

2016 VCE English examination report

General comments

The 2016 English examination assessed student achievement in the skills and outcomes indicated in the final year of the *VCE English Study Design 2006–2016*.

It was evident that the majority of students had a clear understanding of the requirements of the examination and how to approach each section. While there were some weaknesses and faults, students generally performed well.

The examination consisted of three sections. The first section (Text response) 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 respond to one topic on one text. The second section (Writing in Context) instructed students to compose a piece of writing stemming from a prompt for each of the four Contexts. Section C (Analysis of language use) required students to analyse the ways in which written and visual language were used to attempt to persuade readers about an issue in a local newspaper.

Assessment was based on criteria, which were applied holistically. Scores were awarded that reflected the assessors' judgment of the whole answer on balance, and students were ranked 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 40 000 students sat for the 2016 English examination, and the skills and qualities shown by the majority of students were impressive. Most 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, outstanding. The growing awareness of the value of close textual knowledge and careful management of response structure indicates sound teaching and learning.

Most students were familiar with their texts and were able to produce organised responses that showed control over their written expression.

On the other hand, it should be noted that:

- formulaic responses rarely succeed and students are expected to engage with the topic or prompt. Memorising essays or passages rarely helps an essay that should be directed very clearly by the topic
- some students did not fully engage with the elements of the topics and prompts. Greater care needs to be taken in analysing and recognising the specific expectations of each topic or prompt – often this comes down to a precise understanding of the actual words that comprise the task
- strong language skills are expected and necessary for success
- it is recommended that students organise their time so that enough time is left to proofread their work.

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. This year there are no complete responses but more focus on specific traits. These examples 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 – Text response

In 2016, students overwhelmingly demonstrated a competent awareness of the text on which they chose to write in the examination. The highest-scoring responses revealed an assured capacity to closely analyse the text 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 three assessment criteria: detailed knowledge and understanding of the selected text, demonstrated appropriately in response to the topic; development in the writing of a coherent and effective discussion in response to the task; controlled use of expressive and effective language appropriate to the task.

Students needed to show an awareness of the textual form and recognition of its impact on the reader, viewer or audience. In multi-modal texts such as *Mabo* or *All About Eve*, students needed to reveal an understanding of the diverse ways in which multiple elements convey meaning. In the second *Mabo* topic, ‘How does the film’s director convey the power of Eddie’s dreams?’ such skills were required. This also applied to the first topic on *The Complete Maus*, ‘How effective is Spiegelman’s use of the graphic novel in conveying the complexity of Vladek’s story?’ The following extract from an assured introduction reveals this: ‘...*Through the conscious decision to include himself as a character, Spiegelman explores the impact that the past superimposes onto the present second-generation survivors*’.

Likewise, students writing on collections of poetry must be able to analyse the ways in which language intentionally impacts; for example, in the second topic on John Donne’s *Selected Poems*, ‘It is Donne’s imagery that gives his poetry its power’. When writing about a play, students need to consider structural elements that have an impact on the audience in the conveying of key ideas and themes. For instance, in responding to the first *Medea* topic, ‘It is Jason, not Medea, who gains the audience’s sympathy’, one student astutely observed, ‘*It is not a coincidence that Euripides wrote the Chorus as being all female, as this would make them able to relate much more to Medea’s plight, and also to sympathise with her*’.

Students must both dissect and fully analyse their chosen topic, as well as construct an essay that addresses it consistently. Students cannot be dismissive of portions of a topic, nor effectively rewrite the topic to suit their own preconceived approach. Students must focus on the selected topic unequivocally, since this is an unseen examination. 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.

Some students’ responses did not centre focus on the heart of the topic, instead deflecting this to concentrate on other considerations. Students must focus on the topic itself.

Effective text response essays always establish with assurance and clarity the focus of the ensuing argument in their introduction. Consider the following assured and eloquent exemplars: *'The world of Wuthering Heights is dominated by cruelty... Cruelty is shown as being both a product of the suppression of human emotion, but also shown to be an intrinsic parts of his harsh world itself'*, and another student astutely wrote, *'The physical world of Wuthering Heights itself is seen to be harsh and unforgiving, with Bronte using naturalistic imagery to powerfully depict the cruelty.'* An equally assured approach to the first topic on *The White Tiger*, 'Balram overcomes the obstacles that have made slaves of others' was shown in the following example.

In Adiga's portrayal of India, only people with the ability to overcome the inbuilt subservience taught by the nation's culture and traditions, and thus follow their own path, are able to escape the system and thus attain success... Adiga's protagonist Balram is one of the only people who is able to transcend his position, and due to his raw determination and ability to abandon his past in order to achieve what he wants.

