

Teaching guide: Non-exam assessment (NEA)

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Independent critical study: Texts across time

This resource provides guidance on the non-exam assessment (NEA) requirements for A-level English Literature A and should be read in conjunction with the NEA requirements set out in the specification. Example student responses and detailed moderator commentaries accompany this guidance.

Texts across time is the non-exam assessment (NEA) component of A-level English Literature A, a specification which foregrounds the importance of a historicist approach. The objective of a historicist reading is to show not only how the time when a text is *written* will have an impact on its ideas, but also how the time(s) when it is *read* will influence how it is received. Students are therefore encouraged to consider the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they are written, received, and understood.

The specification is committed to the notion of autonomous personal reading and “texts across time” provides students with the invaluable opportunity to work independently, follow their own interests and to develop their own ideas and meanings. To that end, few restrictions are placed on the student’s freedom to choose their own texts and shape their own task. However, the following requirements must be met:

Key reminders

- Students write a comparative critical study of two texts on a literary subject, theme or area of literary interest of their choice.
- An appropriate academic bibliography must be included.
- An academic form of referencing must be used.
- The word count is 2,500 words (not including quotations or academic bibliography).
- The task must be worded so that it gives access to all five assessment objectives.
- One text must have been written pre-1900.
- Two different authors must be studied.
- Equal attention must be paid to each text.
- A-level core set texts and chosen comparative set texts listed for study in either *Love through the Ages* or in *Texts in Shared Contexts* cannot be used for NEA.
- Texts in translation, that have been influential and significant in the development of literature in English, can be used though students are strongly discouraged from offering two texts in translation.
- Poetry texts must be as substantial as a novel or a play. A poetry text could be either one longer narrative poem or a single authored collection of shorter poems. A discrete Chaucer Tale would be suitable as a text for study, as would a poem such as Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*. If students are using a collection of short poems, they must have studied the whole text and select **at least two** poems of sufficient depth to write about in detail as examples of the wider collection.
- Single authored collections of short stories are permissible. If students are using a collection of short stories, they must have studied the whole text and select at least two stories to write about in detail as examples of the wider collection.

Managing the NEA

The first NEA candidates submitted AS work in 2016 and the first A-level NEA submissions were in 2017, so in the intervening years, moderators have had ample opportunity to see NEA in action. The advice offered here on managing the NEA is the result of many years' experience of senior moderators seeing which approaches to NEA have been successful and which have not.

The introduction to NEA should provide students with a detailed review of the requirements and guidance on what it means to work independently (eg productive research skills, effective time management, the discipline needed to read two weighty texts and conduct adequate research). The point at which students begin their NEA preparation is a decision for schools and colleges.

Some schools and colleges aim to introduce the NEA in the first year of the course, but most choose to make it an important feature of the second year of A-level study, perhaps setting reading and research tasks as a bridge between years 12 and 13. Time is the key ingredient.

Students will need sufficient time to select their texts, decide on a theme or literary subject they wish to study in depth and write their essay, so it is important that NEA (worth 20% of the A-level) is given enough time and consideration.

Approaching the NEA

Schools and colleges will differ in how they approach NEA, and this may be dependent upon whether:

- Students all choose individual texts and tasks for their NEA.
- One text is taught to the whole cohort and the second text is individually chosen.
- AS and A-level students are co-taught, and an AS only prose text (*The Mill on the Floss/The Rotters' Club*) is studied for NEA with the second text individually chosen.

These approaches are equally valid and take account of the different contexts in which schools and colleges work. What is important is that each approach recognises that a degree of autonomy in student text and task choice is required. Ideally, a range of differentiated texts and tasks will be seen across a submission for this component. That said, students will choose their texts and shape their tasks with centre support. Centres are reminded that they have access to an NEA adviser who will offer guidance on how to help your students make choices on texts and tasks. If you don't have an assigned adviser, please contact eos@aqa.org.uk

Advice on text choice

The process of coursework must start with the selection of two texts which can be compared and contrasted with rigour and academic depth. Ideally, something about the texts will have excited, intrigued, or motivated the student to select those texts for study. Connecting two texts on a common theme means choosing two texts which maximise opportunities for writing about both similarities and differences.

