

2017 VCE English examination report

General comments

The 2017 English examination assessed student achievement in the skills and outcomes indicated in the first year of the current *VCE English Study Design*, accredited from 2017 to 2020 for Units 3 and 4.

The examination consisted of three sections. Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text offered students the choice of two distinct topics for each of the 20 texts on the text list published by the VCAA. Students were required to complete one response. Section B – Comparative analysis of texts instructed students to 'write a comparative analysis of a selected pair of texts in response to **one** topic (either i. or ii.) on **one** pair of texts.' Section C – Argument and persuasive language required students to analyse the ways in which argument and language were used by Denise Walker (as well as a response by Louise) to persuade their audiences.

Assessment was based on criteria, which were applied holistically. Scores were awarded that reflected the assessors' judgment of the whole response on balance, and students were scored over the full normative range of available marks. The descriptors used for assessment are based on the criteria and are general indicators of what might reasonably be expected for the specified mark ranges in each section of the examination. Fine judgments are then made when the exact characteristics of responses for any one year are analysed.

More than 40 000 students sat for the 2017 English examination, and the skills and qualities shown by the majority of students were impressive. Most students were able to respond well and present three completed pieces of writing that demonstrated an understanding of the knowledge and skills required in the study. Both the quality and quantity of work produced under the timed conditions of the examination were quite sound and, at times, outstanding. The growing awareness of the value of close textual knowledge and careful management of response structure indicates sound teaching and learning.

In this first implementation year of the Units 3 and 4 study, it was evident that students had the ability to adapt to the new requirements for 2017 with very little difficulty.

On the other hand, it should be noted that:

- Some students did not fully engage with the elements of the topics. Greater care needs to be
 taken in analysing and recognising the specific expectations of each topic often this comes
 down to a precise understanding of the words that comprise the task.
- Strong language skills are expected and necessary for success.
- It is recommended that students organise their time so that enough time is left to proofread their work.
- There is little need for summary in any of the three sections. While the context of a particular
 point, or indeed the text itself, may need to be established, some students used too much of
 their available time presenting the plot. Students can assume that assessors have an intimate
 knowledge of the texts.

For the most part, students responded to the tasks appropriately. It is imperative that students recognise the need to closely read their set texts and be able to analyse them, since the skills of analysis are integral to success both in the study and in the examination.



Specific information

Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

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

Throughout the report, student responses are provided for illustrative and informative reasons, and they may form the basis of profitable discussions. There are no complete responses but more focus on specific traits. These should not be taken as the best that is possible; none is without shortcomings of one sort or another. Readers will obviously be able to make many more observations about the quality of these responses beyond the comments offered in this report.

Section A – Analytical interpretation of a text

Students overwhelmingly demonstrated a competent awareness of their selected text. The highest-scoring responses revealed an assured capacity to closely analyse the text as well as to directly address and fully resolve the chosen topic. Such students were readily able to demonstrate high-level writing skills across the four core assessment criteria:

- knowledge and understanding of the text, and the ideas and issues it explores
- development of a coherent analysis in response to the topic
- use of textual evidence to support the interpretation
- control and effectiveness of language use, as appropriate to the task

It is important for students to analyse their chosen topic fully as well as construct an essay that consistently addresses the ideas that emerge from that topic. Students cannot be dismissive of portions of a topic, nor effectively rewrite the topic to suit their own preconceived or previously practised approach.

In response to the topic, 'Characters in *The Golden Age* are haunted by their past' one student astutely noted, 'London's use of character and symbolic place, allows for characters to reflect on their past with not only horror, but light'. Such considered thinking within the scope of the topic is always to be encouraged. Consider the following topic, 'All About Eve presents the world of the theatre as a place of intense rivalries and intense relationships. Discuss.' A number of students ignored either 'intense rivalries' or 'intense relationships', where others conflated them as if they were the same idea, without analysing these ideas in any detail.

One mid-range script opened in the following manner, 'All About Eve by Joseph L Mankiewicz is a film set in New York which follows a young eager actress Eve and her ability to manipulate those around her in order to fulfil her dream of acting in Hollywood. The film displays how the theatre can be destroying to some relationships while cementing others. There are many relationships within the film.' This student has omitted the key notion of rivalries and this continued throughout the rest of the response.

