

Approaching A-level English specifications Case studies

Cathi Allison
Anna Hunt



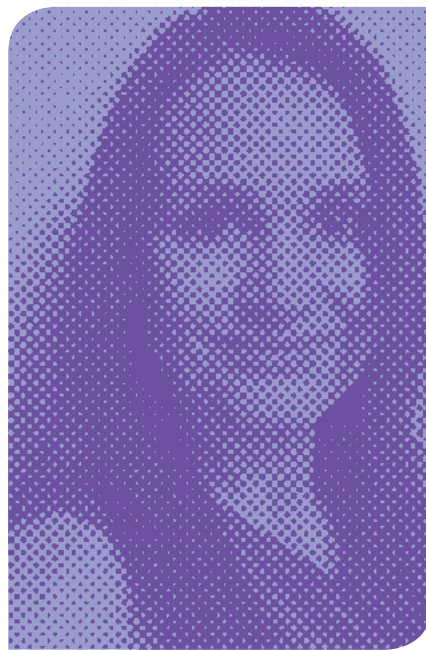
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About the contributors



Cathi Allison is a Head of Department, teaching English Literature to A-level in a moderately sized secondary school in Croydon. She has worked as a senior examiner and moderator on the last four AQA A-level Literature specifications and is currently an AQA English advocate, NEA adviser and senior examiner for the new specification's paper 1 at AS. Cathi is delivering the co-teachability Literature A course.



Anna is a practising English teacher and Head of Faculty at a large upper school in Leicester. She teaches a number of A-level English Literature groups every academic year. She also works as an AQA English advocate for GCSE and A-level and is an assistant lead examiner for AS Literature B paper 2A (Tragedy: Poetry and Prose). This year Anna has chosen to focus on Aspects of tragedy and elements of crime writing for the modules.

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English Literature A: unpacking Love through the ages

Cathi Allison

Extracts

The Love through the ages resource pack ¹ contains extracts from unseen texts and these are useful for paper 2 section B. We made use of the piece from *The Rotters' Club* ², a text which we didn't otherwise plan to study, and as a class we explored how questions are framed around attitudes to, and experiences of, love. With this extract, we started with the below instruction.

“Examine the view that Coe presents men and women as having different attitudes to fidelity in this extract.

Make close reference to the writer's methods in your response”.

To me, this is not a two-part task. I feel it's asking students to look at the content of the extract in a specific way; ie the focus is on fidelity and how attitudes are presented differently. It also suggests that in order to explore this, students must look at authorial methods.

Often students focus on both describing and narrating the content, or stylistically examining technical features, without referring to what the author has actually conveyed to the reader.

Using the extracts to teach unseen

Unpicking questions using AQA's *Command words* bulletin ³, was useful for training students to scope their answers for the right task. For us, some students were known to miss out on marks in the exam due to a failure to address the assessment objectives; and so familiarity with the structure of questions will help them to avoid this.

Teachers may have noticed that the mark scheme no longer talks about language, form and structure, but about methods. Students should be dissuaded from using a tick list, so we found it best to avoid acronyms. We also made an effort to dissuade students from stylistic analysis without referring to the narrative itself.

We allocated an unseen extract to students and asked them to research it.

Unseen extracts include pieces from:

- *The Great Gatsby* ⁴
- *Far from the Madding Crowd* ⁵
- *Persuasion* ⁶
- *The Awakening* ⁷
- *Atonement* ⁸
- *The Rotters' Club* ²

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 The Love through the ages resource pack
aqa.org.uk/lit/lovepack</p> <p>2 The Rotters' Club extract
aqa.org.uk/lita/rotterextract</p> <p>3 Command words bulletin
aqa.org.uk/lita/commandwords1</p> <p>4 The Great Gatsby extract
aqa.org.uk/lita/gatsbyextract</p> | <p>5 Far from the Madding Crowd extract
aqa.org.uk/lita/crowdextract</p> <p>6 Persuasion extract
aqa.org.uk/lita/persuasionextract</p> <p>7 The Awakening extract
aqa.org.uk/lita/awakeningextract</p> <p>8 Atonement extract
aqa.org.uk/lita/atonementextract</p> |
|---|---|

In groups, or independently (depending on class size), we asked students to present the common features between their researched texts. In light of the questions on sample papers, we asked what kinds of questions could they design?

