

ENGLISH HL WRITING A LITERARY ESSAY

GENERAL ADVICE & TIPS

Make sure your thesis statement is **clear, objective, and multifaceted**. What is the point you are trying to make? Don't leave the reader guessing. Be as specific as possible, using **examples and details** to support your position (analysis, explanation, argument).

In essence, you want to describe *what* a text is doing, and precisely *how* it does it (irony, paradox, symbolism, point-of-view, tone, diction, and other literary/rhetorical devices).

Use **complex sentence structures** to show complicated ideas (ambiguity, levels of interpretation, logic, character development, etc.). Consider using these words to begin sentences:

Although	While
Considering	Since
Because	Whether
If	

Use **active, concrete verbs** to describe what the literary significance of certain characters, symbols, settings, tones, etc.

Demonstrates	Characterizes
Illustrates	Portrays
Reveals	Symbolizes
Signifies	Indicates
Represents	

Use **prepositional phrases** and **adverbial clauses** to start sentences:

When	Besides
Whenever	As a result
In the scene	For instance
After	For example
Before	During
Between	In essence

Use **transitional** words and phrases to **organize** your ideas (logically and chronologically):

Consequently	Likewise
Accordingly	Subsequently
However	Thereupon
Furthermore	Conversely
Similarly	Nevertheless
Therefore	
Moreover	
Whereas	

Don't use 1st person pronouns (I, me, my, mine, etc.)

Don't start sentences with common, “dead” words (it, the, a, an)

Don't use dull words (got, really, very, a lot, like)

Don't merely summarise the action

Don't use vague, subjective descriptors (interesting, amazing, cool, etc.)

Don't use passive voice or “to be” verbs (is, was, were, am, are, being)

**Write objectively and concretely (be as specific as possible, leave nothing to chance). Make logical connections and support your claims with textual evidence. Keep it organised, on point, and succinct. Use a variety of words, sentence structures, and examples.*

Some strategies:

1. Use very specific vocabulary.

Vague, abstract words can make it difficult for your reader to know exactly what you mean. You know what you mean when you use those terms, but it is likely that your reader is not so sure. Be sure that the words the reader is reading are exactly what you are thinking.

2. Craft a strong, specific thesis statement.

Take a position on the issue addressed in the prompt. Use strong, clear language.

3. Make an argument.

Don't simply summarize the passage or the sources. Don't just answer the prompt. Look for ways to extend and expand the argument. Offer solutions if the prompt asks you to consider a problem. Look for the broader significance of the topic or issue.

4. Summary : Commentary Ratio

Use strong, specific examples to support your argument, but be sure to adequately explain those examples. Your body paragraphs should be approximately 1/3 Summary and 2/3 Commentary.

5. Use short quotes.

Keep the actual quote length to less than a complete sentence. Long quotes can be distracting and can interrupt the flow of your essay.

6. Introduce your quotes.

Do not begin body paragraphs with a quote. Embed your quotes two or three sentences into your paragraphs. Introduce the quote so that the reader knows it is coming.

7. End well.

Conclude your essay with a statement about the importance of the topic/issue/prompt. Make sure your essay feels complete.

I Introduction

- a. **Hook:** Briefly state a notable fact or two about the work you have studied.
- b. Make sure you refer to the author (by surname, not first name!) and that you underline the title of the text.
- c. Rephrase the essay prompt to simply state HOW/WHY the assumption made in the prompt engenders/brings about the reader's enlightenment and/or entertainment from the text.
- d. Create thesis statement by rewording what is being asked of you in the prompt (basic formula for a thesis statement is SUBJECT + 3 facts or assertions about your topic).

NOTE: Points C and D do overlap, so they can be combined.

II Body

- a. (Transitional phrase) **Topic sentence** (create this sentence by using the *first* fact or assertion from your thesis statement).
- b. **Quote/paraphrase saying WHY** (for what reason or purpose) or **HOW** (by what means) your topic sentence is valid / true.
- c. Use an 'additional' transitional phrase
- d. Use another quote / paraphrase to support your topic sentence, then briefly explain it.

