller in this play The Crucible, is the Reverend Parris, who ultimately buckles under the pressure of the failing society of Salem. Where Mompellion present the reality of the plague as a 'chariot of gold', Parris is overwhelmed by desire for 'golden candlesticks' and 'the deed' to his house, failing to lead others around him as the Reverend in a Puritan society is expected to do so. Mompellion's sense of calm, seen through how he interacts with others, especially in times of conflict, starkly contrasts to the figure of Parris, who appears 'frantic' and 'angry' in stage directions rather logical and controlled. The people of Eyam grow to appreciate Mompellion as not only a leader but as a person, whereas Parris is repeatedly condemned for his 'selfish' behaviour.

In the following example in response to the first topic for Pair 2 (*Invictus* and *Ransom*), the student appears to have the topic ('that it is essential to know your enemy') in mind but does not make enough effort to explore the idea through comparison. Once the student begins with a topic sentence on a single text, it flows into textual summary and does not work towards exploring the topic through comparison. It is followed by a similarly singular summary of *Ransom* before a final paragraph that attempts to pull the ideas together but with little success and with much repetition.

In the text Invictus directed by Clint Eastwood the main character is Nelson Mandela, his key goal is to achieve 'the rainbow nation' equal between the Dark South africans and the white South Africans. Nelson Mandela learns the way white South Africans live whilst he spends a long time inside jail, he learn't the key thing they love is there Springbok the countries rugby team and cherish the good times and the bad. The time comes and Nelson Mandela is allowed to leave prision and becomes the President of South Africa and nearly throws it all way when a community is writing a document to completely get rid of the Springboks once for all but Mandela tells his opinion to this fellow South Africans and none agree which cause him upset between the community which they don't agree this this decision. He learns about his enemy the whites and creates a bond with them through rugby as he apperciates fans at the game for using the new South African flag. Nelson Mandela achieve the 'rainbow nation' from learning what the white South Africans love in the world which he puts full effort into improving by working with the team captain Plenaar for all players to exceed the expectation people have made on the run to acheive the goal of winning the rugby world cup which makes the white and black south Africans bond through the success of the country.

Students needed to be more selective in their use of the text. Many spent much time telling the story or setting the scene at the expense of selecting parts of the text that allowed for exploration and comparison in relation to the set topic. A good example was Pair 1 (*Tracks* and *Into the Wild*), where both topics focused on the main characters isolated in the wild. The first topic, which centred on ‘the limits of human endurance’, and the second, which centred on ‘the importance of companionship’, were explored within the texts in great detail once Robyn and Christopher were on their own in the desert or in the wilds of Alaska. But many students insisted on covering the breadth of the texts, which did not leave enough time for detailed focus on the most important sections that dealt with companionship or human endurance. If there is a need to set the scene, this should be done succinctly. In Section A students rarely had a problem with this. Students seemed more aware of using the text to explore the topic rather than trying to discuss the entire text; this same approach needs to be applied to Section B.

The topics in the 2018 examination allowed for provocative responses. Nevertheless, 14 of the 16 topics were quite specific in the use of the verb ‘compare’ (which implies differences as well as similarities). Other descriptive verbs used in the topics that highlighted how the task needed to be addressed were ‘present’, ‘explore’, ‘demonstrate’, ‘portray’, ‘regard’ and ‘say about’. All of these words are challenging students to do more than simply offer examples from the texts.

As well, some topics were quite specific and did not necessarily invite qualification. They were decisive and asking for conclusions to be made through comparison – not simply a ‘discuss’ topic. For example, the first topic of Pair 7 (*Black Diggers* and *The Longest Memory*):

“‘You should enjoy every moment of your childhood. Plenty of time for the truth later.’” (*Black Diggers*)

“‘I literally saw the boy surrender to that whip...’” (*The Longest Memory*)

Compare how the two texts portray innocence.’

The first topic of Pair 8 (*I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* and *Made in Dagenham*) also called on students to make conclusions about the comparisons they made in relation to the topic:

“‘It is when individuals are tested that their best qualities are seen.’”

Compare how the two texts present this idea.’

While most students seemed well prepared for analysing the topic through comparison, many students appeared to present a prepared response and, in some cases, ignored the topic altogether. An example of this issue is the following response on Pair 2 (*Invictus* and *Ransom*), where the second topic was ‘Compare how the social and cultural differences explored in these two texts are overcome.’, yet this student’s introduction seemed determined to discuss leadership and set the response on an entirely different route.

In both texts Invictus and Ransom conflict between groups is resolved through good leadership. ‘Ransom’ by David Malouf is small insight into the illiard towards the end of the Trojan war which goes deeply into the thoughts and feelings of great war lords such as Priam and Achillies and how actions they are about to take could decide the fate of their respective nations. The movie ‘Invictus’ directed by Clint Eastwood tackles one of South Africa’s toughest periods of time as a nation. Newly alleceted president Nelson Mandela is seen to lead the nation out of this dark time by resolving high tensions between black and white South Africans. The leadership of characters throughout both texts are forced to sacrifice to be respected, ignore the revenge they seek to maintain peace and make the tough decisions they don’t want to which inspires their people.

The highest-scoring responses analysed the topic thoroughly, engaged with the ideas of the topic, set out the response with a strong introduction and then developed the response using comparison as the basis for the exploration of the topic.

The following upper-range example shows an insightful understanding of the topic from the start and is able to make detailed use of the texts while ensuring conclusions are made through comparison. These are the first two paragraphs from the second topic of Pair 5 (*The Crucible* and *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*), and while there may be slight over-reliance on quotation, it nevertheless fulfils the key task itself.