Since students are required to write these essays in analytical/expository form, a clear and definite sense of structure must 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 second topic on *Stasiland*, one student made this assertion in the introduction, *'For many, the past can represent a time in one's life that is greater than one's current life'* and aptly concluded the essay, *'Through Stasiland, Anna Funder depicts a world governed by the barbaric actions of past oppressors. However, she also uses various stories within her piece of literary journalism to explore individual abilities to move on from the past'*. Another strong conclusion to the second topic on *Frankenstein* stated, *'By illustrating the volatile nature of human creativity through different characters in the text, Shelley reminds the reader that no-one is exempt from the 'sudden turn' of the psyche that so often accompanies noble intentions'*.

The most popular text was *Medea*. This was followed by *All About Eve*, *Stasiland*, *This Boy's Life* and *Burial Rites*.

Section B – Writing in Context

The task of creating and presenting saw students exploring a range of context ideas, demonstrating their thinking and taking a variety of approaches. Students produced insightful responses, with all four prompts offering plenty of scope for conceptualisation and purposeful crafting. Exploration of the prompt, use of text, integration of other material and expressiveness were part of the published descriptors for assessment.

An engagement with the prompt was largely determined by students' ability to reach into its core. For example:

- The prompt for Context 1 – The imaginative landscape was 'Personal experiences can change our relationship with the landscape'. This invited an exploration of the nature of one's relationship with the landscape and how it might alter.
- The prompt for Context 2 – Whose reality? was 'Our ideas of reality are dominated by self-interest'. This allowed for varying definitions of self-interest and then sought a consideration of its role in determining our ideas of reality. This student established a distinct view from the onset:

The fact of the matter is that the self-interest of others can impact our own perceptions more than we may even know it! Heck! Maybe even more than our own... There are people in this world whose careers revolve around twisting the truth and manipulating the public into believing it.

- The prompt for Context 3 – Encountering conflict was ‘Our encounters with conflict usually cannot be avoided’. The thrust of this prompt was the idea of whether conflict can be avoided. There was also the possibility of exploring other reactions to conflict situations.
- The prompt for Context 4 – Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging was ‘We understand who we are when we recognise the people we belong with’. The implication here was that a sense of belonging contributes to self-awareness. This prompt was open to an exploration of what it means to understand our identity and how we recognise those we belong with.

Apart from a confident reading of the core meaning of the prompt, high-scoring writing was also determined by the way ideas were developed. To what extent did the students ‘explore’? The responses that presented complex ideas were the highest-scoring pieces. Some responses targeted the prompt directly; the high-scoring responses did so with assurance. The following extract from a response to Context 1 – The imaginative landscape was one such example.

...we ascribe positive and negative connotations to an environment based upon what had occurred for us in that environment. We do this because humans are instinctively wired to assign meaning to a place. We are often more likely to have a positive relationship with a family home, for instance, because we attach it to feelings of safety, security and a sense of place.

Other responses were not as explicit but engaged with the spirit of the prompt, like the following response to Context 3 – Encountering Conflict where the notion of avoiding conflict was challenged:

I don't purport to come to you with an absolute solution to pain, suffering and conflict and this solution will not be able to be enjoyed by those who instigate it, but only by our posterity. This solution that I propose is eugenics – and No! I am not proposing another final solution, whereby we get rid of all the ‘undesirables’...Eugenics is just the encouragement of better genes for future generations.

Below this level were responses that were limited in complexity; however, if they included an adequate recognition of the prompt, they were still respectable pieces. The following response to Context 4 – Exploring issues of identity and belonging exemplifies ideas that were generalised and often apparent in a mid-range response:

Although it can be tough really figuring out who you are and who you belong to, once having realised that, it helps give a bit of closure. By understanding who you are through acknowledging the group you belong too, you will go through life having a better view on things and will have joy in doing what it is you enjoy doing...

Low-scoring responses were ones that simply labelled situations with the language of the prompt. Lengthy accounts of ‘unavoidable’ encounters or descriptions of the groups that people belong with exhibited limited skill with the selected prompts. Brief outlines of the texts were also uninspiring; a diary in the voice of Chris McCandless was a suitable platform for an exploration of Context 1 – The imaginative landscape prompt, but a student merely relating the protagonist’s day-to-day experiences without notions of his relationship with the landscape did not score well. Likewise, students who provided a series of examples of the same idea displayed some understanding of the prompt but rarely achieved any level of complexity.