It is important that students reflect the implied tension that exists in some topics in their responses. Consider the topic, 'In the play *Medea*, the crucial conflict is between reason and passion.' Students needed to be able to construct a reasoned and appropriately supported argument, as seen in the following excerpt from a student's response, 'Therefore, perhaps Jason's fatal flaw is his inability to sympathise with Medea or realise the extent to which her passion can destroy.' and later, 'As the dramatic intensity of the play unfolds Euripides exposes a debate in which overruling passion overcomes unfeeling logic.'

Students also needed to show an awareness of the significance of the textual form, which recognises its impact on the reader, viewer or audience. In the case of multimodal texts such as *Mabo* or *All About Eve*, students needed to reveal an understanding of the diverse ways in which multiple elements intentionally convey meaning. In the *Mabo* topic, "This film shows what qualities are needed to be a leader." Discuss.' such skills were overtly required. This also applied to *The Complete Maus* topic, 'How does the movement between the present and the past affect Art Spiegelman's telling of Vladek's story?'

Likewise, students writing on collections of poetry needed to be able to analyse the ways in which language intentionally impacts on the ideas presented in the topic, for example, in Donne's Selected Poems, "Donne's poetry presents life as full of temptation.' Discuss." When writing about a play, students need to consider structural elements and language elements that impact on the audience in the conveying of key ideas and themes. For instance, in responding to the Medea topic, "In the play Medea, the crucial conflict is between reason and passion.' Discuss." one student astutely observed, "...She is described as "not a woman, but a lioness, with the nature more savage than a Tuscan Scylla's", conveying her dehumanization as a result of her actions. Animal imagery is also employed when the Nurse sees her "glaring at them like a bull." All the animals used to describe her are unpredictably dangerous and aggressive paralleling Medea's own savage temperament. Thus, Euripides states how passion and its outcomes act as one of the main motivating forces in the play."

Students are required to write these responses in analytical/expository form, so a clear and definite sense of structure must be apparent. There should be careful consideration of how best to develop and sequence a unified and consistent case with which to resolve the chosen topic.

Advice for students

- have an intimate knowledge of the text
- understand the significance of the features of the text's genre
- have a clear understanding of the explicit and implied ideas and values of the text
- practise analysing topics, focusing on all the elements presented in the topic
- organise ideas from the text to support the view of the topic to be presented
- work on developing fluent, well-written responses that are carefully and logically structured and that use appropriate vocabulary
- write with confidence

Section B – Comparative analysis of texts

Students well understood the essential task for this section. Very few students strayed from the two prescribed texts and brought in outside material.

Students were well prepared and there were a number of provocative explorations of the topics using the texts. Students should not come to the examination with prepared responses. It is important that students carefully read and analyse the wording of the topic they choose to respond to and plan and craft a response that directly responds to that particular topic.

The topics mirrored the different styles and wording presented in the sample written examination published by the VCAA in February 2017. All 16 topics included the verb 'compare', so there was no confusion about the task. The themes and ideas offered to students for exploration were accessible and few students had difficulties dealing with the key ideas of the topics.

The challenge for this section was in showing the capacity to make comparisons and contrasts seamlessly between the two texts, with a sense of balanced textual awareness and analytically informed and supported insights provided throughout. While it is useful to employ terms such as 'similarly', 'in contrast' or 'mirroring this', these in themselves are not comparison. They are only the framework for connections to be made. The comparison (which, of course, includes significant differences as well as similarities) still needs to be developed and needs to be explicit in the exploration of the texts and topics.

Students who offered a detailed description of one text and then the other with only the word 'similarly' in between were not comparing but simply offering a general narrative about the texts, as is the case in the following extract.

In the world of Tracks the natural environment was very unwelcoming. The harsh sun meant that Robyn Davidson was always in danger of dying of thirst and on more than one occasion becomes sunburnt very badly. She rode for miles and miles without any shade and heat, at times, was unbearable. Not only did she have to deal with the climate and weather, there were also wild camels that intended on harming her train as well as dangerous snakes. She was constantly under threat of death and was even afraid of being taken advantage of by people she met along the way. Similarly, Into the Wild had a hostile environment but for the opposite reason. Chris must live by himself in the wilds of Alaska. Here he must try to exist and deal with flooding rivers, a lack of food in the winter and even an angry bear. The harsh climate meant that he nearly froze to death a number of times and relied on an old trailer when the weather became really bad. In the end the hostile environment claimed his life and it is clear that he was not made to live there.

