

Approaches to teaching literature

Responding to literary texts

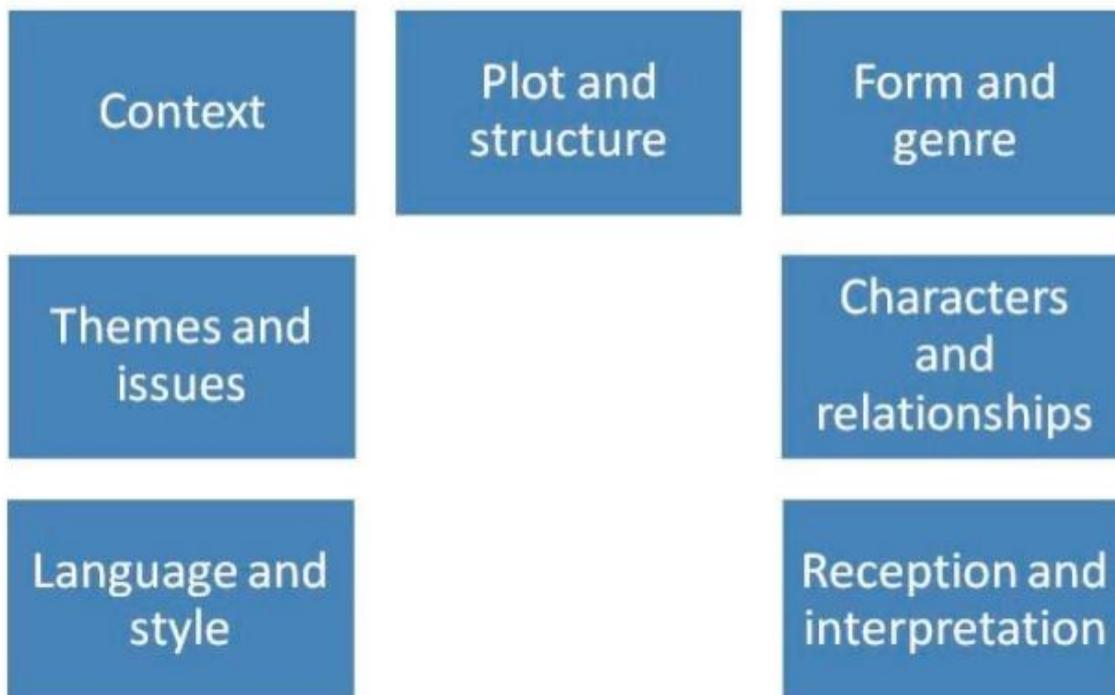
The study of literary texts at AS and A level MFL is prescribed to enrich students' study of language and to allow them to interact with culturally-rich content in the language of study. We hope that the opportunity to read prose texts will enhance students' confidence and enjoyment of the subject, give them a window into the exciting possibilities available as a result of their extending language knowledge and engage them in the rich cultural capital of the wider world. A level students will develop their reading skills, whilst at the same time extending their critical and analytical thinking and writing, hand-in-hand with related vocabulary in the language of study.

The diagram below reflects key aspects of literary texts to direct teachers' planning and students' analytical study. The relative importance of each aspect will differ for each literary text. For example, a text that is written in a particular literary genre, such as detective fiction, would merit weighty study of the genre and how far the text complies with its conventions; a text that has been structured in a non-linear way in relation to time would demand particular study of that aspect of structure.

Analysis of literary texts rests on students' secure understanding of basic meaning:

- Students will need to have read the text in full, mainly independently of lesson time.
- Teachers may wish to divide the text for classroom teaching, having set supported pre-reading for students before each lesson or series of lessons.
- Teachers will want to check students' completion of pre-reading, as well as securing students' understanding of the text's basic meaning, before launching into textual analysis and related classroom activities.

Aspects of literary text



The suggestions that follow offer a range of activities to support students in their approach to A04 Critical and analytical response. Some activities can be used as students are progressing through their first reading of the text. Others are more suited to lessons that are delivered *after* students have completed a full reading of the text.

1 Context

Students may widen their analysis of their literary text by considering a range of **contexts**. It is important that they distinguish between wider reading in this area for their own interest and *relevant* contextual factors that clearly link to the style and content of the selected text for study.

