

2019 VCE Classical Studies examination report

General comments

There were minor changes to the examination in 2019, primarily in the allocation of marks. The distribution of marks for Section A was 4, 6 and 10 for parts a., b. and c. respectively. To earn four marks for part a. of the question students were usually required to identify the context of the source or identify features in it. Most students earned at least three of the four marks allocated.

There was a change in the assessment process for Section B. Initially, assessors placed responses into a High, Medium, or Low range of marks. The main distinctions between the ranges were:

- High: for responses that showed detailed and thorough knowledge of the works and their sociohistorical contexts; sophisticated analysis of classical ideas and techniques in the works; incisive comparison and a strong, convincing argument based on relevant evidence.
- Medium: for responses that showed sound, and usually accurate, knowledge of the works and their sociohistorical contexts; some limited discussion of ideas and techniques; some comparison between the works; some evidence of a contention, with more illustration than argument.
- Low: for responses that showed limited knowledge of the works and their sociohistorical contexts; inaccuracy; scant discussion of ideas and techniques and only basic comparison between the works.

After allocating responses to a range, performance descriptors were used to determine a specific score.

Most students answered two questions from Section A and one question from Section B, as instructed. The questions were correctly identified in their answers and they generally wrote legibly. Most gave appropriate attention to each question although some 4-mark answers were longer than necessary to earn the marks.

Most students followed the order of the questions on the exam paper. Answers were relevant to the questions and students showed solid knowledge of the works and their sociohistorical contexts.

Some responses showed a scattergun approach, where information was presented in large quantities without analysis or sharp focus on the specific question.

Better responses demonstrated the students' ability to convey classical ideas and their appreciation of classical culture. They didn't simply set down information gleaned from the works but discussed how the works expressed the culture.

Some students showed a penchant for Greek terms. There is usually a satisfactory English word and that is preferred. The word *ekphrasis* was used rather loosely by many students, when 'description' would have served their meaning just as well.

Specific information

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A – Individual study

First selection

Question	Homer	Thucydides	Aeschylus	Vases	Virgil	Cicero	Ovid	Portraits
%	86	0	1	2	10	0	0	1

Part a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	2	12	31	32	23	2.7

Part b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	0	2	12	26	33	23	4	3.8

Part c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	1	4	8	13	14	14	26	13	5	2	0	4.9

Second selection

Question	Homer	Thucydides	Aeschylus	Vases	Virgil	Cicero	Ovid	Portraits
%	3	23	33	18	1	0	5	17

Part a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	1	14	30	30	25	2.7

Part b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	1	2	17	23	32	16	7	3.6

Part c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	4	3	7	11	14	16	21	13	8	2	1	5.0

Nearly 90 per cent of students answered the *Iliad* question; the second-most popular work in Section A was *Agamemnon*. The Roman portraits and Greek vases were also popular choices.

There were few errors of identification of passages and images. Students were comfortable and knowledgeable in recounting narratives and describing characters, and they identified the more salient ideas and some techniques. The better responses analysed the passages and works, and the best answers addressed classical ideas and values expressed in the sources.

Questions about techniques tended to draw lists without much examination of how the techniques worked. Direct speech is a technique in a theatrical work, but so is having actors. The interesting question is how meaning is conveyed through speech and what meanings are to be found there. The better answers addressed the descriptive techniques, the focus of the speech, what is said and what is not said.

Question 1 Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 6

Question 1a.

Few students went outside Book 6 to find a starting point for their answers. Most chose to begin with Helenus's instruction to Hector to return to Troy. This was a good place to start but a sentence addressing the bloodshed on the battlefield and the threat to the Trojans of Diomedes' rampage was also required. Some students mentioned the dialogue between Glaucus and Diomedes but were unable to convincingly link it to the extract. This was a generally well answered question.

Question 1b.

