2022 VCE English (NHT) external assessment report

General comments

The 2022 VCE English NHT examination consisted of three sections: Section A required students to write an analytical essay in response to one text, Section B required students to write a comparative analysis on one pair of texts, and Section C required students to analyse the ways in which argument and language persuade in response to unseen material.

The tasks were holistically assessed using the published assessment criteria on the VCAA English study page. Assessors used the published criteria and made their judgments using the expected qualities for each section of the examination.

Specific information

Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text

Students were required to develop an analytical interpretation in essay form on one of the two set texts. Two topics were offered for each of these texts. The descriptors used for assessment related to the degree of textual knowledge, including the concepts and construction, the consistency of the essay structure utilised, the extent of topic focus and relevance, and the control and appropriateness of the writing skills employed.

In the 2022 examination, the students focused almost solely on the novel *Station Eleven* by Emily St John Mandel. They favoured the first question on the characters feeling ‘safest in a world of their imagination’, a topic that afforded opportunities for students to draw on their close textual knowledge and demonstrate their essay-writing skills. Although students showed good understanding of the text and could write about it with confidence in an appropriately structured essay format, some were challenged by the complexities of the concept of ‘the world of their imagination’. There was a tendency to limit the discussion to examples of the writing of the graphic novel *Dr Eleven*, and participation in the Shakespearian plays produced by the Travelling Symphony. Instead of exploring how individual and collective memory, religious belief, creativity, writing and acting were reflections of their imagination, and explaining how the characters found personal security in such pursuits, students relied on recounting long and detailed examples. Emily St John Mandel’s purpose of exploring the tensions between finding safety at the cost of losing control over one’s life was often ignored. This resulted in essays that, while strong in textual detail, struggled to maintain relevance.

The second, less popular, topic asked to what extent the survivors were ‘afraid of unfamiliar people and places’. Some students saw this as a simple invitation to describe examples of fear and although this approach allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge of the selected text, they struggled to address the instruction in the question. The wording of the topic should be closely considered so that it can be fully addressed. Ultimately, it is essential that discussion of the topic is fully resolved, using close textual insights and details.

Students must also consider the intentions of the writer, recognising that all selected texts are constructed to convey core ideas and issues through developed structural techniques. As a graphic novel, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood,* uses the written word, dialogue and visuals to tell its story. All elements must be considered when responding to the question. The analysis of the text must include the author’s intentions, the strategies and impact of the illustrations, the complexities of the written word, as well as knowledge of the storyline and understanding of character development. Some essays put too much emphasis on plot and character, missing the opportunities to explore the world of the text. This task should never be misconstrued as an invitation to retell portions of the plot or merely describe the attributes of characters.

In order to score highly, students must demonstrate a thoughtful and consistent approach to the topic, maintain a clear focus on the critical ideas of the text, use textual elements astutely and write in a careful and precise manner. They must identify a clear contention and structure their response into a considered and consistent essay that presents a sustained line of argument. Students must demonstrate close textual knowledge with assurance.

Responses that scored highly demonstrated a thoughtful and consistent approach to the chosen topic, with astute use of textual elements and a clear focus on critical ideas in the text, all expressed carefully and precisely. They reliably demonstrated a thoughtful reflection on the concepts in the question, considered development of a clear contention, and capacity to plan appropriately to develop a consistent essay.

Section B – Comparative analysis of texts

Students were required to develop and write a comparative analysis on one of two pairings of texts: *The 7 Stages of Grieving* by Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, and *The Longest Memory* by Fred D’Aguiar; or *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham. Two topics were offered for each of the paired texts. The descriptors used for assessment related to the degree of textual knowledge of both texts, focusing on the ideas and issues they present, the extent of exploration of connections, similarities and/or differences between the texts, the degree of topic focus and relevance, and the control and appropriateness of the writing skills utilised to aid meaningful textual comparison.

In 2022, the more popular pairing was *The Crucible* and *The Dressmaker* and many of the students focused on the first topic, comparing the impact of isolation on the two communities of Salem and Dungatar. Each question was focused on an important idea/issue, and required students to closely examine how the central idea or issue – the impact of isolation, the effects of intolerance, that injustice can never be forgiven or the value of truth – was presented in both texts, and to compare pertinent similarities and differences. Students could decide their own angle of discussion, but they were expected to focus on the entire topic and ensure that it was fully resolved through the ensuing discussion.

Responses that scored highly were able to examine the core ideas and issues with confidence and conceptualise them meaningfully. However, responses should avoid making loose references to broad themes in an imprecise and vague manner. The focus of the comparison must always be the idea that is at the heart of the topic, and never fall back into long, detailed comparison of major characters or divergent plotlines of the texts in the pairing. Some responses demonstrated very good knowledge of the two individual texts but were challenged by the need to compare them in a relevant manner. A single sentence of generalised comparison at the end of a paragraph does not meet the demands of the task.