Taking it further, we would go through the extract, primarily looking at the differing attitudes the writer is conveying. Here are some notes from *The Rotters' Club*:

- Narrative voice. Someone is always telling the story. Check that the students remember the various narrative voices, why they might be used, and whose perspective they reflect. What attitude to infidelity is shown by the narrative voice? Does it shift at all? In *The Rotters' Club*, some may argue that Bill's views are privileged and that Miriam's view is only presented through her speech. What effect does this create?
- Although this is an extract, how does it start and progress? In *The Rotters' Club*, are different attitudes to infidelity being revealed and, if so, how does the writer use structure to create this effect?
- Setting is also important, for instance what is the effect? At the hotel in *The Rotters' Club*, is the act of signing in as 'Mr and Mrs' used as a possible foreshadowing of the ending? We picked an extract from *On Chesil Beach* where the newly married couple have dinner in their bedroom and we used this to show how setting is often an important feature.

- The presentation of dialogue is also important in relationships. Ask pairs of students to read out conversations using different tones. You'll appreciate that this works best with those students who study drama.
- Context of unseen texts can be challenging. In *The Rotters' Club* there are some dated references that younger teachers and students might miss; such as the illicitness of the hotel, the chicken-in-the-basket and the reference to chips or Denver's 'Annie's Song'.

If this were the set text then no doubt context would have been taught, but it is important to consider which strategies you can give students for the unseen element in order to help them deal with contexts of which they have little experience.

Can you identify any further authorial methods that might illuminate the presentation of attitudes to infidelity?

English Literature B: which resources?

Anna Hunt

What support is available?

AQA's English Literature B pages [9](#) have a range of support and these pages are my recommended starting points.

I suspect for most teachers, the specification, specimen papers and mark schemes are the core resources, but we also value the marked exemplars, text overviews, text checkers and webinars introducing the specification.

For me, these are the key highlights from the English Literature B pages [9](#), but a range of additional support is also available.

How we used our chosen resources

Initially, one member of staff attended the free *Preparing to teach* session and delivered feedback on our options and choices to the rest of the faculty. The materials are available in full on the Literature B pages under 'Plan' [10](#) and we've found ourselves revisiting these [11](#) retrospectively more than once. I also recommend reading the *FAQ sheet* [12](#) which helped inform our practical day-to-day delivery of the course.

Selecting the right texts for our cohort is an important part of student engagement. AQA have provided some text overviews, which can be found by navigating from the English Literature B pages [9](#) to the Literature B 'Teach' box and on to the relevant resource package:

- *Aspects of comedy* [13](#)
- *Aspects of tragedy* [14](#)
- *Elements of crime writing* [15](#)
- *Elements of political and social protest writing* [16](#)

It was also at the early stage that we explored the *SAMs* on the public website [17](#). We looked closely at the different texts and genres so we had a really strong understanding of the shape of questions, which helped direct the focus of our own centre-produced exam questions. As practitioners, we're always on the lookout for more sample material and so we made careful use of the *Create your own questions* resources from the theme-specific packages mentioned above, to develop our options.

Putting it into practice: Elements of crime writing

For the purpose of this guide, I'll illustrate our use of *Elements of crime writing* [15](#) specifically.

First assessment: 'unseen' crime

Students' first assessment was an unseen crime text which we mocked-up ourselves. We identified a need to prompt students into thinking about what to write, so we turned a *Specimen question commentary* in to a series of bullet points. Doing this helped the teachers to further understand the thinking behind this task. There are three commentaries:

- *Specimen question commentary – unseen* (Paper 2A, section A) [18](#)
- *Specimen question commentary – Oliver Twist* (Paper 2A, section B) [19](#)
- *Specimen question commentary* (Paper 2A, section C) [20](#)

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <p>9 English Literature B pages
aqa.org.uk/englishlitb</p> <p>10 English Literature B planning resources
aqa.org.uk/litb/plan</p> <p>11 Prepare to teach materials
aqa.org.uk/litb/ptt</p> <p>12 Specification FAQs
aqa.org.uk/litb/faqs</p> <p>13 Aspects of comedy pack
aqa.org.uk/litb/comedy</p> <p>14 Aspects of tragedy pack
aqa.org.uk/litb/tragedy</p> <p>15 Elements of crime writing pack
aqa.org.uk/litb/crime</p> | <p>16 Elements of political and social protest writing pack
aqa.org.uk/litb/protest</p> <p>17 SAMs
aqa.org.uk/lita/sams</p> <p>18 Question commentary – paper 2 section A
aqa.org.uk/litb/unseencommentary</p> <p>19 Question commentary – paper 2 section B
aqa.org.uk/litb/twistcommentary</p> <p>20 Question commentary – paper 2A section C
aqa.org.uk/litb/2acommentary</p> | <p>21 Paper 2's Band 3 response paper 2A
aqa.org.uk/litb/band3</p> <p>22 Band 5 response paper 2A
aqa.org.uk/litb/band5</p> <p>23 Question commentary – paper 2A
aqa.org.uk/litb/questioncommentary</p> <p>24 English Hub School network
aqa.org.uk/englishhubs2</p> <p>25 Literature B paid CPD
aqa.org.uk/litb/cpd</p> |
|--|--|--|

These assessments were useful for standardisation and we marked them as a faculty using *paper 2's band 3* ²¹ and *band 5* ²² example student responses, as well as the *commentary* ²³, for reference points.