Whilst the only date requirement is that one text must be written pre-1900, the component title 'Texts across time' indicates that effective comparison and contrast occurs when the same theme is explored in two texts separated by a significant period of time; here the different contexts of production will inform the similarities and differences in approach taken by the writers to the chosen theme and students will have encountered this diachronic approach in component 1, 'Love through the ages'. This is particularly pertinent if students choose two texts from the same genre (poetry, prose, drama).

If, however, students are interested in writing about a theme within a clearly defined time period, it is advisable to consider how the study of texts from different genres will open up discussion of similarities and differences. Students will encounter this synchronic approach in component 2: 'Texts in shared contexts', and [example student response A](#) is an excellent example of the successful connection of a prose and drama text from the nineteenth-century, written within twenty-five years of each other, one from England, the other from Norway.

When supporting students with their choice of texts, therefore, the following guidance is useful:

- both texts should be of sufficient weight and of suitable 'quality' for A-level study; the set text lists for the examined components help to exemplify what is meant by a substantial text, particularly in relation to selecting an appropriate amount of poetry for a poetry 'text'. **Remember, however, that the A-level set texts cannot be used in NEA.** Although there is no rule against using current or traditional GCSE texts, when such texts are chosen, students can struggle to write about them with sufficient depth for A-level
- texts chosen for study must maximise opportunities for writing about both similarities and differences
- texts must allow access to a range of critical views and interpretations, including over time, which students can evaluate and apply autonomously. It often creates difficulties, therefore, for students to find secondary sources for very modern popular texts that have not received serious academic attention. Since the beginning of the specification, some students have struggled to find a range of critical views and interpretations for such texts as Martin's *A Game of Thrones* series, Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy and Meyer's *Twilight* saga. This is not to say that these texts do not possess literary merit; we are simply saying that students often struggle to find useful supportive secondary sources which help frame the students' own arguments. Similarly, centres are advised to proceed with caution when allowing students to use "children's literature". *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *Coraline* all much-loved and admired, can create difficulties for students who struggle to find in the texts much of genuine interest to

literary critics. Useful secondary sources relevant to the texts, can include film and stage productions, as well as books and academic articles. An example of an appropriate bibliography accompanies the example student band 5 responses

- once texts, which both address the student's chosen theme or subject of study are identified, a more defined focus for the essay is needed; this may arise, for example, from similarities and differences in genre (poetry, prose, drama), type (eg gothic fiction), contexts (eg of production and reception), authorial method (eg narrative structure or point of view), or theoretical perspective (eg feminism). [Example student response A](#) is a good example of how the wider theme of the role of women in the nineteenth-century has been more clearly defined in the focus on two specific relationships and the inclusion of a clear viewpoint – that 'the personal is political' – for consideration.

Helping students with their NEA

Some organised students may start with two texts joined by a common theme and have a firm idea about where their NEA is going, ie:

- the presentation of murder in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Capote's *In Cold Blood*
- the significance of money/status in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* and Amis' *Money*
- the presentation of females in the "gothic" texts Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and the Keats' poems *Lamia*, *Isabella* or *The Pot of Basil* and *The Eve of St Agnes*
- the relationship between intellectualism and love in Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Stoppard's *Arcadia*
- the presentation of bourgeois womanhood in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Forster's *Howards End*.

Some students may struggle to identify a thematic topic which interests them. To help in such cases, the specification offers suggestions of themes (page 20) and, as at least one of the texts must have been written pre-1900, of pre-1900 texts (pages 21-22). This is not an exhaustive list.