Societies rely heavily on judgement to maintain order and sense. Arthur Miller's play, The Crucible, and Geraldine Brooks' novel, Year of Wonders, suggest that religious communities in crisis may have a distorted sense of justice as a result of superstition that segregate and incite preconceived opinions and evaluations, based on twisted standards of the 17th century. The authors both connote that forming considered opinions in such times of hysteria is irrelevant during such loss of morality and logic, but both look to organised faith as the true judge of all action in strict religious societies.

Brooks and Miller propose superstition as a huge influence on evaluating behaviours and intention. Brooks' Anys, 'a rare creature', was turned 'witch in the common mind', as the 'fear and rumour that encounter' a woman who meddles in medicinals, renders her a 'sinner in the reckoning of ...religion'. The 'unshakeable' mob were transfixed by their pre-determined standards of Anys as a 'Devil's creature', hence, the frenzied herd's reliance on binary logic, being either 'godly and right' or 'satanic and evil' reduced Anys to a 'whore', judgement based on belief in the supernatural. In similar 'crisis', Tituba suffers the justice of superstition, where 'trouble...always landed on her back'. Where Anys was targeted for her 'glowing...good health', Tituba 'spoke Barbados', a hostility towards the outsider insinuating their false sentences. 'Abigail instantly points at Tituba', Miller offering her as a justifiable scapegoat, as her contractions are contrasted to the eloquence of the court officials' language; a segregation that parallels Anys' refusal to be 'shackled' to the conventions of gender in Eyam. While Tituba 'weeps' and feels she has 'no power' to influence the societal evaluations of her black magic, 'Anys was strong and fought them', at her full impressive height. By using the 'evil doubting of one another', Anys was able to 'weapon[ise]' superstition and turn the community's judgement inward, while Tituba begged the Devil to 'take me home' a self-evaluation of evil and wickedness. Brooks and Miller hence insist that rigid belief in the unknown and its presence in most restrictive societies cause unjustified opinion of outsiders, this superstitious judgement serving to bolster fear of the unknown and colour judgement.

The challenge for this section was in showing the capacity to make comparisons and contrasts seamlessly between the two texts throughout the essay, with a sense of balanced textual awareness and analytically informed insights provided throughout the essay. At the same time comparison still needed to be developed and to be explicit in the exploration of the texts.

The best advice for students is to continue to work on comparison as the basis for discussing and exploring the set topics and to discover the approaches and structures that best fulfil this. It was evident, however, that most students had a clear understanding of the requirements and were able to produce good work across all eight pairs of texts.

Section C – Argument and persuasive language

Section C required students to analyse 'the ways in which argument and written and visual language are used ... to try to persuade others to share the points of view presented'. The instructions were also specific in defining 'written, spoken and visual', and students were expected to respond to the visuals presented in the material.

Students did well in selecting examples from the material that allowed them to demonstrate their understanding of how language was being used to persuade. Students were also expected to analyse how the writer set up his argument and constructed the piece in order to persuade his audience.

While the majority of students were able to plan their responses so that they could cover both the review and the cartoon, a few spent a disproportionate amount of time on the cartoon at the

expense of offering a sufficient exploration of the text. In a small number of cases, the cartoon dominated the response, leaving little opportunity to explore insights into argument and written language use. On the other hand, some students ignored the cartoon.

Students, on the whole, understood the nature of the task and the writer's intended audience. The majority of students were aware of the importance of the 'Background information', which set the context from which the writer based his piece. Many students understood the intention and implications of the review. Most students avoided simply transcribing or quoting the information, setting out the basis of the piece eloquently in their opening.

The heart of the task, however, was a close analysis of the ways a writer used language in an attempt to invite others (in this case the local residents) to share his point of view. A small number of lower-range scripts listed a series of techniques – a few of these used topic sentences for each paragraph as identification of techniques.

High scoring responses:

- provided an incisive and fluent introduction that set out the context for the piece
- offered insights into how the writer's argument was set up to persuade
- showed insight into the ways the writer was attempting to connect with his readership and to use this as leverage to help him attempt to persuade
- made meaningful and sophisticated conclusions about the use of particular language in an attempt to persuade
- dealt effectively with the visual aspects of the material and were able to analyse in detail the cartoon, offer worthwhile conclusions about its intention and offer thoughtful analysis of it as adding to the persuasiveness.

Students who scored most highly showed the confidence in analysing argument and language that comes with regular and authentic engagement with persuasive writing in many forms.

The VCAA is unable to publish student responses to Section C of the 2018 English examination. Teachers and students may refer to previous years' examination reports for illustrations of student responses to the task in Section C.

Table 1 shows the texts selected by students in the 2018 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.

Table 1: Text selection from Section A of the 2018 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>After Darkness</i>	2	48	50	49
<i>Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity</i>	1	53	55	52
<i>Burial Rites</i>	8	54	56	55
<i>Extinction</i>	2	52	51	50
<i>Frankenstein</i>	10	60	60	58
<i>I for Isobel</i>	3	57	56	55
<i>In Cold Blood</i>	2	53	56	55
<i>Island: Collected Stories</i>	2	62	59	58
<i>Like a House on Fire</i>	3	53	52	52
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	4	65	68	64
<i>Medea</i>	23	54	57	55
<i>Old/New World: New & Selected Poems</i>	2	56	51	50
<i>Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood</i>	2	60	57	54
<i>Rear Window</i>	19	54	53	54
<i>Selected Poems</i>	1	70	66	63
<i>Stories We Tell</i>	1	57	52	52
<i>The Golden Age</i>	6	53	51	50
<i>The Left Hand of Darkness</i>	1	68	66	64
<i>The Lieutenant</i>	4	53	53	52
<i>The White Tiger</i>	5	57	54	54
No text	1	0	25	34