



Teaching guide: Non-exam assessment (NEA)

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Theory and independence

This resource provides guidance on the non-exam assessment (NEA) requirements for A level English Literature B and should be read in conjunction with the NEA requirements set out in the specification. This teaching guide develops and exemplifies the NEA requirements and is wholly consistent with the specification. Sample student responses also accompany this guidance.

Given that a central tenet of Specification B is how meanings in literature arise and given that the specification encourages students to explore their own voices, it is fitting that the title of the NEA component is 'Theory and Independence'. The aim of this unit is for students to explore aspects of their chosen texts through the lenses of different literary critical ideas and for them to engage with the idea that meanings in literature are not fixed but are shaped and influenced by many factors, including the ideas and experiences that the reader brings to the text. This area of the course encourages different ways of reading and independent choice on the part of students and it enables them to explore their own interests by giving them considerable ownership of their own work. To that end, few restrictions are placed on the students' freedom to choose their own texts and areas of study but there are some requirements that must be met.

Key reminders

- Students write two responses, each based on a different literary text
- One text must be a prose text and one must be a poetry text
- Each text is explored using some of the literary critical ideas in the AQA Critical Anthology
- A different set of critical ideas must be used for each piece of work (for example, eco-critical ideas for the prose and feminist literary critical ideas for the poetry)
- One piece of NEA work must be a conventional response. The second could be a re-creative piece, accompanied by a commentary. It is possible to submit two conventional responses
- The word count for each piece of work is 1,250 – 1,500 words (not including quotations)
- Tasks must enable students to access each of the five assessment objectives and are most effective if they set up a genuine debate or ask a genuinely open question

Text choices

One of the joys of this unit is that it encourages students to read widely and enables them to select their own texts, although they can be helped and guided by their teachers as is required. Apart from the genre requirements, and the rule that none of the texts from the Literature B exam papers can be used for this unit, there is a great deal of freedom afforded to students as they explore what most interests and engages them. Not all texts will be equally suitable however and it is important that the chosen texts, both poetry and prose, are able to be studied and explored through the selected critical lens and that there is enough in the text to generate interesting work that is worthy of A level study. That does not mean that the chosen texts need to be recognised as 'canonical' or have stood the test of time however;

indeed, this is the perfect opportunity for students to explore new writers or those writing from different perspectives and backgrounds should they wish to.

A reminder of the text requirements:

- None of the set texts on the Literature B examined units can be used for the NEA but it is possible to use a different text by an author that appears on those units
- Prose texts can either be a novel or a single-authored collection of short stories, of which students must explore at least two in their conventional NEA piece
- Poetry texts can either be a single longer poem (for example, *The Rape of the Lock* or *The Waste Land*) or a single authored collection of poems and students must write about at least two of the poems in their conventional NEA piece of work
- For re-creative tasks, where a collection of short stories or poetry is used, students must have studied the whole of the text but it is acceptable to base the re-creative response on a single short story or poem
- Texts in translation are permitted but, as with all text choices for this unit, they need to offer the student enough to ensure they can cover all the assessment objectives and enable them to produce A level worthy work that will do justice to their potential

Some text queries that advisers often get asked:

- *Goblin Market* by Rossetti must be studied as part of a larger collection of her poetry and written about alongside another of her poems
- *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Perkins Gilman must be studied as part of a collection of her short stories and written about alongside one other of those short stories
- It is possible to study two texts in translation, as long as the texts work well for the student within the requirements of the unit
- All texts need to be treated as literature; it can be difficult to apply all of the assessment objectives and meet the criteria of the unit if using 'literary non-fiction' or other genres

Independent Choice

Apart from the requirement to write about a prose text and a poetry text and not being able to use any of the texts from the examined units, there are no other rules that prohibit students exploring texts that interest them. This obviously opens up lots of exciting opportunities and possibilities. Literature texts selected should enable the students to cover the assessment objectives and meet the criteria of the unit. If students and their teachers are satisfied this is the case, then the text will be acceptable. The vast majority of texts will work well within this unit, particularly if they have been selected because a student is interested in them and enthused about exploring a reading from a particular critical viewpoint.

There are three main areas of this unit where students can be given independent choice and ownership of their work:

- Choice of text
- Choice of critical ideas
- Choice of task

Some students are able to be completely independent across all aspects of the unit, whereas others will need more support and scaffolding with certain choices and decisions. Teachers are best placed to decide how much support each individual student requires but students do need to be given some degree of independence and empowered to make some choices about the nature and direction of their NEA work.

Use of the AQA Critical Anthology

There are six different sections in the AQA Critical Anthology and students must engage with at least two of them during their NEA studies. Most students select one set of literary critical ideas to explore alongside their first text and a different set of ideas for their second text. It is possible to consider more than one set of critical ideas in relation to one text and so the student ends up having explored three or more critical lenses. There is no requirement to do this but some students find it interesting and illuminating to combine critical perspectives. The only 'rule' to follow is that students need to have engaged with two sets of critical ideas by the time they have completed their NEA portfolio.

