Pearson

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Level English Literature

Getting Started for Students

Getting started for students

Student guide

This Getting Started guide for students gives an overview of the International Advanced Level (IAL) in English Literature qualification and what it means for them. It particularly gives further insight into contextualisation as a significant part of the assessment in this subject focuses on effective contextualisation of the literary works studied. Online resource links are also provided as additional learning materials and to support independent learning and research skills.

Why study the Pearson Edexcel IAL in English Literature?

This course will try to give you the skills and understanding to:

- Read widely and independently set texts and others
- Engage critically and creatively with a substantial body of texts and ways of responding to them
- Develop and effectively apply knowledge of literary analysis and evaluation
- Explore the contexts of the texts and interpretations of them undertake independent and sustained studies to deepen appreciation
- Understanding of English literature, including its changing traditions.

What do I need to know, or be able to do, before taking this course?

There is no prior learning required or other requirements for this qualification.

How will I be assessed?

Unit 1:

Two hour Open book examination Section A: Post-2000 Poetry - answer one essay question from a choice of two on the prescribed poems. Both essay questions will be comparative with one named poem plus a free choice of second poem from the prescribed list of poems in the studied text'.

The list of prescribed poems will be printed in the Source Booklet.
Section B: Post-2000 Prose, answer one essay question from a choice of two on their studied prose text.

Unit 2:

Two hour Open book examination Section A: Pre-1900 Drama answer one essay question from a choice of two on their studied pre-1900 drama text. Section B: Post-1900 Drama, answer one essay question from a choice of two on their studied drama text

Unit 3:

Two Open book examination Section A: Poetry answer one essay question on a post-1900 unseen poem. The unseen poem will be printed in the Source Booklet. Section B: Prose, answer one comparative essay question from a choice of two, on the two prose texts that they have studied from their chosen theme

Unit 4:
Two hours Open book examination Section A: Shakespeare answer one essay question from a choice of two on their studied play. Section B: Pre-1900 Poetry, answer one essay question from a choice of two on their selected movement.

Examinations are available twice a year in the January and June series.

Student toolkit for context in novels, plays and poems

How to contextualise

When writing about context we need to look at when a text was actually written and what was going on at that time. There may have been significant political events taking place, for example, or changes in religious beliefs. What were current attitudes with regard to gender, class or ethnicity? But another part of context lies in considering ourselves as modern readers. How are we are influenced by the world we happen to be living in today?

Here are some examples from texts across the specification.

The author's biography

We have to be careful here because we mustn't assume that writers are simply writing about themselves. Khaled Hosseini creates a character called Amir in *The Kite Runner* (a Unit 1 text) whose background is remarkably similar to the writer's own – he experienced a middle class, comfortable life in Afghanistan interrupted by the invasion of Soviet forces, leading to his family seeking asylum abroad. But in writing about the novel we can see that, even though the writer is producing fiction, not autobiography, the descriptions are authentic: the author has not simply done research but has actually lived through some of the things he describes. A particular example would be the descriptions his own country when Amir returns there to find it policed by the Taliban.

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is a Unit 4 text. This is a disturbing play that presents us with a happy ending – but not a conventional one. Situations are resolved, but there are some disturbing moral issues. As a result the play is often called one of Shakespeare's problem plays. Understanding something about when the play was written (at around the time of some other problem plays) might show us that this play represents a point in Shakespeare's career where he has moved away from straightforward happy comedies to addressing more complex moral and psychological issues. It might even be suggested that Shakespeare himself was experiencing moral and psychological problems, but beware the point made at the start – writers are not just writing about themselves!

Suggested research: Google Khaled Hosseini interviews and the internet will give you some useful material from the author himself.

Suggested research: the term "problem play" was first coined by the critic F S Boas in his 1896 book "Shakespeare and his Predecessors", but you needn't go back that far to learn more. E M W Tillyard wrote "Shakespeare's Problem Plays" in 1949. Rather more recently (in 2005) the New Casebook series has a title "Shakespeare's Problem Plays".