Students’ use of the nominated text impacted on both the quality of ideas and effectiveness of construction. A fluid integration of the text reflected a synergy that distinguished high-scoring responses. Such was the case with the following response to Context 2 – Whose Reality?:

While there is no physical barrier like the beautiful forever wall, we are equally as culpable as the overcity of Mumbai, for we have built what seems to be insurmountable emotional and psychological walls in our head... however each and every one of us is more than capable of making small gestures of acknowledgement in an attempt to bring change. And yet seeing a homeless man or woman in the street, we simply walk on past.

Responses that used the nominated text in a relevant and confident way were rewarded. Among them were students who made intelligent use of Megan Stack's text to explore the all-consuming nature of current global tensions. Imaginative responses that had a powerful and credible relationship with the original text were also among the highest scoring. Some students managed to establish connections to the nominated text without referring to it explicitly. These responses were often more sophisticated than expository pieces that directly referred to the text but only managed a lengthy retelling. The responses that bore only a slight connection to the text or that superficially used a character or scene did not score highly.

While students are not compelled to utilise outside material, many opt to do so and 2016 was no exception. It was a favoured approach in expository pieces, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Some students were able to skilfully draw other stories up against the selected text. Many carefully incorporated personal experiences and those of notable figures. A script that explored people's understanding of themselves through the groups they belong with, utilising a speech by Stan Grant and a Judith Wright poem alongside *The Mind of a Thief*, mastered the integration of outside material more successfully than the jarring combination of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and *Remember the Titans* or teaming up *Wild Cat Falling* with *Shrek*.

Middle-range responses made some legitimate connections between the text and other situations but often in a rudimentary way. For example:

Now that I've had the chance to read the play myself, I've come to realise that my father is very much like Galileo. Both hold opposing beliefs to a much more powerful state.

Poorly constructed responses contained contrived connections and ideas that were not presented in a structured way. These were the low-scoring responses and they highlight the importance of working on structure and organisation, no matter what the writing task. Good ideas do not work without control.

The highest-scoring responses contained a richness of ideas and language. The highest-scoring writing often exhibited creative flair and excellent control, while the majority of students showed engagement and interest in their writing.

Information on assessing the Context

Context	%	Most popular text
Encountering conflict	44	<i>A Separation</i>
Exploring issues of identity and belonging	25	<i>Summer of the Seventeenth Doll</i>
Whose reality?	24	<i>Death of a Salesman</i>
The imaginative landscape	7	<i>Into the Wild</i>

Section C – Analysis of language use

Section C required students to analyse written and visual language that was attempting to persuade readers of a local newspaper. Students needed to select examples from the material that allowed them to demonstrate their understanding of how language was being used to persuade. A balance of discussion was expected among the three pieces and explicit instructions required students to analyse the visual – in this case a cartoon. While most students were able to plan their responses to cover the three pieces, some spent a disproportionate amount of time on one of the pieces at the expense of offering meaningful insights into the others. In a few cases, the cartoon dominated the response, leaving little opportunity to explore insights into written language use.

Students, on the whole, understood the nature of the task and that both Alexandra Wiley and Ian Warwick were attempting to persuade residents in the community of Lawton. Both writers shared the common belief that the town needed some sort of revival since the highway diversion had isolated them from through traffic, but they disagreed on the way to go about improving the economic future of Lawton. Students were aware of the importance of the Background information, which sets the context for the pieces of writing.

The following introduction incisively and fluently sets out the context for the pieces in the material.

Lawton, a rural town home to a community of 3000 citizens, recently experienced a highway diversion, resulting in fewer cars visiting the town. While this peace is welcomed by the Lawton community, the mayor of the town, Cr Alexandra Wiley, published a column in the local newspaper contending, in an enthusiastic and inspiring tone, that Lawton should build a 'spectacular piece of architecture' to encourage tourists to return to visiting the town. Contrary to her view, the president of the Lawton Progress Association, Ian Warwick, in a letter published the day after, suggests that Lawton does not require such an extravagant structure to attract tourists, and can do so via other means. A cartoonist from the newspaper also published a cartoon satirising the issue.

Not all students chose to begin their analysis with so much detail, but most understood the value of offering insights into the arguments that followed. The heart of the task, however, was to examine and analyse the way that the writers (and the cartoonist) used language in an attempt to persuade. Most students offered a clear understanding of intentions of both Wiley and Warwick. The analysis was broad and varied significantly; those that showed sophisticated insights were rewarded, such as the following high-scoring interpretation:

...she provides an idyllic, almost romanticised image where she imagines 'people who will eat at our beautiful bakery' and 'socialise at our historic pub'. This imparts a sense of uninterrupted tranquillity, a tranquillity which perhaps does not exist in the lives of many readers, bring to mind their own hectic schedules and routines. In this way, a desire for perfect serenity is evoked. In a blunt and almost brusque way, Wiley brings readers back to reality by asserting that 'we need their money', this serving to impart a sense of realism and perhaps urgency in that there may be a tradeoff. This tranquillity will not exist without this money.

