

Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2025

Pearson Edexcel Advanced Subsidiary
A-Level English Literature
Non-examination assessment (9ET0/04)

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Thank you to all centres for another successful series for the NEA/coursework component of A Level English Literature. The specification has been running for a number of years and so nearly all centres are aware of the demands of the component; new centres have generally researched the specification thoroughly and made appropriate entries which were effectively marked and moderated.

For those who read this document every year, the key areas to focus on might be summarised as:

- **Text choices:** There is no 'best approach', but if a 'free choice' approach is followed, centres should advise candidates as to appropriate text choices (perhaps providing their own shortlist) and give guidance when choosing AO3 and AO5 secondary reading. Please note that **texts in translation are not permitted**.
- **Question setting:** Try to avoid questions that imply a foregone conclusion, include too many discrete elements, or guide candidates towards an explanatory or feature-spotting approach. Questions should flag each of the AOs and the command word 'compare' is preferable to 'explore'.
- **Candidate achievement:** Responses significantly over the advisory word count tend to lose focus and therefore be self-penalising in AO1. AO2 could be improved by increased awareness of form and structure (applying lessons learned from the three examined papers). For AO5, as well as choosing appropriate material, candidates need to engage actively with it, analysing and evaluating (as in the Shakespeare question from 9ET01) to achieve Levels 4 and 5.
- **Centre marking and moderation:** Please do not mark in pencil! – it hardly ever scans in well. Most centres are marking and moderating professionally and effectively; the individual E9 report issued to each centre will give advice where necessary.
- **Administration:** Please double-check that coursework has been both uploaded *and submitted* (there is an extra button to click) to the LWT platform. Please scan in each candidate's submission as one file, with the signed NEA declaration (the version from 2024 that refers to AI) at the top.
- **Presentation of folders:** Please bear in mind that moderators read these onscreen – it is helpful to ensure that font size is legible and all internal centre forms (eg moderation documents) are portrait. **Candidates should provide word counts and bibliographies;** footnotes or other inline citations for secondary texts are often very helpful.
- **Ideas for next series:** Please scroll down to the 'Highlights for 2025' section for a list of interesting titles and topics encountered by moderators this series.

This report is in three sections:

1. **Task Setting** (text choices and question setting)
2. **Candidate achievement**
3. **Quality of centre marking, standardisation, and administration**

Part 1: Task Setting.

Text choices:

Centres can choose whether to teach both texts, give candidates an entirely free choice of text, or anything in between.

Many centres seemed to have adopted a 'book box' approach and clearly concentrated on a particular area with students being able to make own choices from, for example, with one centre: *Home Fire, NW; Small Island; Girl, Woman Other; Cutting Season; Americanah*. Using a shortlist of 'approved texts' was often an effective approach.

Slightly fewer centres this year allowed candidates **completely free choice of text**. This often inspired and enthused very able candidates; for those less able, their success depended on the centre's approach. Centres should take care to guide candidates (using the Coursework Advisory Service as necessary) in their selection of appropriate texts, and also to provide ongoing support and guidance to ensure that the AOs are being met – for example, in choosing secondary reading for AO3 and AO5.

An equally popular option **was teaching a 'core text' plus a selection of others**. In a few cases, the quality of candidates' work was notably higher with the core text, suggesting that more guidance was needed with the chosen text. However, for most centres, it appeared that the students had been provided with sensible guidance not only regarding the choice of text, but appropriate resources for AO3 and AO5, and support in studying the text as a whole. This approach often effectively struck the balance between allowing independent reading and discussion, and providing good support for candidates.

A large number of centres continued to **teach both texts**, although in nearly all cases (when there is more than one teaching set) this was decided by the teacher rather than imposed centrally by the Head of Department. This approach is perfectly permissible, and may be more appropriate for some centres or cohorts; scope for pursuit of individual interests was generally accommodated by allowing different choices of assignment title, which is recommended for this approach.

Overall, all the above approaches had their own advantages and disadvantages, and centres should continue to use their professional judgement to determine which is appropriate for their context.