Analysis of the techniques used to describe Hector was confident and correct. Students made good use of the strong voice giving orders ('Up with you'), the 'helmet flashing', 'tall Hector' and 'My heart races to help our Trojans'. Students found Hector straightforward. Paris and Helen were not so simple. Many asserted, without presenting evidence, that Paris was a coward, and accepted Helen's self-condemnation as accurate. Some interpreted Helen's invitation to Hector, 'rest on this seat with me, dear brother', as an attempt at seduction without any evidence apart from her sympathetic words. Judgments about characters need to be supported.

Question 1c.

Students who knew Book 6 well were able to base their response on a comparison between the battlefield and the city. To address its significance to Book 6 the passage must be placed in Book 6. What happens before that leads to this scene? What happens afterwards because of this scene? What contribution does this scene make to our understanding of the war and the experiences of those involved? There is the contrast between battlefield and city, blood and filth as opposed to opulence in the royal halls; demonic Diomedes and genocidal Agamemnon as opposed to these troubled victims cowering and reproaching themselves. The better answers made comparisons with characters and passages in other parts of the book. The comparison between Helen and Andromache was fruitful, though some made it a comparison between a bad woman and a good one, which is an unsophisticated reading. Sympathetic treatment of Paris and Helen produced better answers.

Question 2 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

Question 2a.

Answers that were precise earned full marks. A deputation from Eggesta came to Athens requesting a fleet from their ally to assist against the Selinuntines. They brought 60 talents of silver – a month's pay for 60 ships – with promise of more loot in Sicily. Nicias is not in the assembly debating the proposition to send a fleet to Sicily. The decision to send the fleet has already been

taken. He is proposing that it should be reconsidered. That is why he is circumspect in his approach.

Question 2b.

Nicias is addressing the assembly, the centre of power in Athens and an audience demanding respect. He tries to put them at their ease by dispelling fears of what he might attempt to do. His flattery is ironic – it is not necessarily flattering to praise people for their risk-taking bent. He wants them to doubt their hasty decision, but he avoids telling them they are wrong. His tone is restrained – there is no emotional appeal here, only *logos*, or reason. The Athenians are characterised as risk-takers. He hopes to appeal to the older men who are experienced in war.

A little knowledge of Athenian rhetoric was helpful here. Most identified Nicias' arguments but few showed how they are used. It's harder to show the 'how' and 'why', the thinking behind the words. In the assembly some will be sympathetic to Nicias's arguments, but there are factions and he must be careful. He is not confrontational. He is measured. He tries to avoid negativity – it isn't wrong to go to Sicily, it's just the wrong time. He doesn't criticise anyone apart from a gentle jibe at Alcibiades. Those who identified the tone here did well.

Question 2c.

This question called for a broader view of Thucydides' work. Many students were aware of Thucydides' concerns about the power of the unaccountable assembly, but this needed to be supported with evidence from the prescribed sections. The launching of the Sicilian expedition presents the Athenians as ruled by their emotions, subject to overconfidence when roused by Alcibiades, but also subject to doubts when they farewell their sons down at the harbour.

Better responses mentioned democracy, the assembly and the importance of skill in speaking for those who would wield power in Athens. They noted the irony that Nicias was right but his careful warning would be ignored. Reason did not win.

Some students argued that Thucydides was opposed to democracy, but this was difficult to support from this passage in which he gives a fair, even generous, picture of the Athenian democracy in action.

Question 3 Aeschylus, 'Agamemnon'

Question 3a.

Students answered this question well, dealing with the sacrifice of Iphigenia as the key motivation for Clytaemnestra, and the arrangements she has made for the king's return: the beacon fires, the watchman, the doubting elders and the confident Queen, Agamemnon's nervous, testy return and the crimson tapestry.

Question 3b.

Most students identified the triumphant tone in Clytaemnestra's speech. Some asserted that she is a mad woman, irrationally violent for killing the murderer of her child. This is a simplistic reading. Exulting is not evidence of insanity.

