

EXAM GUIDE ENGLISH

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the way the writer has constructed this part of the passage. These answers are seldom done well and require a little thought. There are some old favourites that you might come across, like the **link** question. This identifies a word like **but** or **yet** and asks how this works as a link or asks *What is the function of the word?* The trick here is to identify and quote from, if necessary, what has come before it and show how this relates to what happens in the passage afterwards, again quoting to prove what you say. Other common questions concern identifying a linguistic or literary feature in a sentence or paragraph. Watch out for a list or dashes and semi-colons: they all have an effect on the meaning and impact of what the author is saying. Avoid bland answers like "for impact" or "for emphasis". These answers tend to be too vague to get a good mark. Be specific, for example: *"The author uses a dash before the word 'collapse' to make it seem sudden and shocking because the writer's argument changes dramatically here."*

There are often questions on imagery too. These were badly done in last year's exam, so watch out. When you tackle an image or any figure of speech in the passage the technique is simple. All images contain a comparison between two things. For example: the boy was as keen as mustard. This simile is comparing the boy's childish enthusiasm to the sharp and positive taste of strong mustard. We can guess that the writer wants us to imagine just how enthusiastic the boy is and so the comparison to mustard is effective. So identify the two things being compared and comment on the appropriateness of the comparison.

In last year's Higher paper the passage contained the image of a ... *tidal wave of immigration* ... but went on to show how *Europe contends with a trickle of refugees, compared with countries who...* Here the technique is just as straightforward; explain the two things being compared; the influx of refugees and the sudden and massive rush of water suggested by a 'tidal wave'. The trick is to explain why that works as a comparison.

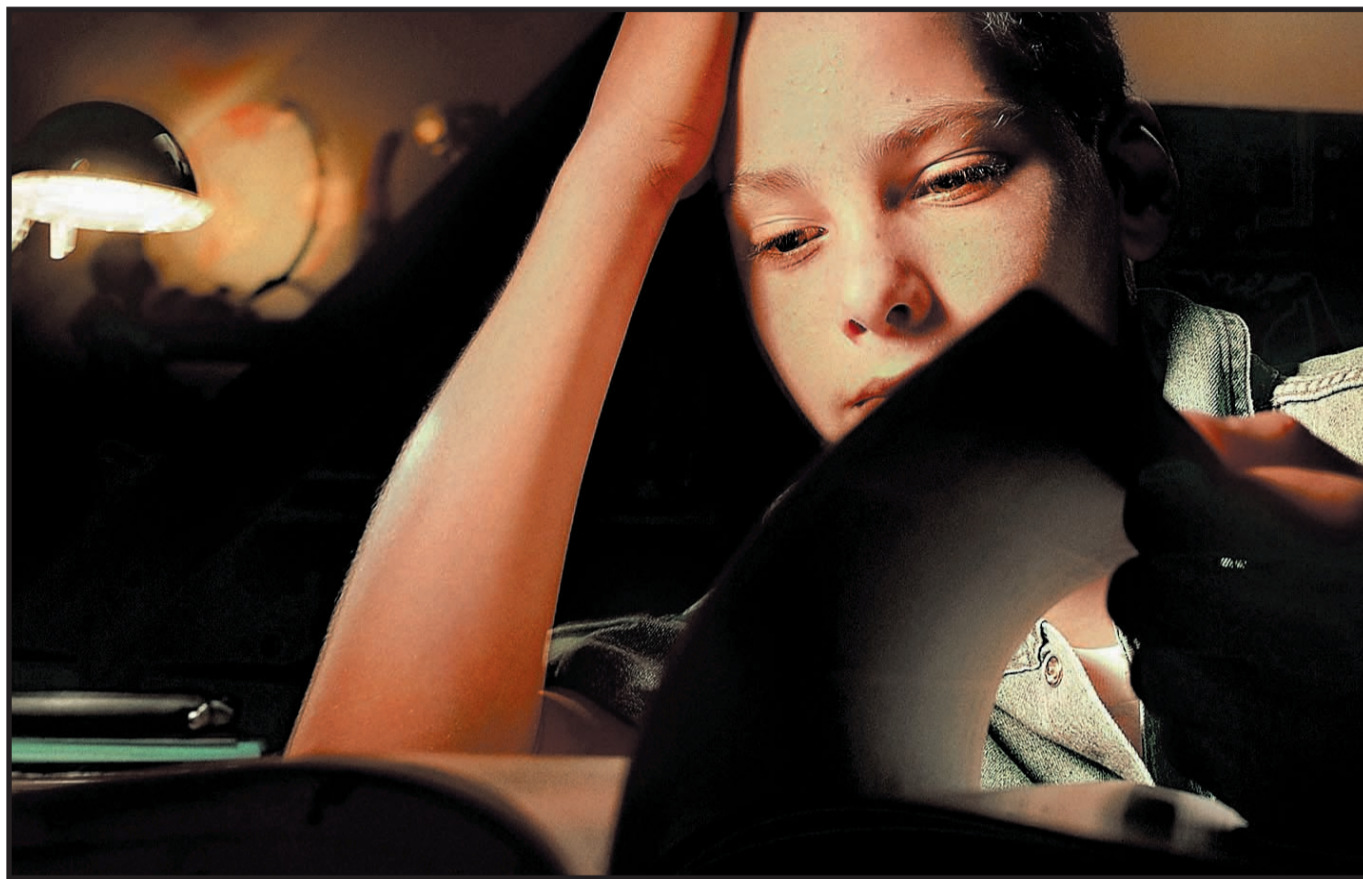
Your answer could be along the lines of: *The use of the words 'tidal wave' suggests that we are being overwhelmed by the sudden rush of refugees because a tidal wave is a deluge of water. The use of the word "trickle" however suggests that actually comparatively few refugees come to this country because a trickle of water would only be a small, almost insignificant amount.*