The most common texts seen this series were: *The Great Gatsby*, *Death of a Salesman*, 1984, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Brave New World*, *The Color Purple*, *The Bell Jar*, *Wuthering Heights*, *American Psycho*, *Beloved*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – all of which were written about successfully by some candidates but could lead to more generalised exploration. Success here often depended on the tasks set.

It was good to see that, as per the advice issued by the Coursework Advisory Service, most centres that choose to study *The Yellow Wallpaper* are doing so as part of a broader anthology of Charlotte Perkins Gilman short stories. Some **interesting and unusual pairings** can be found under '**Question setting**'. Responses to some texts were less successful, and this year moderators flagged *Little Women*, *Station Eleven*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. Whilst candidates demonstrated clear enjoyment and enthusiasm when writing about these, they had clearly experienced difficulty when attempting to select and discuss material in a way that enabled them to access the AOs at the higher mark bands.

It was concerning that there were more rubric infringements this year. Please note that **texts in translation (such as Dante's *Inferno*, however 'literary' the translation) are not permitted**. If centres are in any doubt, they should contact the Subject Advisor or the Coursework Advisory Service.

Question setting:

There was some variety in the quality of questions set – essays on broad topics such as “women”, “identity” or “power” often lacked focus, but some titles were much more precise and focused – such as “Platonic ideals”, “wounded masculinity” or “dysfunctional love”. Questions which focus on how writers present a particular theme are likely to elicit closer engagement with writers' craft than tasks which focus on how characters interact. Tasks once again tended to flag up the oppression of women (especially in the context of toxic masculinity), mental-health issues (rarely done well), loss of identity, gender fluidity and the ever-popular “illusory nature of the American Dream”.

Where candidates had used a critical quotation as part of their title which they evaluated, this was often effective. However, this should be seen as a ‘springboard’, rather than an integral part of the task. Some candidates kept feeling obliged to return to the quotation, narrowing the scope of their essay and preventing it from developing into a truly sustained and cohesive argument; others saw it as a foregone conclusion which they had to explain, rather than arrive at through their own discussion, which affected achievement in both AO1 and AO5.

The idea of a predetermined conclusion often affected the question wording itself, and candidates sometimes struggled to go beyond the ideological straitjacket they had imposed upon themselves.

Most questions included reference to all of the AOs as recommended. for example, "Taking into account your wider reading and the importance of contextual factors, compare how the writers present [...] in [...]".

Highlights of 2025:

Some interesting and unusual pairings of texts and task noted by moderators include the below:

- *The Handmaid's Tale* / *Frankenstein*
- *A Streetcar Named Desire* / *Death of a Salesman* : the use of sound
- *The Awakening* / *Mrs Dalloway*
- *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* / *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the presentation of art
- Treadwell's *Machinal* or Ali Smith's *How To Be Both* in combination with a range of more familiar texts by female writers
- *The Bloody Chamber*/*Top Girls* – how consumption of food and drink relates to power and success
- *The Kite Runner*/ *Reef*
- *Beloved*/*The Scarlet Letter*
- *Mary Barton* / *Nice Work*
- *Othello* / *The Duchess of Padua* - female empowerment
- *Sense & Sensibility* / *Some Tame Gazelle* – marriage
- *A Pale View of the Hills* / *Pale Fire* – unreliable narrators
- *The Bluest Eye* / *Their Eyes Were Watching God* – sophisticated exploration of eye(s) motif
- *The Handmaid's Tale* paired with any of the following: *Herland* / *The Awakening* / *The Silence of the Girls* / *Vox*
- *The World's Wife* / *Hamnet* – presentation of unexpectedly heroic women
- *Bleak House* / *1984*
- *Go Tell it on the Mountain* / *Brideshead Revisited* - the significance of faith
- *Between the Acts*/Henry V
- *The Kite Runner*/*The Road* (father/son dynamics)
- *Antony and Cleopatra* / *The Bell Jar*
- *The Bloody Chamber*/*The Marriage Portrait*
- *Twelfth Night* / *The Importance of Being Earnest* - the satirical presentation of class.
- *The Great Gatsby* / *The Wasteland*
- *Measure for Measure* / *Nina* / *Raine's Consent* - how well law serves women
- *Slaughterhouse-Five* / *Catch 22*
- *Heart of Darkness* / *The War of the Worlds* – imperialism
- *The Homecoming* / *Happy Days* (Beckett) – homecoming
- *Orlando* / *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall)
- *Giovanni's Room* / *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Vuong)
- *Purple Hibiscus* / *Burnt Sugar*

- *The Little Stranger* (Waters) / *The Haunting of Hill House* (Jackson)
- *Normal People* (Rooney) / *Vernon God Little* (Pierre)
- *This Mournable Body* (Dangarembga) / *Brave New World*

Part 2: Candidate achievement within the Assessment Objectives.