III Body

- a. (Transitional phrase) **Topic sentence** (create this sentence by using the *second* fact or assertion from your thesis statement).
- b. **Quote/paraphrase saying WHY** (for what reason or purpose) or **HOW** (by what means) your topic sentence is valid / true.
- c. Use an 'additional' transitional phrase
- d. Use another quote / paraphrase to support your topic sentence, then briefly explain it.
- e. State what if the quote (or a character or scene or situation or conflict in the quote) were omitted. What would be lost? How would this affect the work's meaning?
- f. Use an 'additional' transitional phrase

IV Conclusion

- a. (Transitional phrase)
- b. **Restate the thesis**, and say, briefly, how it engenders enlightenment and entertainment.
- c. State that the work's timeless appeal and value stem from its universal truth / aphorism – specify this truth / aphorism.

How to Organise the Analysis Essay

Directions: The following outline explains how to organize the writing of timed essay questions that require analysis. Remember that this is just an idea to help you organise your thoughts. There is no perfect outline that guarantees a score of 80-90%!

Introduction:

1. Use the first sentence or two to define the meaning of the poem/passage. You can also start a general statement involving the **theme** of the poem/passage. You should probably mention both the **title** of the poem/passage and the **poet/author** somewhere in the beginning. Show the reader that you understood what was going on in the poem/passage! You can also allude to something here you might discuss in the concluding paragraph.

2. In the third or fourth sentence, discuss some of the language/rhetorical devices you see as playing an important role in the poem/passage and what they reveal or show throughout the poem/passage (they must relate to bigger picture). Examples: syntax, tone, diction, figurative language, narrative pace, etc. Be sure to use adjectives before each device such as morose diction and stygian tone. This is your thesis; you will aim to prove this throughout your entire essay.

*Important reminders: Poems are in quotes, novels are underlined. Speakers are in poems, narrators are in prose passages.

Example of a prompt:

Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, indicate how the poet uses images and symbols to link the predicament of the lost boy to the domestic situation of the speaker.

The Mystery of the Caves

by Michael Waters

I don't remember the name of the story,
but the hero, a boy, was lost,
wandering a labyrinth of caverns
filling stratum by stratum with water.

I was wondering what might happen:
would he float upward toward light?
Or would he somersault forever
in an underground black river?

I couldn't stop reading the book
because I had to know the answer,
because my mother was leaving again—
the lid of the trunk thrown open,

blouses torn from their hangers,
the crazy shouting among rooms.
The boy found it impossible to see
which passage led to safety.

One yellow finger of flame
wavered on his last match.
There was a blur of perfume—
mother breaking miniature bottles,

then my father gripping her,
 but too tightly, by both arms.
 The boy wasn't able to breathe.
 I think he wanted me to help,

but I was small, and it was late.
 And my mother was sobbing now,
 no longer cursing her life,
 repeating my father's name

among bright islands of skirts
 circling the rim of the bed.
 I can't recall the whole story,
 what happened at the end...

Sometimes I worry that the boy
 is still searching below the earth
 for a thin pencil of light,
 that I can almost hear him

through great volumes of water,
 through centuries of stone,
 crying my name among blind fish,
 wanting so much to come home.

Example of an intro. to that prompt:

Sometimes reading a book can be a therapeutic activity, but other times it may remind a person of lugubrious events in his/her own life. Such as is the case of the speaker in Michael Waters' poem, "The Mystery of the Caves," wherein a small boy's confusion during his parent's vociferous fight is compared to a book he is reading which portrays another young boy who is lost among the crevices of the earth. Waters correlates the two boys' stories through an array of images and symbols to reveal that the two boys may be in different situations yet share the same feeling of being lost.

Body paragraphs: (Sometimes two, sometimes three)

First choose what device(s) (the how) plays the most important role and focus on that device in the first body paragraph.

1. The topic sentence (TS) should define what the author/poet does first to establish a specifically stated attitude, accomplish part of the specifically stated purpose, or create specifically stated meaning(depends on prompt). You are basically telling the reader what device is used and what it reveals or contributes to the meaning of the work. Try not to use the word "use" (yes, that's ironic!). Try "employs, utilises, manipulates, applies, etc."