Aspects of study might include:

- how and why the text was first published
- biographical details of the writer
- social and historical context; this might include consideration of issues related to gender, culture, politics, morality, religion or philosophical ideas.
- literary context including consideration of any source texts, contemporary writing and other texts by the same author.

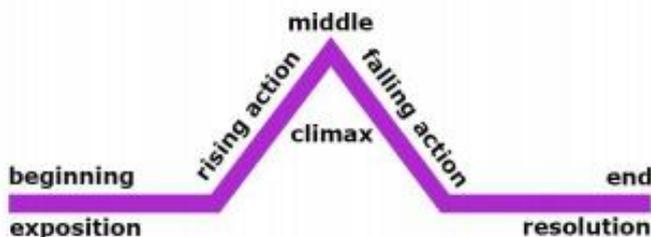
Example teaching ideas include:

- 1 **Biographical research and selection:** Ask students to research the life of the writer and identify five aspects they have found that reflect on their literary text, to share with the class. This may also offer an opportunity to discuss issues of plagiarism and referencing with students, in preparation for the Independent Research Project at A level.
- 2 **Wider literary reading:** Ask individuals or pairs of students to read one of a selection of short texts, either by the prescribed writer or a contemporary, that link to their literary text. They should identify any common features.
- 3 **Contextual précis:** Select a range of extracts for students to use for research into the context of their literary text. Ask them to distil what they have learnt from their reading into a one-side summary of the text's context.

2 Plot and structure

The study of **plot** requires students to understand how the text is built and organised by events and their relationship to each other. Students may consider how far their text as a whole complies with the traditional story structure of exposition, rise of action, climax, release of tension and resolution, as well as considering the structure of individual chapters. Structure demands that students analyse the beginning, middle and end of their text and consider the purpose and contribution each makes to the text as a whole.

Plot diagram



Students should also consider **narrative structure** – who is telling the story and from what point in time and action – identifying any changes at particular points in the text. They should be able to discuss first- or third-person narration and understand the relationships between truth and fiction, the tale and the teller, and the writer and the narration.

Example teaching ideas include:

- 1 **Close reading:** Ask students to read and annotate the opening or concluding section of the text. They should identify key words and quotations that link to the wider text in terms of introducing or developing themes, the writer's concerns, characters and plot.
- 2 **'Turning points' balloon debate:** Distribute various possible 'turning points' in the text to pairs of students. Ask each pair to justify their given point in the text as the *key* turning point in the text, irrespective of their personal opinion. Students should support their argument with references from the wider text as well as their wider research. The lesson can conclude with a class agreement of the foremost key turning point in the text.
- 3 **Time-line narrative:** For a text that disrupts chronological time, select a number of extracts and ask students to place them on a timeline in chronological order. Then reveal their position in the text in terms of the text's linear structure, e.g. chapters. Ask students to consider the writer's method in structuring the text and why the story is told in the order the author has selected.

3 Form and genre

The **forms** selected in Edexcel's prescribed texts cover fictional short stories, novels and drama, although some are based on memoirs.

- Students will need to be aware of the conventions of the respective form of their text and how the writer uses it to convey their ideas and concerns and engage the reader or audience.
- Students should be able to use terminology related to that form in order to analyse relevant aspects such as 'stage directions', 'scene', 'epigraph', 'chapter', 'prologue' etc.

Students should also know if their text may be categorised within any particular **genre** of writing, such as autobiography, thriller, romance, science fiction, and how it keeps to, or breaks from, the conventions of the genre. Students may need to be aware of a *variety* of genres, if a writer is drawing on the conventions of more than one genre to develop their work; they will need to know where such features are demonstrated in particular sections of their text.

