**208/1 Literature in English**

**GENERAL APPROACH TO EXAMINATION QUESTIONS:**

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**A SUMMARY OF THE DOS AND DONTS:**

# In preparation for mocks and final exams, there is urgent need for candidates to take careful note of a wide range of aspects that would go a long way in improving their answers and securing better grades.

# Preambles or introduction to literature essay questions need not be very lengthy. Two or three brief sentences addressing the key words in the question would be adequate for that purpose. Introducing the entire text or even giving the detailed background of the author in the introduction is tantamount to wastage of precious time and loss of marks.

The common tendency by students to open their essays with such sketchy introductory entries as: … *as follows*: …*as below*: …*include*: … *the following*… is a direct route to loss of marks. For purposes of unification and coherence, they are advised to use open-ended **topic sentences** to step into their essay discussion.

1. Answers to literature questions should be written strictly in **the present simple tense** to avoid making the ideas sound stale. Literature is not history! It is supposed to be a living subject. We therefore expect use of such verb forms as *goes*, *realizes*, *informs* etc. **and not** *went*, *realized*, *informed*.
2. The **writer’s intention** for each text constitutes the central overriding theme under which all the other subordinate themes fall. For purposes of analytical approach and impression, candidates should remember to make that major theme their point of entry into every essay question and then proceed to deal with the other ideas in a logical, consistent manner.
3. A literature essay response at O level should be long enough to meet the specifications of a standard essay, usually about **two foolscap pages**. *Cartoon* essays are under-marked as substandard! The essay should be organized in such a way that every major idea takes an independent **paragraph** of smooth, organized and coherent ideas.
4. For purposes of clarity, every paragraph needs a **minimum** of three sentences or accomplished tasks each designed to contribute to the clarity of the idea.

**M**ention the idea;

**E**xplain, elaborate, clarify or paraphrase the idea;

**I**llustrate it with relevant evidence from the text.

Candidates should be guided by **MEI and** Note that it is at the middle Step **E** that they have the opportunity to create a favourable impression by coming strongly into their own flow of ideas. All manner of opinions, arguments, critical ideas, analysis etc are taken care of here.

1. **Paragraph transitions** are best managed with varying transition markers, phrases or words. A good, coherent essay is one with internal harmony. Repetition with one entry word or phrase got directly from the framework of the question leads to serious undesirable monotony, a gateway to colossal loss of marks!
2. **Answers to context questions** are supposed to be **concise** as clearly indicated in the instructions in the question paper. **Concise** in this respect implies that the responses should be brief and to the point; To Say much in very few words; To **K**eep **I**t **S**hort and **S**imple or **KISS** it! It is very unnecessary for a candidate to write whole essays to answer context sub-questions. The very longest a response to a context sub-question can stretch is a half a foolscap page and no more. Purposeful students can, of course, capture all the required ideas in just one or two lines depending on the question.

**NB:** Thorough knowledge of the text in terms of Plot, Characterisation, Setting, Themes etc is a necessity for context questions.

1. Note that **questions on character** in Literature can test any one of the **four** different attributes i.e. **Traits**; **Roles**; **Relationships** and **Appeal**. candidates should not confuse traits with roles, for example, as this will lead to loss of marks.
2. **Character Trait** is simply understood to refer to characters’ **A**ppearance, **C**onduct and **A**ttitude **(ABA)** in the text e.g helpful, shabby, energetic, cunning, scaring, a bully, approachable, egocentric etc.
3. On the other hand, **Character Role**, also commonly referred to by examiners as *importance*, *contribution*, *usefulness*, *significance* is strictly **stylistic**. It means the way the writer uses a character to achieve his/her intentions. This implies that character role is beyond the conscious knowledge of the character in question. Remember also that some examiners ask for the same aspect of character role using the phrase ‘*What would you miss without this character’*!

The character **roles** expected at this level are usually six with only four of them applying to all characters and the other two being relevant to a few specific characters depending on their stance in the text:

* Contribution to Thematic development.
* Character portrayal of other characters through dialogue, contrast, comparison and juxtaposition.
* Enhancement of the plot.
* Symbolic role.
* *As a source of an effect (humour or comic relief, inspiration etc.*
* *Writers’ intention (Writer’s mouthpiece or voice, relevance to real life, lessons etc)*

1. **Character Relationship** is the rapport between two or more characters usually described using such words as intimate, friendly, marital, confrontational, violent, business, sexual, warm, suspicious etc.