Example: *Michael Waters employs vivid imagery to connect the boy's disarrayed and disoriented domestic situation to the predicament of the boy who is lost in a cave (this must relate to the prompt and thesis).*

2. The rest of the body should use specific examples from the actual poem/passage to show how the device plays an important role in revealing a character's complexity, revealing the narrator's attitude, revealing a theme; it depends on the prompt (here is where you use embedded quotes or paraphrase from the actual poem/passage). You must have a good combination of textual evidence and commentary to show how it reveals the meaning. Define what the author does, and analyse how the author does it.

Example: Although the boys are not in similar situations, they both feel lost which is depicted through descriptive imagery such as in lines 9-12 "I couldn't stop reading the book because I had to know the answer, because my mother was leaving again—the lid of the trunk thrown open, blouses torn from their hanger, the crazy shouting among rooms." The image of chaos and helplessness is revealed, and it is obvious that the young boy in the domestic situation is looking for a way out of this chaos just as the boy in the cave is "wandering a labyrinth of caverns" hoping to escape a desperate situation. The boy reading the book so desperately wants the "hero" to find a passage to safety, just as he would like to "know the answer" to his own family's issues. Waters also uses the images of torn clothes and trunks thrown open and "crazy shouting among rooms" to connect the disordered house to a labyrinth of caverns. Both are extremely difficult to follow and seem to lead nowhere.

3. Once you have fully discussed everything concerning the most important device, move onto the next paragraph. What will you tackle next? Choose another device that plays a strong role in the development of the poem/passage. (tone, diction, imagery, figurative language, etc.)

*Example: Waters also utilizes **symbols** to represent both parallel narratives. In line 7, the speaker says about the lost boy, "would he float upward toward light? Or would he somersault forever in an underground black river?" This is the same question he is asking about himself, only in his case he will metaphorically somersault into his parent's divorce. The poet...*

Conclusion:

1. End the same way the passage ends.
2. Tie up the loose ends established in the introduction by making conclusions about how the message of the work just analysed applies to the overall human experience.

Example: The poem, "The Mystery of the Caves," reveals many of the issues some young, children face today. The only escape from listening to their parents abusive fighting is to get lost in a book before they get lost in their parents' issues. It is their only escape.

How to Organise an Essay for the Novel or Drama Question

Introduction:

1. Use the first sentence or two to make a connection to the prompt. This can be a general statement (no altruisms!), or it can use a quote (from the novel or prompt) that has something to do with the prompt or theme of the novel.
2. In the third or fourth sentence you need to write your thesis statement. Be sure to use the novel or play's title (be sure to underline), and the author/playwright's name in your thesis.

Example:

As stated by theorist Edward Said, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience," yet it can also be "a potent, even enriching" situation. Many characters throughout literature have experienced some sort of exile, but not all of them have this paradoxical experience of both alienation and enrichment. Mary Shelley's monster from Frankenstein is a character who experiences this enigmatic exile which illuminates the meaning of the work as a whole concerning human nature.

Body Paragraph: (Sometimes two, sometimes three)

1. The topic sentence should point the reader in the direction you are headed. He or should not ask the question "Where is this student heading?" Think of the first task and discuss that in your topic sentence. Then the rest of the body should use examples from the story to show that you've read the story and can fulfill the first task.

Example: The Monster's exile proved to be isolating yet he grew and learned a great deal from his situation. After Victor left the Monster to fend for himself because he was too disgusted over what he had created, the Monster had no choice but to figure out how to survive. Initially the experience was one of difficulty. The Monster yearned for a companion, but when he would try to reveal himself to others such as in the case with Delacey's family, he was met with violence and abhorrence. Although this task was difficult at times such as when he burned himself trying to learn about fire, or when he was shot for trying to help a young girl who was drowning, there were also times when he grew as an individual. The enriching part of the experience came in the form of education through observation. Even though he was sad an abundance of the time, he also was able to observe others and learn about human interaction, history, language, and most importantly love. Because his creator had abandoned him forcing him to live a life of exile, the Monster did not have a parental figure to show him the ways of life, but his experience left him with no other choice but to learn from spying on others which became rewarding for the creature. This experience serves to illuminate the meaning of the work.