Relevant issues in society at the time the text was written

Othello is a set text in Unit 2. In 1597 and 1601 history tells us that Queen Elizabeth 1 issued proclamations complaining about the increasing number of people from Africa in England. Although Othello is set in Venice, Shakespeare can't help but reflect things happening at that time in England? A good site, with respectable credentials, on the Royal Proclamations is:
http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/elizabeth.htm

We can start to understand the way *Othello* might have been seen by Shakespeare's audiences in the light of this. There are issues of race here - Othello, a black man, marries Desdemona, a white woman. It would be a mistake to think that Shakespeare, whatever his own views were, was writing for the multi-racial open minded and tolerant people of today. Germaine Greer, in her book *Shakespeare*, is not so positive about attitudes in today's Britain however. She argues that "Iago is still alive and kicking and filling migrants' letterboxes with excrement".

Another England, or to be more precise, the Bloomsbury area of London, is created in a Unit 3 text – Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Virginia Woolf was a member of the Bloomsbury group of writers.

Suggested research: read Germaine Greer, a feminist critic and author of a number of books on Shakespeare's plays
The introductions to scholarly editions of Shakespeare, such as the Arden edition or the Cambridge University Press edition, contain valuable critical overviews of the plays.

Suggested research: "Living in Squares, Loving in Triangles: The Lives and Loves of Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group" by Amy Licence (2015) is a well-reviewed and lively description of the life and times of Virginia Woolf and her circle of friends.

Genre conventions at the time the text was written

Genre simply means type, but with genre come generic conventions – the recognised features of that particular type of writing. We can recognise that Unit 3's *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro is a dystopia, just as *The Hunger Games*, or *1984* are dystopias. Sometimes it gets more complicated to identify a genre – there are texts which are experimental and transcend traditional classification. For example, what exactly is Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, a book in Unit 1which asks questions about the nature of storytelling itself? Sometimes the very act of classifying literature as a certain type can make for problems – nowadays we call a group of very dissimilar poets of the seventeenth century "metaphysical" (a unit 4 text, *The Metaphysical Poets*) .
Some background reading is the way forward here. We can only really appreciate a text when we see what else was being written around the same time. Sometimes texts break through the conventions of their period.

Suggested research: See what Yann Martel might be doing with his Life of Pi as a post modern text – a story which asks the question what, exactly, is a story? Find out what is meant by the term "post modern".

Suggested research: Look up what John Dryden wittily wrote about John Donne ("he affects the metaphysics and perplexes the minds of the fair sex...)

Conventions at the time the text was written

Dickens wrote *Great Expectations* (a unit 3 text) originally for serialisation. Knowing this helps us to understand the structure of the book – and think about where different instalments may have ended. It accounts for the fact that for many readers the novel comes across as a series of separate stories. The sheer length of the novel (and what to some people is Dickens' long windedness) can also be accounted for by the fact that writers were paid more the more they wrote. Dickens was also looked on as a commentator on the times he was living in and we can see this in the novel – it has something to say about society, how money can sometimes change people: authors of the time were not just a story writers but commentators on the age they lived in.
A similar act of commentating happens with Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in Unit 4, which was published in 1850, the year that Tennyson became Poet Laureate, a public figure, speaking to the nation. So *In Memoriam* is not just a personal account of his bereavement, it sends out a message of hope: that love lives on, transcending mortality.

Suggested research: It's a huge book but quite fascinating: Peter Ackroyd: "Dickens" (1990)

Suggested research: In 1897, Tennyson's son, Hallam, published a two volume memoir of his father. It is available as a free download on the internet. Look at bits of it to get the idea of how Tennyson was regarded by people who still remembered him.

How did context affect the way the text was received by its first readers or audiences?

"Is it right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff?" Emily Bronte's sister, Charlotte, asked in her 1850 Preface to *Wuthering Heights* (a Unit 3 set text) after its author had died. She was worried, amongst other things, about the references to oaths or swear words - "the practice of hinting by single letters those expletives with which profane and violent persons are wont to garnish their discourse." We need to realise how sensibilities have changed over time, and that Emily Bronte's writing would have shocked people because of its portrayal of a violent and passionate man like Heathcliff.

