Section One: Close Reading

The first section of the Literature examination tests your skills of textual analysis. Being able to analyse examples of poetry, prose and drama is critical to the successful completion of this course, so it is important to consider the close reading skills you will need in this section.

A mistake that many students make when completing this section is that they select the text that best fits with their plans for Section Two of the exam. That often means, for example, that they really want to write on their studied novel and play, so the result is that they will indiscriminately select the poetry text in Section One. This is not a successful approach; don't put all of your eggs in one basket! You should be equally prepared to write about all of the texts you have studied. While you may have a preference for particular texts, you should enter the exam and make the best choices for the paper in front of you.

Another error that students often make is beginning Section One with a plan to create a particular 'alternative' reading of the text, such as a gender or Marxist reading. This is problematic, as the text may not lend itself to this particular type of reading and, in trying to force one, you may be missing an opportunity for a successful close reading. Close reading itself is a reading practice – to use this reading strategy well is a complex task. Don't try to impress a marker with unnecessary multiple readings; it is better to perform one reading well than attempt multiple interpretations and achieve only a superficial discussion. To apply two reading practices in the time allocated for this section is incredibly challenging. Remember, readings do not have to have a name; it is perfectly acceptable to express a reading as 'my reading'.

Approaching the text

Below is a series of points that should help you to prepare for a close reading of any text that may appear in an examination paper. Read through all of the texts in the paper and make your choice based on the following considerations:

- What do I think are the main ideas of each text?
- How does each text represent people, places and events?
- What are the main generic and language conventions of each text?
- Can I make any observations about context in these texts?
- Does my context play an important role in my response to any of these texts?
- Can I make any useful or significant connections to other texts?
- Am I resistant to the dominant reading of any of these texts?
- Would it make an interesting or enriching case if I applied a specific reading strategy?

When you have completed this process, consider which text offers the best possibilities for a thoughtful and well-evidenced reading. Annotate your chosen text, plan what you now wish to say about the text logically and select useful examples. Remember, use of textual evidence accounts for almost a quarter of your marks here. Use evidence extensively, but avoid reproducing large 'chunks' of the extract. There's no excuse not to; the text is right there in front of you!

Planning and writing

You must think through how you will organise and write your response. Some students find writing a dot-point plan helpful, while others prefer to brainstorm or create a diagram. Some only need to do the thinking and jot down a few reminder words. You must find a method that helps you to organise your points in the best order. Experiment over the year and become familiar with your preferred process – what works best for you. Dedicate about five minutes to planning your response to Section One.

Remember, your reading should have a logical order and this should be indicated in your introduction. This doesn't mean you need to include a sentence that begins: 'In my reading I will discuss'. Many candidates find it helpful to approach their reading as an argument, making logical points to convince a reader of their interpretation.

Don't try to include everything you understand or can identify. Focus on creating a well-developed discussion of a few ideas rather than a 'shopping list' of everything you can find. Focus on what makes sense to you in the text. In other words, write about what you understand and don't worry about the things that are not clear or that you don't understand.

What is a reading?

Students often find the instruction to 'present a reading' difficult. This may be because students think it is such a broad instruction – it could be so many different things. This is true; it is extremely broad, but you should try to see this as helpful rather than intimidating.

A 'reading' of a text is simply an explanation of what you understand about it. Sometimes it is defined as the 'meaning made by the reader'. Put simply, it is one interpretation of a text.

A reading might be:

- an explanation of the main themes and ideas that you feel the text communicates and a discussion of the factors that led you to that understanding
- an explanation of the dominant reading of a text – the view that the construction of the text encourages
- a discussion of a resistance that you have to the text's ideas or construction (though be sure to establish the dominant reading as a point of comparison here)
- an experiment with a particular reading practice – that is, a lens that you apply to the text (this is a specific way of looking at the text that focuses on a particular concept or ideological perspective)
- an analysis of the representations within the text; how people, places, events or ideas are constructed within it
- an explanation of the function of the text as a particular example of its genre; how it manipulates the conventions of that genre for particular purposes or effects
- a discussion of how the text operates as a cultural artefact; the ideological functions it holds or what it reveals about the culture in which it was created or received
- an aesthetic reading which evaluates the artistic qualities of the text
- a personal response whereby you critically examine your emotional or intellectual reactions to the text and what informed such response.

What is a close reading?

The Literature Examination Brief specifies that in this section of the examination, candidates must perform a close reading; we have seen this reflected in the way Question 1 has been phrased since 2016: *Present a close reading one of the three texts*. With such an instruction, you can expect markers to reward the close attention that you pay to the text and the analysis of that text based on generic conventions and language use pertaining to the genres of prose, drama and/or poetry.

'Close' refers to our proximity to the text in terms of analysis, i.e. a close analysis of the text. This detailed and specific reading of the text requires consideration of language or linguistic features and stylistic devices related to form and intertextuality. A good control and understanding of metalanguage will be effective in this process.

A close reading may also consider cultural references within the text that provide context to the reading, or the meaning the reader makes. This can require some judgement on the candidate's behalf: how important is the context of the text? Of the receiver? Of the production (drama)? For example, a reading of many Indigenous texts would require an understanding and acknowledgement of context.

Close reading is a reading practice that was popular with the critical movement named New Criticism, a movement with origins in America in the 1940s. It called for readers to look to 'the text itself' or 'the words on the page', rather than explanations provided by critics or other reading methods that relied on information from outside the text. Some prominent figures in defining this method were I.A. Richards, John Crowe Ransom and T.S. Eliot, a poet studied by many ATAR Literature students. New Criticism resists the notion that a text has *one* meaning that we are trying to discover.

A close reading does not prohibit you from discussing critical approaches to the text, but it does require you to connect your reading to text. You should provide evidence of how an ideological position is represented by the text, or how reading with a specific lens provides an insight into specific elements of the text.

