Scholarship Classical Studies: Exam Advice

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Abstract

This article is a set of advice for candidates sitting the NZ Scholarship Classics exam — specifically on question interpretation and essay writing. No apologies are made for the rambling nature of the exposition!

Contents

1 The scholarship performance standard (93404)

1.1 Outcome Description

The student will use knowledge of classical studies to demonstrate their ability to think critically about the ideas and values of the classical world. They will

communicate their understanding through the use of primary and secondary source evidence in a range of integrated contexts, which may include history, literature, philosophy, architecture and / or art.

1.2 Performance Descriptors

1.2.1 Scholarship

The student will demonstrate aspects of high level:

- analysis and critical thinking
- integration, synthesis, and application of highly developed knowledge, skills, and understanding to complex situations
- logical development, precision and clarity of ideas.

1.2.2 Outstanding

In addition to the requirements for Scholarship, the student will also demonstrate, in a sustained manner, aspects of:

- perception and insight
- sophisticated integration and abstraction
- independent reflection and extrapolation
- convincing communication.

1.3 Explanatory Notes

1. This standard is derived from the Social Sciences learning area in the New Zealand Curriculum (Learning Media, Ministry of Education, 2007) up to and including Curriculum Level 8, and the Classical Studies Teaching and Learning Guide.
2. Subject specific definitions:
    - Analysis and critical thinking requires methodical examination and interpretation of primary and secondary source evidence and an awareness of their limitations.
    - Integration, synthesis and application of highly developed knowledge, skills and understanding to complex situations involve using a range of information and applying understanding of the ideas and values of the classical world to explain links and interrelationships.
    - Perception and insight involves subtlety of understanding, an awareness of subtext, and historical empathy.
    - Sophisticated integration and abstraction involves the ability to identify and interpret specific elements of a wide range of evidence and to formulate a complex perspective of the ideas and values of the classical world.

- Independent reflection and extrapolation involves drawing upon a wide range of evidence and, through the selection and exploration of relevant elements, challenging the basis of assumptions and perceptions.
- Convincing communication requires a coherent and fluent response with a degree of literary flair and originality.

2 The Exam Layout

You should expect to write three essays: two on topics of your choice (section A), and one resource based topic (section B). The topics which you can choose from for section A will probably[1] include:

- Alexander the Great
- Augustus
- Socrates
- Virgil's *Aeneid*
- The plays of Aristophanes
- Athenian vase painting
- Roman art and architecture

For section B, the topic will be announced in the assessment specifications as it changes from year to year (so you get it in advance); you will also typically get a choice between focusing on the Greek or the Roman side of your topic. The topics generally are something like:

- Religion and the gods
- Death and the underworld
- Conflict and warfare
- Culture and identity

Know what topics you want to write essays on beforehand. Have at least THREE topics that you would be comfortable with for the long-form essay section just in case the questions are unfriendly.

3 Preparing for the Exam

There is a reason that I run scholarship classics tutoring as a reading course: the best way to know and understand the material is to connect with it and immerse yourself in the sources.

Know the sources well, know their strengths and weaknesses, know the main ideas and the sweeping generalisations. Details are nice, but don't sit down and

[1] An up-to-date list can be found in the Assessment Specifications for the year you are sitting the exam; see the NZQA website.

try to memorise them at the expense of general understanding of the big picture. The latter is worth much more in scholarship than the former.

Don't just reread the standard commentaries and sources over and over again; go out looking for new material, find stuff to disagree with, and write down the name of the author. Don't just read plays, read other writer's perspectives on the plays. Find controversy, work out which side you're on, and try to justify it. You should not avoid material that you disagree with; on the contrary, it is normally much easier to write on (and shows more independent thinking)!

4 Interpreting Questions

The most important thing about scholarship questions (compared to those that appear on the level three examinations) is that they are not formulaic, and so require you to interpret them. The examiner is not looking for a rote-learned essay, but an ability to argue a point of view on a matter that may not have an obvious answer.

4.1 Section A

The following rather long-winded question appeared on the 2016 scholarship exam.