AO1 – AO3

In general, candidates crafted responses with sustained control. At Level 3, paragraphs with clear topic sentences were the best way to ensure clear arguments resulted. At Level 4 and above, the best responses had a sense of fluent cohesion between arguments, which resulted in a convincing line of argument.

As in previous years, for **AO1**, unstructured paragraphing, technical slips (spelling and punctuation), uncertain syntax and informal/ overly pretentious personal expression remain the most common flaws which, if not acknowledged by centre assessors, could lead to over-rewarding of marks for this AO. Candidates in the middle levels often had clear paragraphs but not cohesive arguments and could be encouraged to see an overarching argument. Failing to adhere to the advisory word count (see below) very often led to a loss of control.

For **AO2**, there were plenty of instances of sophisticated appreciation of the writer's craft, where holistic discussion of formal and structural features such as genre, characterisation, narrative perspective and style were combined with detailed analysis of well-chosen examples. The exploration of form and structure, however, was often ignored in favour of word-level analysis. Candidates should be encouraged to apply their insights into plays as theatre (9ET01), the form and structure of the novel (9ET02), and poetic form (9ET03) to this unit. Relatively few could discuss with authority structure, form, narratorial perspective in prose texts or paralinguistic /prosodic features in drama texts and metre, lineation, rhyme (or not), regular (or not) stanzaic structure in poetry texts. Perhaps the most damaging approach was to fail to recognise characters as authorial constructs and include little reference to authors throughout.

For **AO3**, candidates continued to enjoy applying a variety of contexts to inform their understanding of their chosen texts. There was often sensible commentary on political, biographical, philosophical, cultural or literary background at the time of production and reception of texts. Some moderators noted colloquialisms such as 'toxic masculinity' that verged on popular psychology and reduced the depth of contextual analyses. Students who approached context through form did particularly well e.g. 19th Century gothic versus 20th Century. Most students struggled to make biographical context relevant by simply saying that similar things happened to the author (*Gatsby*

with Fitzgerald's relationships, *Yellow Wallpaper* with author's mental health). There were some impressive instances of candidates using writers' diaries and letters to provide specific, illuminating biographical contexts closely linked to their arguments about the texts.

AO4 – AO5

AO4 was very often a strength. The vast majority of candidates understood the comparative nature of the task, and were able to integrate their discussion of both texts – usually in alternating paragraphs with comparative evaluation as they went but sometimes discussing both texts side by side. Some candidates appeared to forget the comparative focus at points during their essay, spending several pages on one text without reference to the other, or introducing a point about one text which did not allow for any form of meaningful comparison. Higher-achieving responses demonstrated the ability to adopt a fully integrated comparative approach from the outset.

Achievement at **AO5** continues to be mixed. Candidates who had been guided to select a few, high-quality examples of literary criticism (as opposed to a mass of material from sociology and psychology text-books which invariably led to a lot of psychological profiling of characters rather than analysis of characterisation as a literary technique) and who were not afraid to interrogate / challenge critical opinions (with textual evidence) were likely to “illuminate” rather than merely “illustrate” their critical position as required for L5. As well as critical discussion of the texts themselves, a large number of candidates showed confidence in applying general critical theory to their discussion of their chosen texts, usually referring to specific theorists such as Judith Butler or Hélène Cixous. This was usually a successful approach, and should give confidence to candidates considering writing about more contemporary texts on which there is less critical writing available.