'Seen' texts

When our centre moved on to the seen texts, we substantiated our annotations with AQA's own *Text overview* (found in the relevant resource package below):

- *Aspects of comedy* ¹³
- *Aspects of tragedy* ¹⁴
- *Elements of crime writing* ¹⁵
- *Elements of political and social protest writing* ¹⁶

The students themselves were given a copy at the end of the process for use as revision notes and for signposting within the text.

Students were also given the relevant *Question commentary* ²³ after they had completed the SAMs question and were asked to use it to peer assess each other's work.

To help students understand the style and standard expected from a top response, we believe in benchmarking against authentic, real-world examples.

Students looked at the *Band 5 exemplar student response and commentary* ²² and discussed the qualities and shortfalls.

In terms of student benchmarking for us as practitioners, we started this academic year by scrutinizing AQA's reports on the examination for AS. These gave real insight into our particular cohort's strengths and development areas in comparison to the national picture, helping to inform teaching.

To find the reports on the examination you'll need to login to aqa.org.uk/eaqa and on to *Secure Key Materials*. If you lack an e-AQA login, you may be able to access one by calling 0800 197 7162.

Performance data from the *Enhanced Results Analysis* is typically available from results day via aqa.org.uk/eaqa, but some insights were informally shared in the early part of term. We saw value in recalling some of our own exam papers for tangible examples.

At this point in the year, we're considering the benefits of the peer-to-peer support offered by our local *English Hub School network* ²⁴, relative to specific Literature B paid CPD ²⁵ covering feedback on the AS exams, as well as new NEA elements.

English in the classroom: promoting independent learning

Cathi Allison

This case study was implemented at our comprehensive sixth form. The average student entered the course with a 'B' at GCSE English.

Starting on the same page

We use the resources on AQA's English Literature A [26](#) and B pages [27](#). For students, this means access to the mark schemes found under 'Assess' on the specification pages for Literature A [28](#) and Literature B [29](#), as well as *Command words* [30](#), a crucial online bulletin that offers prompts on the types of responses required from students at this level.

Student example responses

We also made use of the student example responses found in particular resource packages associated with themes within the specifications. Example responses exist within:

Chosen resources:

- Prepare to teach materials:
 - *Preparing to teach Literature A* [31](#)
 - *Preparing to teach Literature B* [32](#)
- *The ways meaning is made*: a useful document for AO2 [33](#)

Literature A	Literature B
<i>Love through the ages</i> aqa.org.uk/lita/love	<i>Aspects of comedy</i> aqa.org.uk/litb/comedy2
<i>Modern times (1945-present day)</i> aqa.org.uk/lita/moderntimes	<i>Aspects of tragedy</i> aqa.org.uk/litb/tragedy2
<i>WW1 and its aftermath</i> aqa.org.uk/lita/ww1	<i>Elements of crime writing</i> aqa.org.uk/litb/crime2
	<i>Elements of political and social protest writing</i> aqa.org.uk/litb/protest2

These example responses allow students to benchmark themselves against other real-world students at a range of levels. We favour one of two approaches, either we dissect the responses as a group, or we offer our students unannotated versions and ask them to mark them themselves (holding the marking back for later).

26 English Literature A pages
aqa.org.uk/englishlita

27 English Literature B pages
aqa.org.uk/englishlitb2

28 Literature A
aqa.org.uk/lita/assess

29 Literature B
aqa.org.uk/litb/assess

30 Command words
aqa.org.uk/lita/commandwords

31 Preparing to teach Literature A
aqa.org.uk/lita/ptt

32 Preparing to teach Literature B
aqa.org.uk/litb/ptt

33 The ways meaning is made
aqa.org.uk/lit/meaning

Teaching strategies:

Skills

When initiating independent learning projects, we found that some of our students relied on us as teachers because of a lack of confidence in their own skills. We also experienced temptations to revert back to old methods; with a set text examination there is the temptation to ‘teach the text’.