Example teaching ideas include:

- 1 **Collecting aspects of genre:** Ask students to select a number of extracts, short stories, film clips and images from a range of time periods that they believe demonstrate the genre that categorises their studied literature text. For example, a supernatural story might include a dark isolated setting, an old house, eerie sounds, a lonely character, a ghost, etc. Ask students to present them and agree a class list of the features of the genre. Consider also the difference between satirical or comic use of the genre and its conventional use. Then ask students to select ten examples from the text that exemplify features of the genre, considering setting, character, dialogue, stage directions or events, and to consider how far the text complies with its genre. Create a class display linking the studied text to its genre(s).
- 2 **PEA paragraphs using the terminology of form:** Identify a number of literary techniques that link to the form of the studied text in the target language, such as 'stage directions', 'lighting', 'gesture' and 'soliloquy', and give them to pairs of students on individual cards. Students should write a 'Point, Evidence, Analysis' paragraph using the given term to identify an interesting example where it is used in the text by the writer to achieve a particular effect. An example in English might be: 'The writer uses soliloquy at the beginning of Act 2 when the son turns away from his mother' saying '[quotation]'. This is used by the playwright to give the audience an insight into the son's feelings of hatred for his mother and forces the audience to re-evaluate the presentation of the mother as a tragic character in Act 1.' This will encourage students to analyse rather than merely 'feature spot'.
- 3 **Close reading for genre features:** Ask students to read and annotate an extract from the literary text where genre conventions are exploited by the writer. They should consider characterisation, dialogue, setting, language, imagery and any other relevant aspects in relation to genre. Students should highlight key words and quotations that demonstrate aspects of genre and consider the effect on the reader/audience.

4 Themes and issues

Students should be able to identify and analyse the major **themes** of their text – the threads of ideas that recur and develop throughout the text, such as childhood, unrequited love, war, family life. They must be able to identify textual evidence to support these. Furthermore they should learn and apply quotations to back up their analysis. They should also focus their study to establish the **central concern(s) of the writer** and how this is conveyed through the text, whether the text focuses on a major universal issue, a particular contemporary cultural concern or a distinctly more personal issue for the writer.

Example teaching ideas include:

- 1 Collapsed text:** select a lengthy extract from the literary text and 'collapse' it (list words alphabetically removing duplicates) to focus on the vocabulary rather than the meaning of the text. Close study of this 'collapsed text' reveals the themes and concerns of the writer in their raw state, particularly if you do not remove duplicates.
Different extracts might be allocated to different groups prior to reading and comparison of their conclusions followed by consideration of the original extracts from the text.
- 2 Jigsaw:** This is to encourage equal discussion contributions from students. Select three or four extracts that address some of the central themes of the text.
 - Small groups of students should work in 'home' groups. Distribute all three extracts to each group.
 - Home groups read all three extracts.
 - Members from each group reform into three extract-specific groups to consider key questions on one of the extracts. This may be scaffolded by information, question prompts or research questions fed in by the teacher.
 - Students reform to feed back to the home group and reconsider links and connections across all three extracts.
 - Finally, groups might craft their own exam-style question to address the theme they have identified.
- 3 Wider reading focusing on the prescribed writer:** Students might consider letters or personal writing from the author that illuminate study of the literary text and the writer's primary concerns. Alternatively, they might research some additional creative writing by that writer such as a short story or poem that reflects on the central concerns of the studied literary text. They might also focus on the title and any draft titles of their prescribed text, and consider how they illuminate the text's primary concerns.

5. Language and style

While working in the studied language, this area of analysis is possibly the most challenging at this level. However, where a prescribed writer has a distinctive written **style**, students should be able to discuss this and analyse relevant textual evidence. For example, a writer's style might be highly descriptive and sensual; simple and sparse; or perhaps dense and erudite. Some may rely heavily on dialogue to convey character; others may concentrate on description of appearance. For some writers, setting and pathetic fallacy¹ may be crucial to engaging the reader; other texts may be largely plot-driven. Students should also be able to identify basic **language techniques**, such as repetition, imagery, figurative language, alliteration and personification, and consider the writers' choices and their effect, using the correct terminology in the target language. Teachers should, where possible, encourage students who have studied English Literature at GCSE level to make connections between literature reading skills secured in these earlier courses of study and the study of literature for MFL A level.