Study guides and notes are often difficult to engage with critically. Some had chosen their material either indiscriminately via a search engine, or had used AI (the giveaway for one candidate was chatgpt.com being cited in their URL as the referral source); the very poor standard of English in the sources themselves should have been a signal as to their usefulness in the NEA. Centres should encourage candidates to consider resources such as Google Scholar; JSTOR has, for some time, allowed free access to 100 articles a month. Centres may wish to invest in an anthology of critical material for popular texts: the *Bloom's Guide* anthologies are very useful and inexpensive; the *Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism* (Bloomsbury) are outstanding.

Ultimately, candidates are assessed on what they *do* with their AO5 critical material, and centres may wish to stress the links between this component and the Shakespeare component in 9ET01. For Level 4 and above, candidates need to analyse and evaluate others' critical views, using them to help shape their own critical responses. There was a tendency for critics to be quoted in passing – “as X says...” – which showed Level 3

understanding, but not giving the sense that this critic was being used to shape an argument. Another Level 3 approach was for the candidate to insert the AO5 material at the end of the paragraph, almost as an afterthought, making their own conclusion and remarking “this supports/contradicts Y’s argument that...”.

Academic presentation: word counts, referencing, and bibliographies

The quality continued to be variable this series. Centres should impress upon candidates that these requirements will be non-negotiable for their undergraduate courses; teachers who have insisted on these will therefore have given their students excellent preparation for the future.

Word counts must be provided for all submissions. Whilst there is no penalty for exceeding the advisory word count of 2500 – 3000 words, the majority of excessively long responses were self-penalising. Where the centre did not recognise this in their own marking then the moderator will have made adjustments as appropriate. To achieve AO1 at Level 4 and above, candidates need to present a controlled argument, and loss of focus and control was a frequent issue in those responses that significantly exceeded 3000 words.

Unfortunately, this appeared to be a bigger problem this series. Some moderators commented that the majority of responses were over the notional limit. Several centres allowed the majority of candidates to exceed 3500; one centre had an average word count of well over 4000. As well as not preparing candidates for the demands of higher education, this approach also begged the question of whether this was at the expense of curriculum time perhaps better spent on the three examined units, two of which are worth a higher percentage of marks than the coursework. In addition, allowing students to write significantly longer pieces changes the nature of the tasks that can reasonably be attempted. Teachers will be considering a potential title in terms of whether it is suitable for a piece of writing of 2500-3000 words. Titles for pieces of 4000 words might be quite different.

Referencing and bibliographies were variable in quality, as indeed was the scope and quality of wider reading. Though not formally part of the mark scheme, a conscientious approach to referencing makes it clearer to the moderator when the candidate is engaging explicitly with the views of others for AO5, or making a more nuanced and precise AO3 point. This is also important, of course, in avoiding inadvertent plagiarism. Footnotes (or other inline citations such as the Harvard system) would have been very helpful for some candidates.

Bibliographies or lists of works cited were variable in quality. For many centres, candidates of all abilities produced reference lists that would be held up as exemplars at undergraduate level. Some were inconsistent, or cursory. One bibliography had links that went nowhere, a link that was dated before the academic year, and one link that went to a hotel at Gretna Green.

Part 3: Quality of centre marking, standardisation, and administration.

The purpose of centre marking and moderation is to provide evidence, with reference to the assessment objectives and the mark scheme, to support the final mark submitted to Pearson. Nearly all centres acknowledged this, although there were a few examples where feedback was addressed to the candidate or was formative. Centres where marks were most likely to be agreed were able to demonstrate this understanding through extensive annotation, detailed summative comments and clear evidence of internal moderation and standardisation.

Summative comments, at the end of the essay, were often very detailed indeed. The most helpful comments:

- Referred to each assessment objective individually;
- Used vocabulary from the mark scheme to identify levels of achievement (eg discriminating, evaluative), though without simply copying level descriptors;
- Clearly explained the rationale for the overall, holistic mark within the level;
- Identified and explained why candidates were not given a higher mark – for example, due to one AO being weaker, or by reference to internal standardisation.

There was sometimes a disparity between the level of achievement implied by the comments and the final mark given: a comment that suggested consistent achievement within Level 4 should, for example, have been accompanied by a numerical mark at the very top of this level (28 to 29 in AO1 – AO3); if the mark given was lower, then the comment therefore was not in line with what was awarded.