For the first half term, we found it useful to allocate time to teach specific authorial methods so that, over time, our students became equipped with a toolkit for independent exploration of set texts and were able to use these tools with their NEA texts and the unseen elements.

As well as the set texts, we looked across other texts to help students identify the features and effects of particular authorial choices.

We found that a good way to introduce independent learning to our students was to divide responsibility for aspects of the analysis of an unseen extract between students. This could be a passage from a set text or an unseen extract. For example, students would take responsibility to deliver their ideas concerning narrative voice, whilst others would look at structure etc.

Genre: The A-level exams require comparison of texts, so we’re keen that students are aware of the conventions and applications of different genres.

Narrative voice: We set our students a number of questions which we asked them to explore independently such as:

- “Why does Fitzgerald choose another character to narrate *Gatsby*’s story and how does that differ from the first person of Jane in *Jane Eyre*?”
- “How does McEwan use the narrative voice to produce an unstable and unreliable narrator and why did he choose this?”
- “Where is the narrative voice in the poems selected and how does the playwright convey authorial message, views and opinions in drama?”

Structure: We encouraged our students to consider structure in terms of how the writer puts the text together, the order of events, the use of ellipsis and foreshadowing; the dramatic structure of exposition, climax and denouement in drama and how that might be transgressed in some texts.

As well as considering how whole texts were structured, we invited students to view extracts as micro-episodes, with a beginning, a shift and a conclusion.

Significance: We found that some of our students initially understood ‘significance’ to mean ‘importance’ and so we introduced them to sign – signifier – signified, quite early on.

Set texts

We found that a fun way to monitor the extent of student independent reading before a lesson was to introduce a competitive element and for them to test each other. One technique is to allocate a section of a text to a pair of students and encourage them to create an online quiz which they access remotely; this website is mobile-friendly – kahoot.it

The poetry anthology can be introduced as a series of unseen poems, so that students can practise their skills. Our students engaged with the poetry when we allocated them each a poem to ‘teach’ to the rest of the class. The free *English e-Library* is one of the best ways to plot a route through a text and this resource carries a teaching idea ³⁴.

Shakespeare

The Shakespeare question at both AS and A-level requires response to an extract.

Our first step was to share the format of the question with students. In the exam the extract will be about 30–40 lines long and will be a complete episode. We allocated acts to groups of students to identify suitable extracts from the play. Again, the *English e-Library* ³⁵ is a great way to plot themes through texts via keywords.

To familiarise yourself with question design, see the *Create your own questions* documents in the table below. Students create their own questions, an activity which will familiarise them with the style of the assessment. Consider that questions follow the same format for each series.

Literature A	Literature B
<i>Love through the ages</i> : creating your own questions aqa.org.uk/lita/lovequestions	<i>Aspects of tragedy</i> : creating your own questions for section A aqa.org.uk/litb/tragedyquestions
	<i>Aspects of comedy</i> : creating your own questions for paper 1B section A. aqa.org.uk/litb/comedyquestions

Personally, I’m interested in the self-study courses on [Futurelearn.com](https://futurelearn.com). I’ve registered here and have encouraged students to do the same. I’ve identified one such course available on *Othello*: it’s designed for A-level students and we’ve judged it to be accessible. There are other related courses that may help with context; for example, we considered *Literature of great houses*, which references *Jane Eyre* as well as and some Jane Austen works.

34 **Keats resource**
aqa.org.uk/elibrary/keats

35 **The English e-Library**
aqa.org.uk/elibrary9

36 **e-AQA**
aqa.org.uk/eaqa

37 **AQA English updates**
aqa.org.uk/allquestionsanswered

38 **TeachIt**
teachit.co.uk

39 **Approved text books**
aqa.org.uk/englishbooks

Exam preparation

The reports on the examinations for summer 2016 are now available at e-AQA ³⁶ under *Secure Key Materials*. Given some similarities between AS and A-level, we also used the report's comments on paper 1 as context for approaching the A-level. For me, this is essential reading and I make a digest available for students.

In the summer term we are planning to delegate revision sessions to groups of students to prepare and deliver personally. The pressure of presenting in front of peers is an incentive for independent learning right up until the exam.

Keep an eye on:

- AQA English updates. Sign up online ³⁷
- TeachIt for peer-reviewed resources ³⁸
- Approved text books, find the list online ³⁹

Contact

T: 0161 953 7504

E: english-gce@aqa.org.uk

🐦 [@AQAEnglish](https://twitter.com/AQAEnglish)

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