The Critical Anthology provides students with another opportunity for independent choice. Not only can they select which critical lens most interests them but they also need to decide which of the ideas contained within the anthology are most applicable to the task and text they are exploring. It is possible to read beyond the anthology should a student wish to do so. Deciding how to introduce the Critical Anthology to students and support them with it is something teachers may wish to give some thought to. It could be that it is introduced early in the course and is used to support and inform the reading of texts being studied for the examined units. If this is done students should quickly gain a clear understanding of how texts can be interpreted in multiple ways, so enabling them to arrive at their own interpretations and become confident autonomous readers.

If students are not introduced to the theoretical material prior to their NEA study then they will need some support in their reading and exploration of it, perhaps initially via applying some of the critical ideas to individual poems or short extracts. By studying a range of critical ideas, some of which contradict each other, and applying them to different texts then students should see that meanings in texts can be laid open for negotiation and debate and therefore what they themselves have to say about them becomes ever more valid and relevant.

Task setting

Tasks must enable students to access all five assessment objectives. Like examination questions tasks work best if they are framed around a debate or if they ask a genuinely open question. It can be helpful to look at the questions on the examined units in order to see how tasks can be phrased to encourage all of the assessment objectives to be addressed. It is not a requirement to get tasks approved by an AQA adviser but they should be contacted if there is uncertainty about a task or indeed a text choice.

Command words like 'Describe ...' or 'How is ... presented ...' should be avoided in order to encourage students to develop a line of argument and debate in their conventional work.

The conventional response

Of the two pieces of work that make up the final NEA folder, one of them must be a conventional response, of which examination essays are examples. It is permitted to do both pieces of work as conventional responses and many students choose this route.

A conventional essay will focus on debate and invite students to explore potential meanings in a literary text using critical ideas and theories. As with the examination questions, tasks need to address the assessment objectives but with the NEA there can be a more flexible approach as students and teachers have time to discuss the implications of a task.

Student response E (linked into this document) is not unlike a section B response from one of the examined components, in that the student is exploring to what extent they agree with a given viewpoint. Whilst the directive to include relevant comment on authorial methods (AO2) is not made explicit in the task, the importance of students integrating exploration of the writer's methods also applies here. Even if an assessment objective is not explicitly signalled in the task's wording, students must remember they still need to cover all the AOs in their work. In example E (given that the text is a novel) the AO2 exploration is likely to be on narrative method. Comment on characterisation, sequencing, structure, voices, settings and language may be appropriate and should be woven into the line of argument.

Students should know their NEA texts well and be able to discuss writers' methods in an explicit way, making judicious choices in their selection of supporting material. In response to this task, a student would need to think about how Burgess's methods have contributed to their line of argument on whether *A Clockwork Orange* is a protest novel about the powerlessness of human beings against ruthless autocratic governments.

It is worth considering how key terms in the task wording link to different assessment objectives:

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| <p>'A clockwork Orange is a protest novel about the powerlessness of human beings against ruthless autocratic governments.'</p> <p>Using ideas from the critical anthology to inform your argument, to what extent do you agree with this view?</p> | |
| <p>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.</p> | <p>In responding to the extent, they agree with the given view, AO1 will be tested through the way the student constructs the argument and expresses ideas.</p> |
| <p>AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.</p> | <p>AO2 is set up in the requirement for the student to focus on the ways Burgess has/has not presented <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> as a protest novel, and on the implied presentation of human beings as powerless and governments as ruthless and autocratic.</p> |
| <p>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.</p> | <p>AO3 will be addressed through the student showing their understanding of a range of possible contexts which arise from power and powerlessness (eg cultural, gender, political and historical contexts), and the feminist/Marxist readings of the text that are possible.</p> |
| <p>AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.</p> | <p>AO4 is targeted by the requirement to refer to the critical anthology which is itself another text. The student will also connect implicitly with other 'protest' texts.</p> |
| <p>AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.</p> | <p>In debating the extent to which <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> is a protest novel about the powerlessness of human beings against ruthless autocratic governments, the student will directly engage with the different interpretations.</p> |

- [NEA example student response A - Band 5 - *Paradise Lost*](#)
- [NEA example student response B - Band 5 - *Heart of Darkness*](#)
- [NEA example student response C - Band 5 - *1Q84*](#)
- [NEA example student response D - Band 4 - *Shelley*](#)
- [NEA example student response E - Band 5 - *A Clockwork Orange*](#)

Another option for students is that they are able to present a conventional response as a journalistic piece (further details below).

A journalistic response

It is possible to submit a conventional response in the style of a piece of literary journalism. This allows students to experiment a little more with their style of writing and it can be great fun to both produce and read.

If students are keen to try this type of writing, they should first of all read some examples from literary magazines and publications but also be made aware that they must still cover all of the assessment objectives, as they would in a traditional conventional piece. This usually does not pose a problem for any of the AOs except AO2. Students need to think carefully about how to convincingly include analysis of the writer's methods into an article style piece.

Should a student wish, it is possible to submit two journalistic pieces in their NEA folder.

A re-creative response

Students have the option to include one re-creative response in their NEA folder should they wish to do so. This consists of a new text, that has been created from the base text that has been studied, and a commentary. Together the two pieces of writing should constitute 1,250-1,500 words.

