

Year 11 Literature Advice

The following are recommendations in response to weaknesses that keep cropping up in Lit. assessments and exams. Examples are in italics:

- You must give the text's title and date in the introduction. Make sure you underline the title for the novel and play. The title of poems have 'commas'. Give the title once only in the introduction and only a couple of times throughout your essay (including the conclusion).

e.g. The Secret River (2005)

'cribb island' (smoke encrypted whispers, 2004) Note that Watson doesn't use capitals, so when quoting titles etc. neither should you.

You also need to do this for texts that your text alludes to/makes an intertextual link with.

e.g. In Frankenstein Mary Shelley is engaged in a continual dialogue with John Milton's Paradise Lost, (1667).

- Give a short overview of what the text you are focussing on is about in your intro. Make sure it covers the whole of the text. These are the "factual" details of the text.

e.g.

Macbeth is corrupted by witches who tell him he will be king. Weakened by his own ambition, and to ensure that the witches prophesy comes true, he and his wife kill King Duncan as he sleeps in Macbeth's castle. After this to remain king, Macbeth goes on a killing spree, while his wife, wracked with guilt goes mad and kills herself. The witches tell him he should beware Macduff (a Scottish lord) and give him a false sense of security telling him that he cannot be harmed by a man 'born of woman' (a 'natural birth'). Eventually, Macduff catches up with Macbeth and kills him. It transpires that Macduff was born by caesarean section and the witches were not to be trusted.

This is as lengthy as an overview should get. You could even leave out the Macduff details.

The reason for writing an overview is that you need to approach the text as though your marker (WACE marker, not your teachers) is not familiar with it. These details contextualise and help them make sense of your examples later in the essay.

- Be accurate about genre and subgenre. Make sure you know the characteristics of that genre.

e.g. Dead White Males is a satirical, magico-realist play...

The Secret River is an historical novel...

Know the form of your poems and define them (hibun, dramatic monologue, sonnet, free verse...).

- If you use an unusual term define it briefly for your marker.

e.g. *Mises en abyme or embedded narratives of...*

You don't need to do this with most of the literary devices as you can assume your marker is well informed about these.

- Construct a thesis that incorporates the question's key terms and make them specific to your text.

e.g. If "ideologies" is a key term in the question, you need to specify what ideologies your text explores, critiques, represents or is informed by (use the same verb as the question).

e.g. Question: *Explain how a literary text has critiqued the dominant ideology of its production context.*

e.g. Frankenstein critiques the dominant patriarchal ideology of England in the 19th century.

- Write topic sentences that develop the thesis. Look at the question in the exam paper. A topic statement is an argument, not an example alone.

e.g. Topic sentence: *Shelley challenges the way patriarchal ideology allows men to pursue glory and hubristic validation, exposing it as corrupt and destructive of others as well as the man himself.*

Next sentence brings in a specific example: *This is most evident in the characterisation of Victor, who acts alone and without the cautionary mediation of his friends and family...*

- Conclude your paragraph, bringing your examples and discussion back to the question. Look at the question again before you do this.

e.g. *Readers are left in no doubt that the cause of Victor's misery is male supremacy, a consequence of the patriarchal ideology of the time.*

- When undertaking a close reading:

You do not have to nominate a particular reading practice (feminist, post-colonial...). Sometimes this may be appropriate if the text's central idea is about gender or class etc. Applying a reading practice means you foreground particular aspects of the text, examine representations related to that practice and set aside other elements of the text. This could mean you will not engage with all ideas and their presentation.

You should also be careful that you are not emphasising one part of the close reading text over other parts.

e.g. A close reading of a text should not start or overemphasise rather minor literary devices such as alliteration or caesura in one example. It is analogous to eating an incredible dinner at a fine restaurant (Yes, a middle-class example!) and when asked about it you begin and speak for a long time about how wonderful the cilantro garnish was. Or, you had the best burger and in recommending it to your friends you overemphasise the sesame seeds on the bun (More working-class perhaps).

Begin at the beginning of the text and structure your analysis accordingly. Ideas, devices and effect. Analyse the most prominent or significant generic conventions, language features and literary devices.

- Practise writing essays to different questions or syllabus points.

You need to know your texts well and be able to quote extensively in your responses (even for context).

Just as important is your argument that makes all of your examples **relevant** to the question you are addressing. I look for key terms in topic sentences, in the paragraph and in the concluding statement of paragraphs.

- Words to avoid in Literature responses:

"Showcases" (Jewellers use these to show off the valuable items in their store – writers don't show off the devices they use!), "show" (use demonstrate, illustrate, create...), "quote", "heavily", "syntax", "lexical choice", "diction" (just write: *Grenville's choice of language here suggests...* Or, "When Thornhill returns to the site of the massacre the repetition of 'silence' twice, and 'dense silence' not only describes the psychological dimension of the setting, the words echo the real world silencing of these acts of colonial violence against Indigenous people." You must introduce the example, as demonstrated in the underlined phrase above.

Don't use "connotes" (or, "connotates", which isn't a word) in place of "suggests". Only **words** have connotations, which are associations that we bring to them. E.g. "baby" denotes (its dictionary meaning) a very young child or infant, but connotes innocence, purity, fragility, love, new life... Think of the different connotations of "house" and "home", "mother" and "mum", for example.

Think about how you express reader response. Avoid overly emotional responses as they will lack credibility if used without thought. Don't over-use "sympathy" or "empathy". Be logical. You wouldn't say you are/readers are "outraged and hate/spurn" Thornhill and his group who have perpetrated the massacre. Instead: *Non-Indigenous readers would feel deeply troubled by this novel's representation of our colonial past...and...would reflect on this part of our nation's history and the relationships we have with Indigenous people today... or... understand the Indigenous perspectives in the on-going battle over land rights issues in the present...* (Note: If you use "**Indigenous**" or "**Aboriginal**" people capitalise it and use the **one** term throughout your discussion.)

Don't use "message" (unless it is a key term, which we hope never happens). The word is too reductive. Our literary texts explore complex ideas and issues, and ask serious and often profound questions of our world and our humanity. These should not be reduced to "a message".