Relationship can also be described in two other acceptable ways:

* Identify a common group to which they belong and use *They are……. Eg They are neighbours. They are both members of the church choir. They are lovers. Etc*
* The other way is by use of a hyphenated compound word *eg husband-wife; master-servant; seller-buyer; teacher-student; boy-girl etc.*

1. **Character appeal** is usually exclusive to drama and refers to the quality of action or dramatization on the stage. You should for example know you are dealing with character appeal if you are asked: *Of Jimmy and Jogo, whose part would you choose to act in a school play and why?* This question has little to do with the moral attributes of these characters! It has more to do with their words, gestures, how well they portray the intended qualities etc.

However, if the question is: *Of Jimmy and Jogo, who do you admire and why?* Here the moral attributes take centre stage.

1. You should contextualise all **quotations** in questions before embarking on the main question. There are usually very attractive marks set aside for contextualization. Consider this question: *‘ an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is not such a bad idea after all…’ Explain the truth of this statement with reference to the play The Heart Soothers.* Be guided by the questions: *Who says it*? *To who*? *In what circumstances*? *What does it mean*?
2. **Application questions** require the candidate to step out of the text to apply certain textual facts to the real life contemporary world in a very specific manner. You should avoid making general, sweeping references. Name people, places; quote news papers and electronic media etc
3. It is necessary to **take a clear stand** where it is asked for in such questions as: ‘*Do you agree*?’ Or ‘*Who do you sympathize with*?’ before presenting the main stream arguments. A double stand is a loser unless it is asked for.
4. **Feelings** in literature should always be answered with the **heart**, not with the **brain**. It is wrong to state, ‘*I feel he is a bad person’*! or ‘*I feel he has made a mistake*’ There is no real feeling expressed in these answers! Basing on past experience, candidates are also advised to avoid using the word ‘**feel**’ in their answers to questions on feelings, and should always give a logical reason to support your feelings. You are better off using: I (*feeling*) e.g I hate; or I am (*feeling*) eg I am disgusted or just make a ‘feelings’ comment eg Florence is very embarrassing; Jogo’s sexual misadventures are disgusting;etc
5. **Sub titles** are not expected in your essay answers.
6. If a question has **more than one part**, all should be responded to in a balanced manner.
7. **Straight narration** devoid of analysis leads to loss of marks.
8. **Synonymous repetition** is common with candidates. For instance,*Brave* is synonymous with *Courageous* just as *loving, kind, caring* etc are entangled synonyms.
9. **Textual knowledge** is the spring board upon which convincing, plausible arguments can be built. Be conversant with the textual facts with regard to **People**, **Episodes**,**Places** and the **chronological** time trends (PEPT).
10. **Negation as** a means to stating otherwise positive comments is not permissible in a literature exam. Do not say: *He is* ***not*** *kind*. Rather say: *He is unkind* etc
11. Many of you lose marks due to **Rubric violation.** It may be true that the O level Literature Question Paper probably has some of the most complex rubric demands and indeed many candidates find themselves on the wrong side. However, the instructions are clear:

***INSTRUCTIONS:***

*Answer* ***five*** *Questions in all on****Five*** *books; choosing* ***Two*** *Questions on* ***Two*** *books from* ***SectionA*** *and* ***Three*** *Questions* ***on Three*** *Books from* ***SectionB****, One of which* ***MUST*** *be on poetry.*

*In Section A, you must answer* ***One*** *question from Subsection (i) and* ***one***

*question from Subsection (ii).*

*You must cover* ***a play*** *and* ***a novel****.*

1. There is need for emphasis on poetry.Please engage in adequate practice. Be reminded that poems are written more to be recited, sung and listened to than merely to be read. The key poetic devices should be mastered by the candidates in a practical manner.

* Title (Type, Atmosphere and scope of meaning).
* The Poet, the Speaker/Persona.
* The Subject Matter or a brief summary of the content.
* Theme(s).
* Tone, Feelings, Mood, attitude
* Rhyme and any other music aspects.
* Simple attributes of Structure e.gHow many stanzas, how Short/long?
* Language and Style – Simple similes and metaphors; Repetition; contrast and their obvious effect.
* Application of the poem to real life situations.
* You should participate freely here in writing simple related poems of your own; naming relevant scenarios in real world etc.

**NB:**Poems should be recited in bundles according to the themes as categorized in the Anthology.

1. When all is said and done, Literature in English is marked by impression.Do everything in your means to create an impression that favours you. You should give a semblance of aptness, neatness and organization.

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