Some themes may be presented to students by centres in little 'clusters' of texts:

- representations of rural life in Gaskell's *Cranford*, Hardy's *The Woodlanders* or Eliot's *Silas Marner* and Webb's *Special Bane*, Carr's *A Month in the Country* or O'Farrell's *Hamnet*
- urban life/social class/London as a character in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Gissing's *The Nether World*, Smith's *NW*, Ali's *Brick Lane*, or Lanchester's *Capital*
- the significance of art in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Andrea del Sarto* and *Old Pictures in Florence* (from *Men and Women*, 1855) and Carey's *The Horse's Mouth*, White's *The Vivisector*, Atwood's *Cat's Eye* or Tarrt's *The Goldfinch*
- the presentation of obsession in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Nabokov's *Lolita*, Shaffer's *Equus*, Byatt's *Possession* or Fowles' *The Collector*
- the Country House/Manor House as a setting in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Dunmore's *A Spell of Winter*, Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* or Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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- representations of the clergy in Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, Lewis' *The Monk* or Trollope's *Barchester Towers* and Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, Hare's *Racing Demon* or Osborne's *Luther*
- satire in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, Austen's *Northanger Abbey* or Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Heller's *Catch-22*, Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* or Bradbury's *The History Man*.

Centres may wish to select themes or types of literature (or ask students to do so) which can create a larger 'pool' of texts:

- the occult/supernatural in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan*, or Stoker's *Dracula* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*, Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* or *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* or Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*
- the theme of transitioning from childhood to adulthood or "coming of age"/growing up would enable students to consider such pre-1900 texts as Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Austen's *Emma*, Barret-Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Alcott's *Little Women*. To complement these texts, the following post-1900 texts could be considered: Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Smith's *White Teeth*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Eugenides' *Middlesex* or Syal's *Anita and Me*
- a pool of texts on the theme of revenge could include Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Titus Andronicus*, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Post -1900 texts dealing with the theme of revenge could include: McEwan's *Nutshell*, Flynn's *Gone Girl*, King's *Carrie*, Chandler's *The Little Sister*, Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, Portis' *True Grit*, Joanne Harris' *Different Class*
- a pool of satirical texts could include Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Heller's *Catch-22*, Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* or Bradbury's *The History Man*.

Even within a small pool of texts there are very many text pairings students can consider. Furthermore, many of the texts featured above have multi-functionality and can operate across themes, so for example Stoppard's *Arcadia* could fit the Country House category, *Northanger Abbey* could work with a task about coming of age, *Cold Comfort Farm* could dovetail into a question of presentations of rural life. New ideas based on the texts shown above could present themselves. For example, *Huckleberry Finn*, *True Grit*, *Lolita*, *In Cold Blood* and *Moby Dick* could be considered as a grouping under a theme entitled 'American Journeys'. As long as students remember that at least one of the texts must have been written before 1900, many opportunities for enjoyable reading, research and enquiry are open.

Advice on task choice

We encourage schools and colleges to check individual students' essay titles with their AQA NEA adviser before students embark on their research, especially where there may be some uncertainty about the appropriateness of texts, or the approach being taken.

The NEA assesses all five assessment objectives, so the task must be designed in a way that allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in all of these areas. Students should be familiar with this concept by the time they approach the NEA as all assessment objectives are tested in all questions in the examined components 1 and 2. [Example student response A](#) is a good example of how access to all assessment objectives is enabled by the task and the moderator commentary explains how the assessment objectives have been addressed by the student. It is worth considering how key terms in the task wording enable different assessment objectives to be accessed:

Compare and contrast the ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell and Henrik Ibsen present the relationships between Margaret Hale and John Thornton in <i>North and South</i> (1854-55) and Nora and Torvald Helmer in <i>A Doll's House</i> (1879).	
Examine the view that in both texts, 'the personal is political'.	
AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.	The use of the command words 'compare and contrast' invites the student to organise her response around relevant similarities and differences in the presentation of relationships in the chosen texts. In doing so, she will express her ideas using appropriate terminology.
AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.	The key word 'present' explicitly invites the student to write about the different genres of the chosen texts and, together with 'the ways in which', signals the need to discuss a range of authorial methods involved.
AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.	The focus on specific relationships and on the concept of 'the personal as political' engages with how literary representations thereof can reflect social, cultural and historical aspects of the time period in which these texts were written.