> After the battle of Issus, Alexander captured members of the Persian royal family, including Darius' wife. Quintus Curtius Rufus praised his treatment of the captives:
>
> > 'At this particular time, certainly, his actions were such that he outshone all previous kings in self-control and clemency* ... As for Darius' wife, who was surpassed by none of her generation in beauty, Alexander was so far from offering her violence that he took the utmost care to prevent anyone from taking advantage of her.' (Quintus Curtius Rufus)
>
> To what extent were self-control and clemency the hallmarks of Alexander's treatment of those he conquered?
>
> *_clemency_: mercy

Scholarship questions from section A usually begin with a quote, and then the question asks you to respond to a related idea or concept. The quotes used are usually also a hint as to how the examiner wants you to answer the question.

In this case, the examiner is asking about the mercy shown by Alexander the Great to those he captured. They are looking for two things:

- A *point of view* regarding Alexander's treatment of those he conquered (was he relatively merciful?), and
- An *intelligent argument* backing that point of view up.

In answering this question, you would be expected to define clemency, relate events from Alexander's life (with reference to both primary and secondary sources), and come to a conclusion (after considering all the possible points of

view). In one sense, it is a rather simple question: you only need to write one argument, and it would be relatively easy to conclude one way or the other in a balanced way.

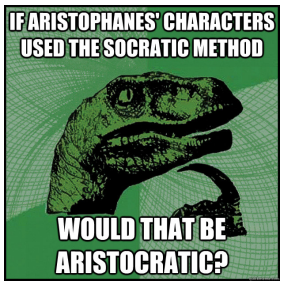
A shorter but more complex 'personality' question comes from the Roman art section of the 2015 exam:

> 'The Romans loved portraits of themselves. They embellished their public spaces with statues and busts of their emperors ... [and their] coins feature ... precise portraits of famous leaders.'
> (Cornelius C. Vermeule III)
>
> To what extent were imperial portraits* faithful images of the individuals portrayed? What factors might account for divergence from realistic portraiture?
>
> *'Imperial portraits' include the representation of emperors in statues, sculptural reliefs, cameos, and / or on coins.

This question has two parts: a 'describe' part (where you must draw on your factual knowledge, providing examples of both faithful and unfaithful portraits) and an 'interpret' part (where you must say something intelligent about the reasons behind these examples and draw an insightful conclusion about Roman society).

The quote here is not as evocative (to me, anyway) as the Alexander quote above — however, a nice essay could use the phrase 'the Romans loved portraits of themselves' as a springboard to talk about the cultural reasons for propaganda in portraiture (i.e. portraits were the only way for the outer reaches of the Empire to 'see' their emperor), and could form the conclusion around the correctness (or lack thereof) of the use of the word 'precise' by Vermeule. (Interesting point: does the word 'precise' here mean *well-executed technically and artistically*, or *true to life*? Write an essay on this.)

My personal preference is to focus on the 'describe' part when choosing a question: it's usually possible to say something intelligent about anything as long as you have enough examples, so even if you cannot come up with a thread to pull all your examples together when you're looking at a question then it may be worth choosing it anyway if you have enough basic knowledge.



The theatre questions are often relatively bare-bones. The following question on Aristophanes comes from the 2015 exam:

> How valid is it to argue that Aristophanes sees the problems facing Athens as insoluble and, in response, uses absurd fantasy as a form of escapism?

Note here the wording 'How valid is it to argue...', rather than the alternative 'Is it valid to argue...'. This is a good example of the open-ended nature of scholarship questions. The examiner is not looking for a straight yes/no answer — they are looking for a *reasoned and balanced argument*, that looks at all of the sides of the coin and then makes a justified conclusion. If you can only think of arguments for one side (or can only think of one side to argue), then do not pick that question!

Noticing the lack of a quote here is also a nice segue into a discussion of the role of quotes in theatre essays: the examiners are not looking for a regurgitation of *Frogs* or *Lysistrata*, but a general discussion of Aristophanes' purpose. Because of this, you will be talking about the general ideas throughout the text rather than doing a close-reading analysis. Quotes are nice, but not necessary (and gratuitious quotes make it look like you have no original ideas of your own). A well-chosen quote of five words that is used within your argument is much better (and shows better fluency) than taking a passage from Aristophanes and just dropping it into the middle of your prose (even if you introduce it).