Dr Faustus is a unit 2 text, written by Marlowe. At first sight some of the comic subplot scenes seem irrelevant or just silly – but the scene where Faustus goes to Rome, makes himself invisible and annoys the Pope by snatching his food away makes a lot more sense when we realise the play made its first appearance around 1604 when there was some anti catholic feeling (the Pope had blessed the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the Gunpowder plot was revealed in 1605).

Suggested research: read Charlotte Bronte's 1850 Preface to Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights".

Suggested research: read David Riggs, "The World of Christopher Marlowe" (2004)

Has the changing context affected different readers over time?

"She is all states, and all princes I" wrote John Donne in his poem "The Sun Rising" (Unit 4, *Metaphysical Poetry*). It was a declaration of love, but to modern ears, more accustomed to feminist principles, it sounds rather like an assertion of male dominance. There are many ways we can interpret metaphysical poetry We might also discuss ways in which other poems of the period might seem to silence the woman's voice, for example in Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* where we hear only the male point of view.

In Unit 2 *Top Girls,* first performed in 1982, is clearly a play reacting against Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Does that seem dated now, or has it still some relevance, not just to people in the UK but as a comment on capitalism and feminism across the world? For an answer it is worth reading some reviews of a more recent revival – Michael Billington in *The Guardian* wrote the 2011 production had "vivid timeliness, in a world where isolated female success still obscures the plight of the majority."

Suggested research: In October 2009 The Guardian newspaper featured Donne's "The Sun Rising" as its Poem of the Week, with a fascinating commentary on it by modern day poet Carol Rumens.

Read Michael Billington's review dated July 2011 in The Guardian reviewing a production of "Top Girls" at the Minerva Theatre, Chichester, UK

(Both of these extracts from the UK newspaper The Guardian are readily available on the internet.)

Your own personal context and how it influences your reading

Remember that you, as a student in the twenty first century, reading these books and plays wherever you happen to be in the world, are entitled to your own interpretations and need to express them, justifying them with close reference to the text. But be aware that these will not necessarily be the same as those of other people, who may have lived at other times in the past, or may be living in other places today, with different backgrounds, beliefs and ways of thinking. All this influences interpretation, and that is why significant credit is given for this awareness when it comes to marking your work.

Suggested online learning resources for IAL English Literature

Online resources for teachers and students (poetry/literary terms etc):

https://www.youngwriters.co.uk/index
http://poetrysociety.org.uk/
http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qp7q/clips (BBC Radio 4 'Poetry Please' series)
http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/pdfs/talking_poetry_notes.pdf (Teaching notes and full programmes on BBC 'School Radio')
http://www.slideshare.net/BCALevels/alevel-english-glossary
http://www.irevise.com/GCSE-Blog/ArtMID/788/ArticleID/60/-GCSE-and-A-Level-Poetry-Terms-A-Quick-Guide-
https://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/glossary-of-poetic-devices-post-16-poetry-6001429

Online resources for teachers and students (Purple Hibiscus, etc):

http://sodiqyusuf.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/textual-analysis-of-purple-hibiscus.html

(Selections from): 'Language and Ideology in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus.' Lawal M. Olusola, L.M. Lawal,F.A. *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (2013):* http://iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol13-issue1/B01310816.pdf

https://prezi.com/guaa2re84gue/literary-analysis-of-purple-hibiscus/ (slide share)

https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v40n1/pdf/peters.pdf 'Issues of Personal and National Identity in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus, Peters, A. The Allen Review(2012)*

An Ambiguous "Freedom Song": Mind-Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus, Tuca, D Postcolonial Text*, Vole 5, No 1 (2009) http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/index

General resources, e.g. background on Chinua Achebe:
http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/achebeov.html

Additional online learning resources

British Library Learning resources, especially the English Timeline:

http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/evolvingenglish/accessvers/index.html

Crossref-it.info: http://crossref-it.info/im-a-student has useful study materials and contextual information for set texts, this site has material on studying poetry and poetic form.