Compare and contrast the ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell and Henrik Ibsen present the relationships between Margaret Hale and John Thornton in *North and South* (1854-55) and Nora and Torvald Helmer in *A Doll's House* (1879).

Examine the view that in both texts, 'the personal is political'.

A04: Explore connections across literary texts.	The command words 'compare' and 'contrast' instruct the student to make connections between the texts in terms of subject matter and authorial method.
A05: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.	The directive to 'examine' a clear viewpoint - that 'the personal is political' - signals the need to debate this given opinion and so to engage with multiple readings and interpretations.

- [NEA example student response A - Band 5 - *North and South* and *A Doll's House*](#)
- [NEA example student response B - Band 5 - *A Doll's house* and *The Magic Toyshop*](#)
- [NEA example student response C - Band 5 - *Great Expectations* and *A Clockwork Orange*](#)
- [NEA example student response D - Band 5 - *Far From the Madding Crowd* and the poetry of R.S. Thomas](#)
- [NEA example student response E - Band 5 - *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Frankenstein*](#)

Advice on writing the essay

Having completed the study of their chosen texts, researched secondary sources, and devised an appropriate task which liberates all the assessment objectives, students will need guidance on how to pull their ideas together into a coherent response. Here again, [example student response A](#) offers an excellent example of how to structure a sophisticated argument and the moderator commentary explains how this student achieves this. Some key points to note are:

- students who struggle to write in clear, assured, formal academic English (AO1) will seriously compromise their ability to show control of the other four assessment objectives. Therefore, attention should be paid to the rules and conventions of spelling, punctuation and grammar, and work should be carefully proof-read before hand-in
- NEA is a connective task and so students should be prepared to make connections between their texts in terms of similarity and difference throughout the response; students should make the connections they wish to explore from a range including authorial method, context, genre and critical theory
- contexts and critical views should not be ‘bolted on’ but instead should be woven through the response, evaluated as a way of reading the primary texts and then used as a stepping-stone into the development of an interesting and persuasive personal overview. The best evaluations of contexts and critical views begin firmly and squarely with the details contained within the texts before moving out into a consideration of contexts and critical views. This “inside-out” approach to contexts generates more success in NEA than an “outside-in” approach to contexts which begins with a set view about ie an era, a writer, genre, or a critical theory which is then super-imposed onto the text.
- well-selected, concise quotations should be embedded and adapted to the student’s own syntax
- a bibliography and academic referencing are required to indicate the secondary sources used by the student during the writing of their essay. AQA does not insist on a particular form of referencing but following the example given in the example student responses would be appropriate
- The upper limit for NEA is 2,500 words. Candidates who exceed this word limit often self-penalise because over-long work can drift out of focus, become irrelevant or repetitive.

Supervising and authenticating students' work

The role and responsibilities of the teacher in supervising and authenticating students’ work are set out in Section 6.1 of the specification. It is worthwhile emphasising that the teacher must confirm that each essay submitted is the work of the individual student. The JCQ (Joint Council for Qualifications) document “Instructions for Conducting Coursework” provides further guidance about the level of support and guidance that is appropriate for teachers to provide. In accordance with JCQ guidance, the following support would not be acceptable:

- having reviewed the candidate’s work, giving detailed advice and suggestions as to how the work may be improved in order to meet the assessment criteria

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- giving detailed indications of errors or omissions which leave the candidate no opportunity for individual initiative
- giving advice on specific improvements needed to meet the assessment criteria
- providing writing frames specific to the task (eg outlines, paragraph headings or section headings)
- intervening personally to improve the presentation or content of the work.

Awarding marks

The role and responsibilities of teachers in submitting marks are set out in Section 6.6 of the specification. Please note that a mark out of 50 is required. This means that the mark you award against the assessment criteria, which will be out of 25, needs to be doubled when entering on the Candidate Record Form, before submitting marks to AQA.