Example teaching ideas include:

- 1 **PEA paragraphs using language terminology:** Identify a number of language techniques commonly used in the studied text in the target language, such as 'metaphor', 'alliteration²', 'symbol' and 'pathetic fallacy', and give them to pairs of students on individual cards together with a given extract from the literary text. Students should write a 'Point, Evidence, Analysis' paragraph using the given term to identify an example where it is used by the writer to achieve a particular effect (see page 5). For example: 'The writer uses pathetic fallacy at the beginning of Chapter 5 when Gerard approaches his family home '[quotation]'. This is used by the writer to foreshadow the disaster that will inevitably unfold and creates suspense and fear in the reader.'
- 2 **Silent conversation:** This is another technique which requires all students to contribute and facilitates questions and interpretation rather than limited definitive answers. Select several extended passages from the text and place each on a large piece of sugar paper. Allow students to circulate to each extract and to identify language techniques and their effect as well as to ask questions such as:
 - 'What does this image suggest?'
 - 'I don't understand why 'light' keeps being mentioned. Why is it significant?'
 - 'Repetition of the word 'no'. Does this suggest rigid resistance or is this just a game he is playing with his partner?'

Students should attempt answers to others' questions as well as posing their own and offering close language analysis. Detailed analysis of each passage can be consolidated once students have offered their contributions.

- 3 **Student-led seminars:** As you progress through the literary text, allocate particular sections to students in advance, along with a bank of language terminology they can use to support their textual analysis. Ask particular students to lead the lesson discussion on their given passage, prior to teacher-led consolidation. They should:
 - Establish the overall 'story' of their section.
 - Suggest the writer's primary concerns in the given passage, e.g. to convey plot, setting or atmosphere, or to explore character, motivation or relationships.
 - Identify which language techniques are most prominent and suggest the effect of these in relation to the writer's concerns.

¹ The ascription of human traits or feelings to inanimate nature (as in cruel sea)
<http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary>

² Language techniques may be different according to the language

6 Characters and relationships

Students should be encouraged to discuss and write about the **characters** in their texts as *constructions* rather than real people. Their reactions to characters must account for what the writer is *encouraging* them to think, rather than personal emotional reactions as if they were real. Thus characterisation is closely tied to context and the writer's themes and concerns. Tentative arguments that take account of the possibility of interpretation rather than a rigid single reading, will characterise a more sophisticated analytical approach.

Example teaching ideas include:

- 1 **'Who said what?' competition:** Select a number of quotations of direct or reported speech from the text. Ask groups or pairs of students to identify who they think said each quotation. They should justify their choices by drawing on their knowledge of characterisation.
- 2 **Reporting verbs close exercise:** Select a prose extract which relies largely on dialogue. Remove all the reporting verbs (e.g. said, shrieked, argued, whispered) to create a cloze exercise.
 - Ask students to insert appropriate reporting verbs, using a vocabulary bank for support as necessary, ensuring that they can justify the reasons for their choices.
 - Ask students to compare their own version with the writer's original and consider what is conveyed about character and relationships from the chosen verbs.
- 3 **Character collage:** Ask students to select a particular character from their text. They should:
 - Cut out a person from a magazine or newspaper who they think reflects their chosen character, giving reasons for their choice.
 - Consider how the character is presented by the writer through: appearance or description, actions, dialogue, relationships, gesture and movement, and add a variety of relevant quotations to surround the character drawing on these aspects.
 - Add five to seven key words that reflect what the writer conveys about this character, e.g. jealous, greedy, controlling, compassionate, etc.
 - Consider which key themes and concerns are addressed via this character and add these to the collage, e.g. childhood, love, jealousy, power.

7 Reception and interpretation

Readers of literature must be aware that they are themselves twenty-first century readers who bring their particular culture and values to a text. Students may consider the original reception of the studied text, both in its country of origin, and where relevant, abroad. Their study of a text may be illuminated by critical or popular writing on their given text as well as directors' interpretations of that text on screen or stage.

Example teaching ideas include:

- 1 **Writing a review:** Students might write their own review of the text in the target language for a particular audience as defined by the teacher. It would be useful for students to see a few simple model review texts, to consider the appropriate style and vocabulary before writing their own.
- 2 **Study of another version:** Students might consider a film or theatre interpretation of their text, or focus on a key scene, analysing how far, in their view, the director has addressed the writer's original intentions.
- 3 **Reading critical reviews:** Students might scan simple reviews on book sites such as Amazon, to identify comments on their literary text that they agree with, as well as comments they disagree with, giving reasons for their answer that are rooted in their literary text. Where available, students may read and respond to either critical extracts or published reviews of their set text and identify three elements that they agree with and three that they would disagree with.