Responses that scored highly explored differences as well as similarities. The instances to which they referred added ‘meaning’ to the topic, inviting conceptual thinking. Relying on discussion of similarities only tends to lead to an extended focus on particular examples; the comparative element becomes lost as two ‘mini’ essays appear on the two set texts.

Students are expected to closely analyse how the relevant writers sought to reveal and expose the ideas in their respective texts. This ought to be facilitated through considered metalanguage, which underpins meaningful comparison, alongside prudent textual analysis. Students should consider how each text has been intentionally constructed to expose the issues identified in the topic. This may include, for example, the differing historical contexts of Miller’s play and Ham’s novel, or the shifting narrative voices that are so powerful in the vignettes that permeate *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, as opposed to the continual juxtaposing of the thoughts and voices of the slaves and slave controller in *The Longest Memory*.

As already noted, an argument must be consciously constructed by the student to fully resolve the topic. Students must recognise the key role played by both the introduction and topic sentences in ensuring that a tight and careful argumentative structure is established and maintained. Moreover, it is essential that the evolving argument is sustained and built upon.

Simply describing textual examples, or citing aspects of characters, does not aid in the construction of strong argument. Students need to understand that the ideas and issues in any text are conveyed through the actions of the characters and the events that occur. Authors make deliberate choices about the construction of their texts in order to effectively present these ideas to the reader. It is essential that students recognise the need to continually compare the texts they have studied through the lens of the selected topic, so that there is an analytical focus on the nominated ideas or issues.

Section C – Argument and persuasive language

The unseen task material presented for analysis was a social media post, written by local resident, Daphne Lower, sharing her concerns about the long-term effects of Strapleton residents feeding the local bird populations. The post included two embedded images: the first a photograph of the recently constructed council signs warning people not to feed the birds; and the second a light-hearted cartoon focusing on one of the dangers of doing so. These images sought to exemplify and strengthen the line of argument being presented by Lower, while maintaining her carefully restrained tone. The topic, language, length and style of the piece readily offered opportunities for students to demonstrate the analytical skills required. They were expected to show understanding of the arguments presented, identify and explain how written and visual language worked together to persuade an audience, and use the language of analysis fluently and adeptly.

The straightforward nature of the material allowed students clear entry into the identification of argument and language. All students could identify Lower’s basic contention and the connection between the first visual and the written text. There was less certainty about the cartoon and a number of students did not reference it in their analysis. It became more challenging for them to track the development of the argument over the course of the whole article. There was a constant pattern of ‘Lower states…’, ‘She goes on to say…’, ‘She backs this up by stating…’ and ‘Lower says…’. This pattern is clear evidence of students falling into summary and simply restating the writer’s ideas. Some students struggled to move from paraphrasing to analysing whatwas said,how it was said and why it was said in this way.

This task required students to closely consider the written material, as well as the visuals, and examine how argument and language operate together to persuade the audience of local residents and neighbours to share a specific point of view. All students were able to identify samples of appropriate language employed by Lower, but some could not move past quotation. For example, they appreciated her love of nature, citing ‘picturesque park and lovely lake’, and contrasted the bird-feeders ‘committing a crime against nature’; they acknowledged the bird-like phrase ‘take them under my wing’; and they identified the repetition of ‘wrong food’ in ‘the wrong amount’ that is ‘downright dangerous’. However, only some students were able to analyse how these language choices functioned within the argument and how they were deliberately chosen to impact on the reader.

Students struggled with tone, and this may reflect the challenges of ‘hearing’ the restrained, moderate voice of Lower, which was quite nuanced at times. Again, there was the pattern of identification – ‘Lower uses a warm, friendly tone’ was most popular. Students could not move past the generic descriptors of a ‘persuasive tone’, nor could they go on to explain how her tones and tone shifts were carefully constructed by Lower to persuade her Strapleton neighbours and friends without giving offence.

There needed to be a strong connection made between the graphics and Lower’s text. The photo of the newly constructed sign, ‘Do Not Feed the Birds’, acted as the de facto title of the article, as well as being a clear statement of Lower’s contention. The imperative tone of the sign was used strategically by the writer as an opening statement, whereas the post itself was more moderate and restrained as she carefully argued her position to her friends and neighbours, careful not to give offence. Most students recognised that the photograph was reinforcing the author’s concerns about bird feeding. However, many of them struggled to consider and explain why the cartoon was placed at the end of the article, choosing instead to ignore the second visual.

It is important that students avoid merely labelling and identifying argumentative devices and forms of persuasive language. It is not enough to identify inclusive language, three rhetorical questions, an anecdote and the use of personification. Students should explain why such forms of argument and language are used by the writer to fulfil the persuasive intent of the piece. Each convention is used for a specific purpose and students must be able to analyse how its use adds to the persuasive impact of the writer.

Like the other sections of the examination, there were no expected responses in Section C. Assessors were looking for the skills that demonstrated the student’s ability to understand how the argument develops and functions, how language is used effectively to present the argument and the intended persuasive impact on the reader.