On the other hand, a higher-scoring response used the same term but then elaborated on the similarities throughout the paragraphs.

Both D'Aguiar and Wright postulate the root of all "gross injustice" stems from the social institutions which prioritise patriotism and economic interests above morality. Hence, through the non-chronological use of editorials, referred to as the Virginian editorials, D'Aguiar outlines through instilling pragmatic views through the use of media, white supremacists are able to uphold their belief in slaves being just a "business" that "best serves [their] interest". This in turn allows the white dominated society to spread their belief of slaves being likened to that of "stock" and "cattle" which ultimately answers to plantations owners' "physical and mental wellbeing". As such, D'Aguiar insists the injustice remains heavily entrenched, regardless of time, as symbolised by the non-chronological order of the editorials, also upheld by other institutions such as "gentlemen's club". In incorporating the motif of the club founded by plantation owners' "fathers and his friends", they are able to further encourage the coining of slavery as "fair" as long as it is for the "love [they] hold for God" validating the common action "cast[ing] aspersions" upon slaves, mostly through the use of a "whip and rod". Similarly, Wright also emphasises the lack of justice that permeates in Australia, disadvantaging Indigenous Australians also through social institutions and media influence. Comparable to the media use

of the Virginian editorials, Wright also employs structural use of an "old wireless voice" that echoes throughout the ANZAC myth. Within this, Wright accentuates non-indigenous Australians are unfairly marginalised from history, excluded from being considered "gallant figures" characteristic of an Australian man as they do not have "fair yeses", and are not "substantially European" but more like "anthropological specimen". Consequently, Wright and D'Aguiar assert that all that is fair is ultimately converted to an unjust social truth accepted by the majority of society when maintained by institutions.

Many students understood the value of examining distinctions between the texts in their exploration of the topic. Often it is the differences in the texts that offer thoughtful insights and development of the topic.

Ultimately, authoritarian states manifest into the continual monitoring and surveillance of their citizens due to the inherent distrust and realisation of the natural human will to dissent. In '1984', the continual surveillance of citizens of Oceania never ceases, as the Party attempts to maintain absolute control over its adherents, and thus know everyone's secrets. Through devices such as the telescreens, such constant surveillance is physically presented, with their ability to "simultaneously receive and transmit" exhibiting Orwell's foreboding, of allowing totalitarian states to penetrate too deep into the lives of citizens. It is Winston's observation that one had to live with the "assumption that every sound you made was overheard", that exemplifies the notion of the impossibility of holding secrets, portrays the extent regimes go to, in order to maintain complete authority, their clandestine role ensuring the inability of dissidents to conceal secrets. Similarly, in 'Stasiland', Funder depicts a world ravaged by surveillance, hauntingly similar to the fictitious '1984'. Funder describes the way that the Stasi had "microphones disquised as flower petals", and "implanted in apartment walls", drawing clear parallels with the "telescreens" of '1984'. Additionally, Funder explores the "weapon" of the Stasi, East Germany's own "thought police". Through her depiction of Herr Winz, Funder emphasises his disbelief in the fact that Australians had not been "numbered" and "labelled" by "identity papers", exhibiting the notion that this excessive surveillance was second nature to such men. Thus although Funder's real life GDR are unable to practically assume such an omniscient stance as the Party of Oceania, there are undoubtedly parallels between the two Parties' methods of suppressing the ability of individuals to cultivate secrets in oppressive environments.

The following upper-range example demonstrates the student qualifying the idea of sacrifice from the topic and then makes strong comparative points before making clear the distinctions the two texts offer.