The questions with an **E** next to them require you to evaluate what the writer is writing. This is not simply working out what they are saying – that would be a **U** question – but commenting on why something works.

This paper is a real push to get finished in the time allocated so keep a close eye on your watch or the clock in the hall. The question above was the last in last year's Higher paper and it was worth five marks out of the total of 50. No candidate can afford to miss out on that number of marks.

Some of the ways in which you can speed up your performance are:

- Read passage 1 first and answer the questions then read passage 2 and answer the questions.
- Try to keep your answers short and to the point.
- Do not waste valuable time rewriting the question at the beginning of your answer.
- Be direct, answer the question, don't waffle



or flannel. A one-mark question should not require a seven-line answer. A six-mark question might, and that is where you should spend your time.

- Avoid missing questions out; this can confuse you and put your answers out of order.
- Do not white-out or erase, simply score out and move on.
- Get a good night's sleep the night before because this paper is for the alert student who is working at their best.

Critical Essay – 45/90 minutes

This is the paper that you should have been studying for since August last year. It takes place on Friday, May 14, when you will have two essays to write on two different texts and on top of that, your ability to write is being tested at the same time. Treat these as discursive essays with your chosen book, poem, or play as the subject. You need to know your texts really well. It is no good just going over the essay you wrote in class. You have no idea what the question will be in the exam. You may get the ideal question for your text but if you limit yourself to the one aspect of the novel you could lose out.

If you have studied the character of Chris Guthrie in *Sunset Song*, you may be lucky and find a question on character. What a shame it would be if there was a

perfect question on the importance of setting, or about a novel which dealt with the subject of war, and you could not use your most familiar text to answer it. A good idea is to presume the essay topic you did in class will not come up and ready yourself to answer on any aspect of the text.

Fears that candidates would not have time to write two good essays were proved wrong last year. Nearly all managed it well within the time. Prepare at least three texts thoroughly. Reliance on only a poem and a short story can be a bit risky. There are only a few short story questions. The short story is also not an easy option since the questions often ask about the techniques associated with this particular genre, so be well prepared to write about technique. Poetry is perfect for this paper mostly because candidates who are writing about poetry do not get bogged down in the business of re-telling the story and start answering the question right away.

The question is the important thing. To pass the paper you need to answer the question. It is no good twisting an old essay. It is no good ignoring the question. It is no good tagging a conclusion which seems to answer the question on the end: none of these techniques work. I marked and failed so many obviously bright candidates' work last year, who failed when they might have passed with flying colours just because they

ignored the question.

So, take it from me, read the question carefully and make your essay a direct answer to it and you will stand a good chance of passing.

All good critical essays are well structured and follow an argument. There should be an introduction where you answer the question and state the name of the text and the author. There should be some kind of account of the text that you are writing about: no more than a paragraph. There should be at least five clear points all directly related to the answer to the question, supported where appropriate by quotations from the text. There should also be a conclusion which sums up your answer to the question you are answering. If you do this, you will be fulfilling the demands of the paper.

Do not use the list of techniques at the end of the question as a structure for your essay as this can lead to rather forced and sterile answers. The main thing is to express the main idea behind the text itself. In poetry answers, don't get so bogged down in lists of techniques that you lose sight of the ideas behind the poem.

Last year, the most popular poem used by candidates in the Higher exam was *Visiting Hour* by Norman MacCaig. It is a fine poem but it is so because of the subtle and poignant self-realisation that it expresses. I must have marked hundreds of papers last year and all pointed out the use of synecdoche where he describes his nostrils "bobbing" along the hospital corridor.

This is all very well, but what is important is not the technical term, impressive as it is, but the understanding that MacCaig feels alien and aloof: a stranger acutely aware of the sharp antiseptic smells of the hospital. Literature is about ideas and beauty all wrapped up in words. The formulaic approach to the critical essay shows little

THE CRITICAL ESSAY PAPER EXPLAINED

12. Choose two nature poems. **1**
 Compare each poem's treatment of the subject, and discuss which you find more successful. **2**
 In your answer you must refer closely to the text and to at least **two** of: atmosphere, structure, imagery, or any other appropriate feature. **3**

- ① This identifies the text you could use
- ② This is the question that you have to answer
- ③ This is a reminder to analyse the text rather than tell the story.