To get back to the question itself, the examiner is looking for two things (framed as one question this time):- (1) whether Aristophanes sees the problems facing Athens as insoluble (debatable, he proposes solutions a few times with only a little sarcasm) and (2) whether Aristophanes' use of absurd fantasy (à la *Birds* or *Lysistrata*[2]) is not only for comedic effect, but for the far less respectable goal of escapism (surely he would not stoop that low...)!

See how I spun that question? Let's try to spin it the other way:

To get back to the question itself, the examiner is looking for two things (framed as one question this time):- (1) whether Aristophanes sees the problems facing Athens as insoluble (quite likely, since the only solutions he tries to put forward are over-the-top and obviously for comedic effect) and (2) whether Aristophanes' use of absurd fantasy (à la *Birds* or *Lysistrata*) is only to provide escapism and temporary relief from the peaceless and hopeless situation that the Athenians found themselves in, just years before the dismantling of their democracy!

I hope I have made my point — there are a myriad of perspectives to every question.

4.2 Section B

The questions from Section B, on the other hand, are very formulaic; from 2016, we have:

> Choose EITHER ancient Greece (Resources A–D) OR ancient Rome (Resources E–H) to answer this question. The resources provide evidence about death and the afterlife in the classical world.

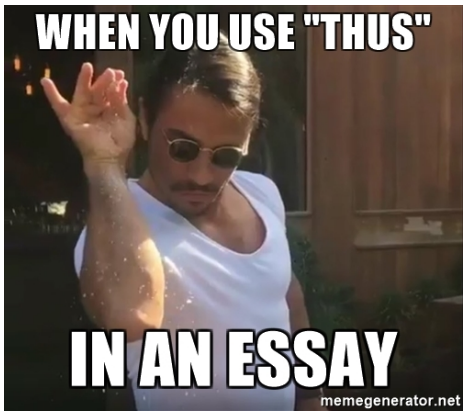
[2] Yes, I would call *Lysistrata* 'absurd fantasy' since it has been argued (conclusively in my mind) that Aristophanes is not actually promoting a classical form of feminism or equality but is simply presenting this situation as a mark of how absurd the situation has grown: the idea that women could (gasp!) be competent and full members of society would have been comedic to the conservative and varied audience of the play. Aristophanes intended his portrayal of the sex strike and seizure of the temples to be absurd, and put forward to the audience the idea that 'peace is such a simple solution that even a woman could think of it!'. Of course, in our (hopefully) more enlightened times the ideas are only comedic in their tone but not their modern equalist overtones.

Discuss at least THREE of the resources and the insight they give into Greek or Roman beliefs and practices linked to death and the afterlife.

Your response should focus on analysis of the source material provided, but you should also draw on your wider knowledge of the classical world.

I do not think much commentary here is necessary; you know what topic(s) will be available beforehand, so you need only really prepare for one question.

5 Writing Essays



So you've chosen your question, and want to write your essay.

5.1 The Introduction

I tend to write essays as a flow-of-consciousness, and so when I write my introductions I usually have no idea what my conclusion will look like. In fact, when I sat the Scholarship paper myself, I changed my final answer to the question halfway through! As such, I tend to think that a good paragraph introduces the subject, summarises the question, gives your interpretation of the question, roughly outlines the vague shape of your argument, and then gets out of the way without giving much hint of what your conclusion will be.

A better justification for this kind of introduction is that you want your marker to keep reading: if you give the punchline away at the start, then there is no mystique around your argument and nothing to set your paper apart from the last sixty boring ones that they have read.

An extremely bare-bones example of an introduction for a literature which meets those criteria is as follows (from an essay on Catullus' Poem LXIV):

Gaius Valerius Catullus was a Roman neolitic poet active in the first century BCE. Over 100 of Catullus' poems survive in almost complete form including the avant-garde Poem 64, an epyllion which contrasts the expectations of society with respect to epic heroism with themes of love and marriage, and overall it seems that Catullus was trying to present love as the more powerful force of the two.

I do feel, in retrospect, that this introduction is a bit too light for a serious essay; its purpose was to immediately lead into a close analysis of the text and as such contains the bare minimum of niceities. I think that a better version of this would have a few sentences giving a couple of examples of the contrasts mentioned, and a sentence summarising the plot and point[3] of poem 64.