The best answers started with the palace doors opening to reveal the shocking scene – a stunning theatrical technique. The powerful figure of the queen steps forward to address the audience. Her scheme and the nets. Her time came. She 'did it all'. Three blows, the third for Zeus – this is a sacrifice – she does to him what he did to Iphigenia. They are all in the nets of the gods. The shower of blood like rain bringing life – Clytaemnestra thinks this is a rebirth, the end of a nightmare. She ponders a libation, the vintage of the curse, to put it to rest. The passage is rich in metaphors and images which students used well.

Question 3c.

This question was not so well answered. Many answers simply expanded on the character of Clytaemnestra without referring to the curse, the inevitability of this scene and her domination of the bumbling chorus. It is, in several senses, the climax of the play, the revelation. Clytaemnestra has brooded on this plan for ten years and now it is complete. She towers over the sputtering chorus in her moment of triumph. But they are right; it isn't over. Someone will come to avenge Agamemnon. The better answers responded to Clytaemnestra's magnificence, but also her delusion that the curse was ended.

Question 4 Greek Vases

Question 4a.

Students responded to this question in two quite different ways. Some described the process of turning a pot, painting it with slip, creating the friezes at the shoulder and foot and inscribing lines and textures. Others focused on the composition of the image, the stances and interactions of the figures. Both kinds of response were accepted and could attain full marks.

Question 4b.

Accurate and detailed accounts of the labours of Heracles abounded. Most students needed to write more on the ideas, though. What sort of hero was Heracles, as he is depicted in these images? Students who scored well identified his heroism as tragic.

Question 4c.

The portrayal of the Greek hero in vase paintings is a rich theme given the number of heroes depicted in the prescribed works. Better responses were constructed around the tragic aspects of the Heracles legends and found similarities with some heroes (Oedipus) and differences from others. Medium-scoring answers made many points of comparison, high-scoring answers explored the representation of the hero in these works.

Question 5 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 10

Question 5a.

Most answers began with Juno's approach to Jupiter and her reason for luring Turnus away from the battle. Better answers noted the return of Aeneas with allies and the fighting fury he becomes after the death of Pallas. Juno recognises that Aeneas will kill Turnus soon and she obtains Jupiter's permission to give Turnus a brief reprieve so he can see his father one last time.

Question 5b.

This was a question that most students handled well. They went through the passage line by line, picking out the descriptive words and phrases. Mezentius is compared to a rock on the shore, standing firm against wind and wave. He performs the act of a giant, killing Latagus with a rock like a mountain top. Then he is like a wild and dangerous boar, untroubled by the hunters' spears. All the hunters hang back in fear while he circles forward, step by step.

Question 5c.

Students who knew the last 100 lines of Book 10 enjoyed the possibilities here. First, Orodes, dying, predicts Mezentius's death, and Mezentius says 'Jupiter will see to that' – a common Homeric scene before the death of a hero. Mezentius becomes a giant, as huge as Orion, wading through oceans. First blood – Aeneas wounds him in the groin and he is shaken, 'terrified' and he retreats – not in a cowardly fashion as some students claimed, but to recover. Meanwhile Lausus, his son, has leapt forward to face Aeneas and protect his father. Aeneas kills the boy but cries

aloud for pity when he sees the youth's pale face as he lies dying. When the body of Lausus is brought back to Mezentius he is grief-stricken, he weeps and curses himself for letting his son go to his death. He has an epiphany, he sees his failure, his violence, and he resolves to die. In crippling pain, he mounts his horse and faces Aeneas, who brings him down. As Aeneas approaches to dispatch him Mezentius asks to be buried with his son. He dies nobly. Students who knew the book recounted the change in Mezentius accurately and earned high marks.

Question 6 Cicero, 'On Duties', Book 3

No students attempted this question.

Question 7 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Question 7a.