Many students offered thoughtful analysis of the language used to persuade.

Some students presented a response that struggled to offer meaningful insight into language use and there was little engagement with the task. These responses often did little more than describe the situation in Lawton, and the use of quotations was merely summary. There was virtually no analysis or attempt to analyse the way Wiley or Warwick used language to persuade readers.

There was no expressed expectation that students compared the language used by each of the writers, but many offered astute insights by exploring Wiley's language against Warwick's. Very few went outside the task and evaluated which was more effective – this was clearly not the task. The following example adeptly examines the two writers.

Both authors spark discussion about the beauty of their town and the effects of implementing a large tourist attraction. Wiley addresses the attraction as 'grand' and 'soring high', alluding to the idea that this will become something the town will be known for, compelling community members to feel proud for the town and its assets. Conversely, Warwick believes that this 'giant' attraction will be 'ugly' and a 'monstrosity', urging the council to realise that they may not want a huge 'ugly' attraction taking away from the 'beauty' of their town.

Most students understood how to fit the cartoon into the debate. However, it was evident and reasonable that the cartoon could have been interpreted in more than one way. While most students saw the cartoon as a satirical attack on Wiley's vision, others felt that it could be seen to endorse her idea of a monument that attracted tourists and were able to substantiate their analysis.

The three examples below are all well written, relevant and insightful, yet take slightly different perspectives.

In a similar manner, the cartoon by the newspaper's cartoonist justifies the establishment of a giant monument. Jovial in mood, the cartoon provides an insight into the construction of a monument. The clear skies and scene represent the optimistic future of the town in the presence of the giant monument. The contrast of the empty highway versus the bustling town is symbolic of the town's exposure and its ability to combat adversity. The giant watermelon as a symbol of the town's fresh produce positioned beside the watermelon stand illustrates the projects ability to generate revenue. In so doing, the cartoonist presents that Mayor's as viable and suitable in assisting its economic state and exposure to a more global society.

The cartoon depicts a scenario in which the town has embraced the idea of constructing a large attraction, and its quality of produce to attract tourists to the town. The ridiculous figure of a giant watermelon, taller than trees and St Martin's Church, highlights the future of the town following the Mayor's approach to construct large attractions... Furthermore, the cartoon highlights how tourists have become attracted to the giant watermelon and have lost focus on other treasures of the town, suggesting how the construction has resulted in tourists becoming less appreciative of the town's unique qualities. Thus the cartoon vilifies Wiley's approach that giant attractions will bring prosperity to the town, and prompts readers to reflect where their values lie.

When the cartoon is viewed in tow with Warwick's letter, the audience discovers the cartoonist may perhaps be ridiculing Wiley's contention, arguing that Lawton will forever be immortalised as the 'home of the giant watermelon' – one that sticks out like a sore thumb within the town centre – and not as the town of fresh produce and arts and craft that it wishes to purport itself to be. In highlighting the potential flaws behind such a construction, the cartoonist, similar to Warwick, intends to illustrate the salient flaws with undergoing such a construction, leaving the audience to carefully reconsider the actual inspirational nature of building such an attraction.

Table 1 shows the texts selected by students in the 2016 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.

From this table it can be seen that students achieved the highest scores on average for *Measure for Measure*. However, it can also be seen that on average this same set of student achieved well in the other sections of the English examination. Conversely, students who selected *No Sugar* had the lowest average score for Section A but also had lower scores, on average, in Sections B and C.

Table 1: Text selection from Section A of the 2016 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>All About Eve</i>	10	57	57	57
<i>Brooklyn</i>	5	54	54	54
<i>Burial Rights</i>	8	56	56	56
<i>Cloudstreet</i>	2	56	58	58
<i>Frankenstein</i>	4	62	62	61
<i>I for Isobel</i>	3	59	55	56
<i>In the Country of Men</i>	4	53	53	53
<i>Island: Collected Stories</i>	1	63	62	61
<i>Mabo</i>	5	54	51	52
<i>Measure for Measure</i>	3	71	71	68
<i>Medea</i>	17	56	57	57
<i>No Sugar</i>	5	51	51	52
<i>Selected Poems by John Donne</i>	<1	71	63	61
<i>Selected Poems by Gwen Harwood</i>	3	64	59	60
<i>Stasiland</i>	9	62	59	59
<i>The Complete Maus</i>	4	54	54	54
<i>The Thing Around Your Neck</i>	2	57	55	55
<i>The White Tiger</i>	4	56	53	54
<i>This Boy's Life</i>	8	55	54	54
<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	2	63	62	60
No text	1	0	27	35