The following introduction to an essay on Alexander the Great is probably more what I would be expecting for scholarship:

> Alexander the Great was born in 356 BC to Phillip II, king of Macedonia, and Olympias of Epirus; he grew to rule one of the greatest empires in Western history, stretching from the Balkans in the west to the Indus River in the east. Despite his importance to classical history, modern historians have limited reliable information about Alexander's life. This is due to the lack of extant primary sources, forcing us to rely on later writers like Plutarch, Arrian, and Diodorus, and to the inherent bias present in all sources due to Alexander's hero-or-villain persona, and the actions which he carried out for propaganda purposes in order to win the support of his men and of the people living in the countries he conquored. Arrian wrote that Alexander was 'the most variously written about' of all leaders in history, and the noted modern writer Brian Bosworth shared a similar sentiment, writing that in the 1980s, a new book about Alexander was coming out every year. These two statements show just how many different and often contradictory ideas it is possible to have about Alexander, and therefore how careful we have to be in analysing source material and attempting to reconstruct his motivations and actions.
>
> Many myths surrounded Alexander's birth and early life. His parents both believed that they were descended from heroes and deities, including Heracles, Perseus, and Achilles, and the Roman writer Plutarch writes about rumours that Alexander himself was the son of Zeus, after his mother was seen with a serpent (a form often taken by Zeus in Greek myth) in her bed. Alexander was brought up reading Homer, including the Iliad – the epic poem telling the story of the Trojan War, which a copy of which he kept with him all through his life. With such a childhood, it is not entirely surprising that, as a ruler, religious beliefs were an important part of his image; in fact, Alexander was a master of religious propaganda.

This introduction is quite nice for an Alexander essay: it summarises his life in one sentence, gives a glimpse of the problems with the source material, introduces the topic of the essay (the use of religious propaganda by Alexander) in its proper historical context, and has a nice catchy punchline. Notice, though, that it doesn't have mounds of verbiage (and gives only a few hints as to how I will go about justifying my final statement).

I do tend to be a little loose with the traditional essay structure (introduction, self-contained paragraphs, conclusion); confidence and fluency are important skills for the professional essay writer. Be creative with the paragraph structure, don't be afraid to have a short introduction and get straight into the meat, and remember not to summarise your argument before it begins.

[3] Although, to be honest, the 'point' of poem 64 was the focus of the entire essay and so summarising it here would go against my most fundamental guideline: don't rewrite your conclusion to serve as an introduction!

5.2 A Typical Paragraph

This out-of-context paragraph is taken from an essay on Plautus' play *The Swaggering Soldier*:

> The scene is out-of-place, separating the two halves of the action of the play and not really furthering the storyline in any way; Watling calls the scene 'unnecessary' in his introduction to the translated version (p. 149). The obvious answer is that Plautus was trying to make a point and to put forward his views on an issue. Interestingly, many of the views put forward are counter to the general values of Roman society. One of the fundamental tenets of Roman society was the duty of the citizen to his family and his country, and this included the duties of men to marry, start a family, and offer hospitality to guests. I am not so sure that Plautus would seriously present the view that such a fundamental principle was wrong, especially given the success that the play apparently enjoyed at the time.
>
> Another explanation, and one which is probably more likely, is that these lines are a bit of tongue-in-cheek humour similar to modern American sitcom humour, expressing the sentiment that women and family only cause trouble for men with their constant nagging and requests for money, in an attempt to elicit laughter — apparently this type of comedy has endured throughout the past millenia, probably since it pokes fun at such a fundamental part of Western society.

I would not claim it to be the best paragraph I have ever written, but it is illustrative of a number of points which I wish to make.

Firstly, as I alluded to above, I am not a fan of taking long quotes from primary or secondary sources and sticking them into the essay vertabim; my preferred style is to paraphrase the quote, and then pick out a few nice words and directly quote those. The Alexander introduction above has a few more examples, but I suppose the most important thing is to remember to only recall a quote if it is absolutely necessary; that is, you want to discuss the idea in the quote at some length. Pulling quotes in just because you want to fill an imagined quota does not look great.

Secondly, notice the lack of a rigid structure. The point of a scholarship essay (or any essay, really) is to make a point about the bigger picture, and so the paragraphs should flow into each other and work to bring the reader into your conclusion. On the other hand, write in the way that is most comfortable for you. If you find you work best when you have a structure in mind, then by all means write that way! Just make sure that it all fits together as a cohesive whole.