There were some impressive answers to this question. Good responses noted that Ovid describes power at work. The assembled gods are compared to the Romans at the time of Julius Caesar's assassination. They are terrified by the challenge to their supremacy and cling to Jupiter, just as the Romans feared the murderers of Caesar and now cling to Augustus as their saviour. Ovid makes a craven political gesture to Augustus who is directly compared to Jupiter. From this point in the extract all of Jupiter's gestures of authority belong equally to Augustus. Jupiter now addresses the spellbound divinities, confident and effective – just like Augustus. 'The whole world shuddered' is a dramatic personification. There is hyperbole – 'tried to extinguish the Roman name', and the imagery of 'bristling with wild beliefs'. Jupiter calms the storm, hushes the crowd, brings expectant silence.

Question 7b.

This is all about Augustus, and Ovid's need to be wary of his disapproval. Better responses showed a strong awareness of this. Ovid was writing at a time when free speech was not an option – as he discovered to his regret. *Metamorphoses* is dated to around 8 CE, with Augustus in firm control of the empire that he had ruled for over 30 years. It was written not long before Ovid's exile. Ovid misrepresents the Roman reaction to Caesar's assassination to please Augustus under whose reign Caesar has been deified. Augustus was determined to restore Roman morality after the dissolution of the civil war years and writers who produced questionable work were vulnerable. Perhaps because of his popularity Ovid thought he would escape censure as long as he praised Augustus. High-scoring responses noted the comparison between Jupiter and the Roman emperor in the way he exercises power.

Question 7c.

Only a few responses made direct comparisons between the transformation of Lycaeon and other transformations. Most of the transformations in *Metamorphoses* are a direct result of choices that characters make. This account is different, though. The focus is not on Lycaeon's error because of his decision-making. It is on the destabilising effect of his testing the gods. The world is endangered by such a threat to the natural order. It is important that Jupiter (or Augustus) takes charge and reassures the gods (Romans). Unlike many other transformations, this one is the direct action of the gods, intervening to punish. It is the restitution of order rather than the perverse action of nature. Coming at the beginning of the work it sets a precedent for judging the transformations that follow. Lycaeon will be transformed into a wolf, a fitting punishment, not an arbitrary one. To produce a strong response the student had to take a broad view of Ovid's work and refer to other transformations.

Question 8 Roman Portraits

Question 8a.

This question was well answered. Students recognised Augustus of the Prima Porta and Trajan, and most knew the dates and the respective sociohistorical contexts. In relation to Augustus, good responses mentioned his restoration of order in war-torn Rome, the Pax Romana and his rejection of regal symbols. Trajan, the second of the five good emperors, was given the honorific of *optimus princeps*, campaigned in Dacia and extended the empire to its greatest reach.

Question 8b.

Students identified plenty of techniques. They described the sculptures in detail – military attire, the emperor as *Imperator*, victor; *ad locutio*, the emperor as orator; and *contrapposto*, a dynamic stance, but also required to balance the statue. The youthful face of Augustus (he was in his mid-forties at least, but the face is much younger) compared to the middle-aged veristic face of Trajan. While Augustus is elegant in his stance, Trajan looks heavier, more like a worker than an aristocrat. There was description of the dress, the cuirasses, robes, bare feet, Augustus's cupid and dolphin – the link to the Julio-Claudian dynasty and Venus. Many answers included all of this material and earned high marks.

Question 8c.

The better answers focused on Roman portraiture as propaganda. They spoke of victory, authority, control. The figures are calm, decisive, effective. Trajan uses some of the symbols established by Augustus. Most chose to compare Augustus with Caligula and Trajan with Hadrian.

Section B – Comparative study

Question selection

Question	Aeschylus Herodotus	Aristophanes Plato	Homer Sophocles	Horace Ovid	Livy Tacitus	Suetonius Seneca	Altar Column	Aristophanes Plautus
%	8	17	56	2	2	0	16	0

Essay

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	0	2	1	1	2	5	3	3	6	5	10	10	11	10	10	8	6	3	2	0	1	11.1

Note that although Section B had a mark allocation of 40 marks, for convenience the distribution of marks above is shown on a 20-mark scale.