While both authors present ordinary people who act out of self-sacrificing courage, they provide stark contrast in those leaders who abuse their potential to do extraordinary good, becoming villainous. Following the sermon during which Michael Mompellion asks the villagers to not "leave while [the] plague lasts", Colonel Bradford opts to deny the "Sunday oath" in the hope of self-preservation and protection from the scourge in his flight to Oxfordshire. These actions show that he values the "lives of [his family]" more than he cares about the consequences that befall the villagers or the countless staff he abandons. Despite the evident pragmatism in his actions to protect "what is his", his selfishness reveals that the fear of death and disease can incite cowardice, preventing those of power and affluence acting out of integrity. More despicable is Reverend Parris. When he discovers his daughter Betty and niece Abigail "sportin" in the woods" he fears the townspeople will "howl [him] out of Salem for such corruption" in his house. Instead of assuring his superstitious parishioners that witchcraft is not to blame, he uses the Devil as a scapegoat. His call for John Hale ignites suspicions and allows personal vengeances to be exacted through the testimony of the ostensibly afflicted girls. Parris' actions exhibit how the fear of losing power and wealth can cause leaders to fail in their responsibility to act courageously for others. While the actions of the two characters are somewhat similar, the fact that Bradford acted in the interest of his family, not only himself, poises him as somewhat less sinister than the entirely acquisitive Parris.

The exploration of differences in the texts can lead to thoughtful insights into the topic. While the following example may be somewhat verbose, it nevertheless fulfilled the task of comparing the texts very well.

...while Eastwood maintains a utopian vision of the human desire to reunite once polarised individuals trumping the need to gain retribution, Malouf shows a more cynical perspective of human error. The character of Pienaar functions as the mouthpiece of Mandela's conciliatory policies which define "revenge only begets revenge" or "retribution is petty" and the inability to forgive only reinforces the cycle of violence which haunts the post-Apartheid nation of South Africa. However, Malouf's character Achilles deviates from the virtuous and forgiving character of Mandela, instead embroils in an archaic revenge code which sees his volatile grief, inhibit his capacity to extend forgiveness. Following Hector's heretical slaughtering of Patroclus, Achilles "mauls" Hector's body "stripped from tendon to tendon". Personifying Malouf's interpretation of the human instinct to seek revenge on those who have caused an individual pain, Achilles embodies the archetype villainous "warrior" figure. Iniquitously postulating "It is never enough" and sacrilegiously lacerating Hector's already slaughtered body as if "he had always known this was what he was to do". Achilles' vengeance contrasts with the Carter, Somax's ability to forgive his mule Beauty for the accidental death of his son. Thus although Achilles is trapped within a paradigm of blood lust and retribution, Eastwood's characters of Mandela and Pienaar endorse a nation which takes "their knives and guns and throw them into the sea". Furthermore, the artificial nature of the truce between Achilles and Priam diverges from the reconciliation achieved between the black and white South Africans where the "dawning era" is one of genuine national unity. The foreshadowing of Priam's inevitable slaughter at the hands of Achilles' Greek forces renders the forgiveness extended by Priam to Achilles' trite and obsolete. Hence while Eastwood adheres to a vision of multicultural capacity for positive change overcoming the need for revenge, Malouf highlights the limitations to human reconciliation being achieved.

There are no specific expectations about the way in which students structure their responses. Students are free to put their ideas together in a manner they feel best fulfils the requirements of the task. This was set out clearly in the examination, to develop a 'discussion of meaningful connections, similarities or differences between the texts, in response to the topic' and make 'use of textual evidence to support the comparative analysis'.

Students should continue to work on comparison as the basis for discussing and exploring the set topics and to discover the approaches and structures that best fulfil this. This includes:

- ensuring a consistent and assured focus on the central idea or issue presented by the topic
- considering meaningful contrasts as well as similarities, which may shed meaningful light on the distinctive ways in which the texts explore ideas
- avoiding excessive plot focus or lengthy descriptive passages that fail to shed light on the issue for consideration.

It was evident, however, that in this first year of comparative analysis of texts, most students had a clear understanding of the requirements and were able to produce good work across all eight pairs of texts.