The purpose of a re-creative response is to offer a critical reading of the base text that has been informed by working with the Critical Anthology. Re-creative work can find 'narrative gaps' or 'absence' in the base text and by filling in some of the gaps, or offering a voice to an otherwise silent character, a new critical reading of the text is provided. A more traditional reading might be reconfigured by creating a new text that is shaped by a particular critical viewpoint.

A guiding principle for a re-creative response is that the new text should provide a reading of the base text from a critical perspective. This is often done by giving a voice to a marginalised character or exploring a key event from a different point of view / through a particular critical lens. The commentary should then make explicit how the new text has used critical ideas to shed new light on the original and how it is providing a new reading of an aspect of that text.

Doing a re-creative response can be incredibly interesting and it encourages students to think about literature analysis in a different way but they should be very clear that the new text they are producing must grow out of the base text, be rooted in it and provide a new reading or perspective of it. A re-created text is not a completely new text in the style of a particular writer that is otherwise not connected to the text the student has studied. The commentary must establish a clear connection between the re-creative piece, the relevant critical ideas and the base text, explaining how they have informed and shaped each other.

There is no requirement for students to replicate the form and language of the base text but the selection of narrative voice does matter. Both the re-creative piece and the commentary need to be incorporated in the word count. There is no requirement for a particular division of words between the two pieces; students will need to decide what is most appropriate given the new reading they are exploring. The unpacking of the assessment objectives in the re-creative task is slightly different in that there are two pieces of writing to consider: the re-creative piece itself and the commentary.

It is worth considering how key terms in the wording of the task in student response point students towards different assessment objectives.

Using Tennyson’s *‘Ulysses’* write a monologue by Ulysses’ wife in which she reflects on the words he speaks.

Use ideas from the critical anthology to inform your work and include a commentary explaining how you have explored ideas from Feminist Theory and/or Marxist Theory and/or Narrative Theory and/or Post-colonial Theory in your re-creative piece.

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| <p>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.</p> | <p>AO1 will be assessed across both the monologue and the commentary, where the latter will invite the use of critical concepts and terminology.</p> |
| <p>AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.</p> | <p>From the task it is clear that the student would need to demonstrate in both the re-creative piece and in the commentary, an understanding of how monologues work in terms of structure, language and voice.</p> |
| <p>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.</p> | <p>The reflection of a wife on her husband’s words invites comment on gender contexts linked to the Victorian age in which Tennyson was writing. Focusing on his words as fiction and offering alternative words invites discussion of literary contexts.</p> |
| <p>AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.</p> | <p>The requirement to refer to the critical anthology will explicitly address AO4. In writing about monologues students will show their understanding of how the form works and implicitly connect with other monologues.</p> |
| <p>AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.</p> | <p>AO5 will be focused on in the commentary as the student reflects on different possible readings from the critical anthology and how these open up different interpretations.</p> |

- [NEA example student response A - Band 4/5 - Ulysses](#)
- [NEA example student response B - Band 4/5 – Pride and Prejudice](#)

Advice on writing the NEA responses

Having completed the study of their chosen texts in the light of the selected critical ideas, students will need guidance on how to structure their ideas into a coherent, focused response. The word count for each piece means that a tight focus on a clear line of argument, with well selected examples and supporting evidence, is required.

Some key points to note:

- The task should remain central to the line of argument
- Students cannot possibly hope to make every point or give every example, so they must judiciously select the best points in order to produce a coherent and convincing piece of work
- Considerations of writers' methods should be integrated into the argument and students should focus on the methods that they consider most relevant
- Contexts and critical views should not be 'bolted on' but instead woven throughout the response as is meaningful and relevant
- Students should make a concerted effort to work within the stipulated word limits

Supervising and authenticating students' work

The role and responsibilities of the teacher in supervising and authenticating students' work are set out in the specification. It is worthwhile emphasising that the teacher must confirm that each essay submitted is the work of the individual student. The [JCO \(Joint Council for Qualifications\)](#) provides further information about the level of support and guidance that is appropriate for teachers to provide to students.

Assessment and administration

Teachers should use the mark scheme holistically and arrive at a mark out of 25 for each piece of NEA work. The marks for the two assessed pieces should then be added together and a final mark out of 50 recorded on the Candidate Record Form and sent electronically to AQA. Teachers should not separately award marks for each assessment objective; a holistic approach to marking is required when assessing the NEA work.

Teachers should annotate the NEA work, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses, and include a final summative comment where the qualities of the work are evaluated. The purpose of these comments is to explain to the moderator why the centre deemed the mark that has been awarded to be the most appropriate. The fairer and more honest these comments are then the easier it is for the moderator to understand the centre's marking.

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Some administrative points to remember:

- All work should contain written comments that are aimed at the moderator
- The teacher comments should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the work and explain/justify the mark that has been awarded
- Each folder must have a completed Candidate Record Form attached to the front
- Individual folders should be secured with treasury tags or staples (not plastic wallets or envelope folders)
- Each centre sample should be accompanied by a completed Centre Declaration Sheet