So, a close reading could take one of the approaches outlined above, or be a combination of a number of them. Just always remember, it must relate to 'the text itself'.

Some general points to consider

An important aspect of presenting a reading is explaining the approach that you are taking; it is a description of a *process*, not a description of the text.

If you are a strong writer, you may be able to spend the bulk of your response articulating one particular reading and then, in your penultimate paragraph, offer an alternative view of the same points. For example, you might critique the power dynamics evident in the text as a function of class structures, but then comment on how, within its historical context, such power dynamics may have been seen as natural. However, such alternate readings are most successful if they relate to your own reading, otherwise your overall response may seem disjointed.

Reserve time to read over your answer and specifically check that your introduction matches where you eventually end up with your reading. Sometimes the focus can shift during the writing process and tweaking the introduction helps to create a cohesive response.

A reading is not:

- a description of what happens in the text
- a discussion of audience engagement or enjoyment
- looking for 'what the author intended'
- a 'shopping list' of generic conventions
- a checklist of things you notice as you read through the text.

What if I don't 'get' the text?

Your skills of analysis should be sufficiently developed so that you can interpret almost any literary text with which you are faced. Remember, you don't have to discuss the most significant themes – which is a subjective notion anyway – you just need to articulate one possible reading.

However, if you feel that you are unable to start unpacking the text, it can be worthwhile to consider some common themes of literature:

- representations of particular groups, such as gender, race, ethnicity, age etc.
- social commentary
- interpersonal relationships
- human experiences, emotions or traits
- power relationships
- endeavour or struggle.

Another strategy can be to consider who, what, when, where, why and how:

- **who** are the people in the text and who might they represent in the real world?
- **what** events are taking place in the text and what might they represent in the real world?
- **where** and **when** is the text set and what context might this represent in the real world?
- **why** has the writer represented these aspects in this way and what purpose might this serve in the real world?
- **how** has the writer used language and generic conventions to aid this understanding?

What are markers looking for?

The table below includes some tips for achieving highly in Section One of the Literature exam. Try to incorporate at least some of these suggestions into your study routine.

Criterion and available marks	Helpful tips
Reading/s of text **(7 marks available)**	• Know how to connect your understanding of ideas to construction and/or context. • Clearly state what you understand to be the main ideas of the text. • Be consistent with your reading. Don't be hesitant or undermine the points you have made. • Ensure you are explicit about the reading practices you are using. Only use a particular lens if the text calls for it. • Be analytical, not descriptive.
Close textual analysis **(6 marks available)**	• Make sure you choose relevant and significant examples from the text to analyse. • Select and explain language or generic examples and discuss how they function, as well as the meaning you make from them. • Also consider examples from the text that provide cultural context or contextual connections that add to the meaning you make. • Know how to incorporate quotations into your writing. • Avoid lengthy chunks of quotation. • Always explain quotations – state their significance to your argument. • Understand how to quote both directly and indirectly and offer appropriate technical analysis of your quotes.
Linguistic, stylistic and critical terminology **(6 marks available)**	• Study the terminology of Literature. • Know how to use the metalanguage of the course: the terms used to identify certain linguistic patterns, stylistic choices or critical practices. • Be familiar with syllabus concepts and how they apply to making a reading. • Avoid using jargon and buzzwords. • Spend time studying the generic features, stylistic choices and forms that differentiate prose, poetry and drama from each other.
Expression of ideas **(6 marks available)**	• Know how to present a 'reading'. • Plan your response. • Ensure your response is focused. • Don't become distracted or stray from your main points. • Reread your work to avoid errors or confusing expression. • Practise writing 'readings' throughout the year. • Don't overcomplicate your writing; be concise and efficient.

Below is one example of what the framework for a response to this section might look like.

Introduction

1. Present an overarching reading of your text in a few sentences.
    a. What is the text about literally?
    b. What is your deeper reading (inferential, thematic, ideological, aesthetic, responsive) of the text?
2. Next, present the aspects of this overarching reading that you will address in the body of your response.
3. Refer to the major elements of construction – the generic and language conventions used to communicate the ideas you are focusing on.
4. Don't simply list your ideas, expand them over a few sentences.
5. Consider any background information that you might need to supply the reader with. For example, if you are offering an intertextual or personal context reading.

Body paragraphs

A close reading will usually consist of at least 3–4 body paragraphs, each containing a separate idea. Each paragraph might structurally look something like this:

1. Identify a specific idea or aspect of your overarching reading.
2. Develop this idea over a couple of sentences.
3. Refer back to the text and find example/s. Use this evidence to support your point.
4. Technically deconstruct your evidence as a way of proving your ability to read closely.
5. Embellish your point by adding greater justification and subsequent depth of analysis.
6. Conclude by linking your idea within your overarching reading.

There are different schools of thought as to the order of paragraphs. Some believe that you should lead with your strongest point to set the tone of your response; others maintain that you should end with your strongest point to leave a powerful impression. Some believe your weakest point should be 'buried' in the middle, whilst others feel it should be last, in case you don't quite finish it. However, there is more at play here than just the psychology of the marker: you should structure your paragraphs in order of *significance*. What is the most important aspect of the text that has a bearing on your reading? If you are under time pressure within the context of exam and there is a chance you won't finish, it makes sense to lead with your most important points.

Conclusion

A conclusion assists in the structure of your reading. It reiterates the main elements of your interpretation of the text. In order to avoid being merely a repetition of points you have already made, your conclusion should acknowledge the significance of your reading. For example, you might conclude with a comment to show how the text's representations compare to those of your own context, or you may explain the ongoing significance of the ideas you discussed from a historical text to contemporary audiences or offer a personal or aesthetic response.