Section C – Analysis of argument and language to persuade

Section C required students to analyse 'the ways in which argument and language are used to persuade others to share a point(s) of view'. The instructions were also specific in defining the term 'language' as 'written, spoken and visual language', and thus it was expected that students respond to any visual presented in the material – in this case a black-and-white photograph of a pile of full garbage bags. Students needed to select examples from the material that allowed them to demonstrate their understanding of how language was being used to persuade. Students were also expected to analyse how the writers set up their arguments and constructed the pieces in

order to persuade their respective audiences to support their points of view. While the majority of students were able to plan their responses so that they could cover both pieces, some spent a disproportionate amount on Walker at the expense of offering thoughtful insights on Louise. While there is no expectation that discussions be equally balanced, the material presented needs to be dealt with meaningfully. In a few cases, discussion of the photograph dominated the response, leaving little opportunity to explore insights into argument and written language use.

Students, on the whole, understood the nature of the task and that Walker's intended audience was the Spire School community. While Louise's response was specifically aimed at the Principal ('Fair go, Denise.'), it was also a public response attempting to elicit support from that same community. The majority of students were aware of the importance of the 'Background information', which sets the context from which the writers' base their pieces. Most students avoided simply transcribing or quoting the information, setting out the basis of the pieces eloquently in their opening.

The following introduction incisively and fluently sets out the context for the pieces in the material.

While pre-packaged food items have been lauded by some as convenient, others are critical of their corrosive effects on the environment. In her weekly message entitled 'Principle's Message' (Spire Primary School Website, 08/07/17), Principal Denise Walker asserts that students, staff and parents must reduce the use of plastic packaging. With the primary audience of parents with children at Spire Primary School in mind, Walker maintains an intimate and at times punctilious tone. In response, parent Louise has commented on the message, repudiating Walker's proposal on the basis that it interferes with '21st Century living'. She employs a critical register, targeting fellow parents and readers of Walker's message.

Another opening understood the value of showing the clear connection between the two pieces.

Following Spire Primary School's Principal, Denise Walker witnessing the build up of rubbish in the school, she decided to address this issue in a weekly message on the school's website on 8 July 2017. She outlined her concern and the parents responsibility to act, as well as introducing a new curriculum that she was planning on implementing. Addressing parents of her students in a concerned and incredulous tone, she frames the issue as a threat to the environment and society at large. Her message elicited an impassioned response from a parent, Louise, who commented on the newsletter expressing her disapproval of the Principal's requests of parents, proffering that such ideas and changes infringe on the civil liberties of parents. Utilizing a tone of dismay and an earnest tone, she aims to expose that the principal's suggestions are illogical and frankly, unsupported.

The heart of the task, however, was a close analysis of the way these writers used language in an attempt to persuade. Most students could offer a clear understanding of the intentions of both Walker and Louise. However, some students listed a series of techniques, with a few using topic sentences for each paragraph as identification of techniques.

An understanding of how the argument is set up and some thoughtful insights into Walker's attempt to persuade are demonstrated in the following interpretation.

Walker opens her newsletter by highlighting the important role Spire Primary School has played thus far in protecting the environment. "I often take this school down new paths", contends Walker. Her words, designed to seem self-deprecating when coupled with the phrase "Oh, no! I hear you say", are in actual fact utilised to demonstrate her innovative thinking and commitment to preserving the planet. Whilst it appears to be an admission of her faults, it is actually Walker's attempt to highlight her good nature and thus maintain support from parents. Walker then follows this introduction with a list of all the changes the school, and by extension, herself, have implemented in the name of improving the environment such as the weekly "walk / pedal to school day" and "four bins...not just three!" Here Walker invites the parents to realise that Spire Primary School has become incredibly environmentally friendly through the introduction of her initiatives. Her enthusiastic use of exclamation marks when listing these initiatives attempts to

elicit a feeling of excitement within her readership of parents, who may see the programs as a source of pride. By opening with this, Walker seeks to create fondness within parents towards her previous environment initiatives, which may then make them more receptive towards the new waste-free proposal which she is about to outline.

Another example offers thoughtful insights into language used to persuade while contextualising it around the construction of arguments. Both of these scripts showed a clear understanding of the task while thinking deeply about how the writer is attempting to persuade.

Following Walker's stress on the school's role in combatting the rubbish build up, she ensures that parents, the readers, are also aware that they are complicit, identifying areas in which they should improve. By positing this argument after the first, the Principal ensures that parents do not feel attacked, but can respect and acknowledge shared responsibility. To incite action on their part, Walker describes in detail her motivation in writing her message, and through this seeks to make parents realise that they have been unconsciously contributing to the "amount of superfluous packaging in [their] everyday lives". She elucidates that this crime is seemingly innocent and harmful by repeatedly describing the packaging with adjectives like "little" and "cute", identifying that this is all a façade that has culminated in " – more rubbish".