Essays were of a good length generally and most dealt with the question. Question 3 on *The Odyssey* and 'Ajax' was the most popular, followed by Question 2 on Aristophanes and Plato and Question 7 on the Pergamon Altar and Trajan's column. There were no essays on Suetonius and Seneca (Question 6) or Aristophanes and Plautus (Question 8).

Knowledge of the works and their sociohistorical contexts was widespread and usually accurate. The higher-level skills of analysis and evaluation were less in evidence.

Students needed to link the sociohistorical material to the question and avoid giving too much general background information that had no relevance.

There were tenuous sociohistorical links in some essays – some students read Ajax as carrying a political message of opposition to Athenian belligerence in the first Peloponnesian War. This is

unlikely since Sophocles had close political connections with both Cimon and Pericles and served as a general in the suppression of Samos in 441 BCE. Many students were quite confused about the Homeric sociohistorical context, some placing Homer in the late Bronze Age and others placing his work as contemporary with the Persian wars.

Some essays strayed from the question and turned into general comparisons between the works. This was particularly evident in responses to Question 1 where students did not opt for particular differences and similarities.

There is a marked difference between illustration and argument. Many students accepted the topic as a given and proceeded to find evidence illustrating its assertion. The task is to consider the topic and take a position in response to it that is supported by evidence from the works. Illustration makes for a weak essay.

Defining terms and interrogating the question produced results for some students. In Question 3, which stated 'Revenge has terrible consequences for all', the phrase 'for all' was significant. There was ample material for a thorough examination of this statement and students responded well. Odysseus suffers no sanction for murdering the serving maids though he says they were forcibly taken and hence are innocent. The torture and maiming of Melanthios appears to have no negative consequence for Odysseus. In *Ajax*, Athena gets her petty revenge and there are no consequences for gods. Menelaus and Agamemnon are unscathed. Students who considered the question carefully wrote good essays. The topic invited a qualified response. Question 1 was broad. The student's first task was to decide which similarities and differences they would address. Most focused narrowly on presentation of the Battle of Salamis and its aftermath and ignored genre. In other questions, 'justice' and 'fairness' needed definition (Question 2), similarly, 'leader' (Question 5), and 'glorify' (Question 7). 'Glorify' was a particularly apt word to describe the purpose of monumental public art in ancient times. But what exactly was the context of these works, and how was the glorification carried out? Thoughtful responses posed these questions and answered them.

There was some evidence of misreading. The message of 'The Clouds' (Question 2) was a problem for many students. There was a tendency to read the play as a serious attack on the dishonesty and political chicanery of Socrates.

Many students disregarded genre, which is particularly important when comparing the paired works. The pairings were prescribed with genre in mind, to give students a starting point for comparison. Consideration of genre was infrequent in comparisons between 'The Persians' and *The Histories* (Question 1). But genre explains why Aeschylus focuses exclusively on the tragic aspects of the Persian defeat while Herodotus constructs a narrative aimed at explanation of the outcome.

The best essays resulted from students asking questions; for example, asking why the king of Pergamon chose bare writhing male torsos to represent greatness and power.

Performance on the criteria

Knowledge of the classical works and their relationships with their sociohistorical contexts. Students did best on this first criterion; they knew the works and the times which produced them.

Analysis of the ideas and the techniques used to express these ideas in the classical works. Some ideas were handled well, such as revenge in Question 3 and glorification in Question 7. Most essays would have benefited from more attention to techniques.

Comparison and evaluation of the ideas and techniques used in the classical works. Comparison was satisfactory, though it is not enough to juxtapose observations about the two works. Good comparison may be included as a separate paragraph after independent analysis of the two works, but it is better when interwoven throughout the essay.

Construction of an argument based on relevant evidence. Students were often more successful at writing a structured essay if they wrote an introduction setting out their position, defining terms and stating their main arguments. In better essays claims were invariably supported by evidence.