Note also the way that the essay topic plays a central role. *You are not writing an essay on Alexander the Great, on Socrates, on art; you are writing a response to a topic related to them!* In other words, always explain how the quotes you give or events you relate are not only relevant but *irreplacable* in efforts to understand the topic. Give multiple explanations and discuss which one you feel is most likely, and then link it back to the big overall point that you are trying to make.

Link everything back to the culture of the time (whether it is Hellenistic, Alexandrian, Augustan, Constantinian, or otherwise), and try to describe why

the topic that you are writing about is relevant to a proper historical or literary understanding of the time period.

Overall, though, remember that it is the content that you write and the ideas that you put forward that matter; presentation is just a bonus. (Not that you should neglect the presentation, that is — it should be a consideration, just don't let your argument suffer for the sake of making it sound better.)

5.3 Dealing with Sources

> All questions allowed candidates to produce answers of scholarship standard and — at the top end — critical commentaries on the source documents were notably sophisticated and insightful. Candidates who were awarded Scholarship with Outstanding Performance commonly... integrated relevant primary and secondary source evidence into their response. (2016 Examiner's Report)

An important part of scholarship is knowledge of a wide variety of both primary and secondary sources. There is no nice way to say this:

You should have a variety of sources that you can pull from during the exam, knowing both their content and their strengths and weaknesses. For some topics, like Alexander the Great, we do not have any extant primary sources and so the examiners are looking for an understanding of the problems associated with this. Challenge the sources of evidence for bias and propaganda.

It goes without saying that any statement you make in an essay should be backed up by primary or secondary sources; the markers in an exam will be less strict about this (especially as the material is quite standard), but you will be penalised if you do not refer to any primary sources!

Knowledge of secondary sources is also very important; not only to quote to support arguments, but to pull in to compare and contrast with your own argument.

5.4 The Resource-based Section

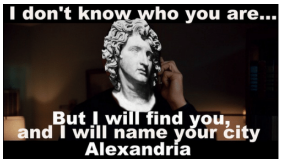
The main advice that I have for the resource-based section is to focus on the resources that they give you, rather than your own background knowledge. They won't give you anything too nasty; pick an angle that the resources suggest, and then write one paragraph per resource to back up your angle. Don't overthink this section.

6 Per-topic Advice

I am not so egotistical that I will attempt to give advice on topics that I know nothing about; I may add subsections here as and when I have time to go and

learn the material.

6.1 Alexander the Great



There are two main facets to Alexander: strategy and personality. I have always personally found a personality essay much easier to write (it is less difficult to find an new and interesting point to make).

The important strands of Alexander's personality include:

- His childhood and upbringing.
- His ego and ambition politically and militarily.
- His religious beliefs, and his views on his own deification.
- More generally, his use of propaganda.
- His attitude towards the peoples that he conquered.

Strategically, some areas of interest include:

- The siege at Tyre.
- The other battles with Darius' armies.
- The founding of Alexandria.
- His drive further eastwards.
- The 'mutinies'.

Have a general understanding of all the topics, and the big picture; but pick a few and know them well.

6.2 Roman Art and Architecture

Use this as an excuse to learn Roman history from Augustus to Constantine. Some good pieces to focus on include

- Idealised images of Augustus (e.g. Prima Porta)
- *Togatus Barberini* (?)
- The bust of Commodus
- The arch of Septimius
- Busts of Philip the Arab
- The arch of Constantine

but the best way to approach this topic is to use the art to talk about Roman politics and society (not the other way around).

Pick up a good long book with lots of pictures that covers the whole Roman age, and read bits of it at a time to get a big-picture overview.

6.3 Aristophanes

Know the history of the era that Aristophanes was writing in. If you are writing about war and conflict, make sure you read Thucydides (or at least Hanson) before you try to tackle *Peace*, *The Archarnians*, *Lysistrata*, or any of Aristophanes' other war-related works. If your focus is on politics, revise Socrates and Plato before reading *The Clouds* or *The Birds*. Find someone who knows the era, and get them to help you to focus your attention.

Secondary sources on Aristophanes (especially the introductions and notes in the Penguin editions) are your friend.