Not all students, however, were able to analyse the material and some simply quoted from the material, without any explanation or direct analysis, which did not fulfil the requirements of the task.

There was no explicit expectation that students compare the two pieces. Many did, however, use comparison to offer astute insights in how argument and language were used by the writers to persuade. The following example adeptly examines the two writers.

It is evident when placed against each other that Denise Walker offers an idealistic, hopeful view of effecting change in people's thinking about the environment, while Louise's response is more realistic taking readers into the world of a busy family. Phrases such as "mornings are chaos" and "filling [bottles] takes time" are intended to portray a stressed situation that Louise implies will worsen with Walker's ideas. Describing the Principal's ideas as "a vague principle" attempts to diminish the importance of Walker's proposal and finally Louise associates takeaway food and teabags with "civilized people" as opposed to Walker's attempts at denigrating all the modern conveniences like "little fish".

The image used by Denise Walker in her Principal's Message was generally handled well and was open to various interpretations, as long as the interpretation was consistent with the ideas presented by Walker. Higher-scoring responses were thoughtful in the placement of the analysis of the visual so that its role in the message became clear. The following high-scoring response used Walker's language as a springboard for moving to the photograph.

To highlight that these "little", seemingly negligible contributions to the amount of rubbish, Walker includes an image of mountains of black bin bags on the website. The image appears to be barren and empty, consisting solely of the black bags and a cloudy murky sky. The background of the image is blurry, however it is evident that the rubbish bags are there, creating a sense that the rubbish is never ending. The grey scale nature of the sky invites descriptions like desolate and destitute. Correlating with Walker's exclamation "more rubbish!", readers would recognize that the image is representative of the current situation, bolstering the feeling of responsibility to stop contributing to the already endless rubbish.

The following response successfully integrates the visual while offering thoughtful analysis of it as adding to the persuasiveness.

However Walker's tone modulates from proud to perturbed as she outlines the peril of packaging. Utilizing the verb "clogging", the principal suggests that waste packaging is overflowing, inundating and drowning the bins, a cataclysmic eventuality further warned by the photograph of rubbish bags. Heaped upon one another and extending infinitely into the background, the dark image with the ominous dense clouds of pollution pessimistically

threatens total environmental destruction led by wastage. Fear is further instilled in the audience in the appeal to patriotism, "clogging...our country". Australian parents are likely to feel emotionally connected to their state so to have their nation damaged by rubbish it attempting to compel them to regard packaging as a detestable scourge. Indeed, Walker compounds upon the prospect of environmental deterioration by labelling it "irreversible"; an adjective that dramatizes the impact of wastage as it is presented as the legacy of these parents.

Students who scored most highly showed a confidence in analysing argument and language that comes with regular and authentic engagement with persuasive writing in many forms.

Table 1 shows the texts selected by students in the 2017 English examination and the average scores achieved by students for the associated text. The table also shows the scores for Section B and Section C for the same grouping of students.

Table 1: Text selection from Section A of the 2017 English examination and average scores for Sections A, B, and C

Section A Text	% of students	% Average score Section A	% Average score Section B	% Average score Section C
All About Eve	11	55	53	53
Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity	<1	54	52	53
Burial Rites	9	54	55	54
Cloudstreet	2	59	54	54
Frankenstein	8	59	59	57
I for Isobel	4	62	56	56
Island: Collected Stories	2	60	57	56
Mabo	4	54	49	51
Measure for Measure	4	69	68	64
Medea	23	53	56	55
No Sugar	6	54	51	50
Old/New World: New & Selected Poems	1	55	54	52
Selected Poems	1	70	67	62
The Complete Maus	3	59	52	53
The Golden Age	4	53	54	52
The Left Hand of Darkness	<1	73	65	65
The Lieutenant	3	55	54	53
The Thing Around Your Neck	2	56	55	54
The White Tiger	5	54	52	52
This Boy's Life	8	51	50	50
No text	1	<1	20	30