Some summative comments were very brief, or squeezed into the limited space on the NEA authentication sheet (please note the majority of centres simply write “see comments on essay” in this box, and this is fine). This was disappointing, and centres which demonstrated this very cursory approach are reminded that adequate annotation and explanation of the summative mark given is a JCQ requirement.

Inline marking and annotation was often very helpful, and most centres continued to annotate in detail, either by hand or through a comments function on Microsoft Word. The most helpful annotations made direct references to assessment objectives, indicated level of achievement, with reference to the mark scheme, and provided further, brief explanation of how the candidate’s argument developed and assimilated the assessment objectives.

There were some excellent examples of **internal moderation** where the whole centre’s process was documented and it was easy to see why marks had been awarded or changed and the rationale behind this. These centres also justified their internal ranking

system which was also helpful. Less helpful were centres where 'agreed' was written with no rationale or marks were adjusted (usually upwards) with no rationale. Many essays were 'double marked', and some made reference to standardisation material from Pearson. Most of the time, moderation was fairly light in touch, with adjustments typically being of +/-1 or 2. For a few centres, there was a sense of professional dialogue as marker opinions varied and an internal moderator/HoD gave a final judgment; E9 reports to the centres made clear that this was interpreted as an excellent sign of the centre's integrity and professionalism.

Even within centres where marking was not in line with the national standard, marking generally was consistent. Very few centres were identified where one teaching group had been marked inconsistently compared to another. Exceptions within the whole cohort mainly involved lenience/severity at a particular point in the rank order. Another common (but understandable) issue was that the range of achievement in the centre was narrower than the (inter)national picture – leniency at the higher end, severity towards the bottom.

Again, with all the above, the precise nature of any inconsistency within centre marking was made clear within the moderator's individual report to the centre. **There were some additional overall issues noted in 2025, as above:**

- **AO1 – AO3:** several centres were lenient when marking AO1, not taking into account some of the issues raised in the 'candidate achievement' category above and awarding Level 5 for essays which were poorly-expressed or controlled. Some centres also assessed rather straightforward AO2 as 'critical evaluation'. For AO3, as was found last year, some fairly general assertions (often unsubstantiated) were over-rewarded.
- **AO4 – AO5:** Some centres credited any transition from one text to another – even if the texts were treated completely serially – as evidence of high achievement in AO4. Some secondary reading was credited as AO5, when all it was offering was contextual information that the candidate mentioned in passing. As above, there was a tendency to over-reward AO5 references without reference to how well the candidate was engaging with their material.

Administration:

The majority of centres had carefully scanned and collated their candidate submissions, uploaded the requested sample promptly, and included all the necessary administrative material.

Sixty centres had not submitted their samples to the LWT platform by 15 May. Most were very quick to rectify this. Centres should ensure that as well as being uploaded, the work is **submitted**: there is an extra step and extra button to click, and if in any doubt, the support material available from Pearson should be consulted.

Other administrative issues included: failure to include highest- and lowest- ranked folders **(these are required even if they are not requested in the sample generated by Pearson)**, individual essays missing, pages missing, lack of authentication forms, or errors in the mark (a disparity between the mark on the scanned copy and that submitted to Pearson, or errors of addition).

Some submissions had pages scanned in the wrong order, or that were rotated. A few centres had used some paper material produced in landscape but scanned in as portrait. Finally, please note that annotation in pencil often scans in poorly and is difficult to read, and it was a real pity to have evidence of really detailed and conscientious marking that was simply illegible to the moderator.

It would be appreciated if *all* centres could take a little extra time to make extra checks to their scanned coursework submissions before uploading them to the LWA portal.

Conclusion

This was another successful series overall, and the moderating team, as usual, enjoyed the insight into the opportunities centres offer to candidates studying English Literature at Advanced Level. It was fascinating to see what texts and genres candidates and their teachers choose when given free choice, and to have an insight into how departments worked together as professionals when teaching, assessing, and moderating the component. Students were encouraged to pursue a wide range of enthusiasms and interests, read widely around their texts, and formulate their research into a comparative study that will have been excellent preparation for the undergraduate studies most of them will be entering soon. The moderating team wish them all the best for their future studies.