



AQA GCSE English Literature



Your notes

How to Answer the Shakespeare Essay Question

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Your notes

Structuring the Shakespeare Essay

Structuring the Essay

Answering just one essay question can seem daunting. However, examiners just want to see your ideas and opinions on the Shakespeare play you have studied. The guide below will enable you to best express these ideas and opinions in a way that will gain the highest marks.

Answering the question

Regardless of which Shakespeare play you study, the type of question you'll need to write an essay for will be the same. You will be asked a question that asks you to analyse and write in detail about an aspect of the play. Your answer will need to address both an extract from the play that you will be given and the play as a whole.

It is tempting to jump straight in and start analysing the extract immediately. However, completing the steps below first will ensure you answer the question in the way that examiners are looking for.

Six key steps to answer the Shakespeare exam question effectively:

1. The very first thing you should do once you open your exam paper is to look at the question:

- This sounds obvious, but it's really crucial to read through the question a few times
- Why is this important? Regardless of what subject you're being examined in, the single biggest mistake most students make in their exams is not reading the question through carefully enough that they answer the question they **think** they're being asked, rather than the question they've actually been asked
- It's especially important to get this right in your GCSE English Literature exams, because you only have five essay questions to answer across two papers, so if you misread a question, you're potentially costing yourself a large number of marks

2. Identify the **keywords** of the question

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Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict in this extract
- how Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

AO4 [4 marks]



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- The keywords are the focus of the question: the specific themes, ideas or characters the examiners want you to focus on
- For the above question, the keywords of the question are “**the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families**”
- This is the theme the examiners want you to explore in your essay
- Do not be tempted to write a question on a related theme, even if you have revised more for it: this will affect your overall mark badly, as you won’t be directly answering the question!
- In the example above, the theme is **conflict**, so make sure you plan and write an essay about conflict, rather than, for example, the relationship between the two families
 - Although this is a related theme, your answer won’t be focused on the question and will lose you marks

3. Critically evaluate the **idea** or **theme** of the question in terms of the play as a whole

- Think: what is this question asking, and what is it not asking?
- It is asking you to explore **conflict** – an ongoing fight or struggle – **between** the two families
- The question is not asking you to explore any other conflict, for example, conflict **among** families (Juliet’s conflict with her own family)
- Again, writing about related ideas will actually lose you marks as you aren’t answering the exact question you have been set. The examiner isn’t going to reward you extra marks for information that is factually correct or demonstrates a great understanding of the play if the information is not relevant to the question being asked

4. Now you have identified and evaluated the key idea or theme of the question, read the contextual information above the extract:

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Romeo and Juliet

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, the Prince has arrived to stop the fight that has broken out in the centre of Verona.

- This contextual information will help you understand where the extract comes in the play (Act I, Scene I), and give you a headline about what is happening in the extract
 - *At this point in the play, the Prince has arrived...*



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- This information, alongside your knowledge of what the theme the examiners are asking you to explore in the question, are vital clues that help you decode the extract

5. Contextualise the extract further yourself, **before reading it**

- Understanding where the extract comes in the play will also give you clues to understand the extract more completely
 - Think: what else happens before and after this point in the play?
 - Which characters are involved?
 - How does it link to other parts of the text?
- Examiners repeatedly state that the very best answers are those that move beyond the extract and consider the question in the context of the play as a whole
 - Therefore, even at this stage, it is good to think about how the theme of the question develops before and after this point in the play

6. Read the extract with all of the above information (the keywords from the question; the context) in mind

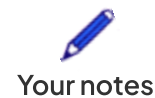
- This will enable you to pick out quotations and analyse only the most relevant parts of the extract in the context of the play as a whole, and the question you have been set

Planning your essay

Planning your essay is absolutely vital to achieving the highest marks. Examiners always stress that the best responses are those that have a logical, well-structured argument that comes with spending time planning an answer. This, in turn, will enable you to achieve the highest marks for each assessment objective. The main assessment objectives are:

AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Write a clear essay with a central argument based on your own opinions ▪ Select quotations and references from both the extract and the rest of the play
AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use analysis of Shakespeare's methods to support your argument
AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use contextual ideas and perspectives to support your argument and to provide further insight into Shakespeare's choices

- Your plan should include all aspects of your response, covering all of the assessment objectives, but mainly focusing on AO1:
 - Your overall argument, or **thesis** (AO1)
 - Your **topic sentences** for all your paragraphs (AO1)



- The quotations you will be using and analysing from the extract (AO1)
- The quotations you will be using and analysing from elsewhere in the play (AO1)
- A sense of why Shakespeare makes the choices he does (AO2)
- A sense of what contextual factors give further insight into the ideas and theme presented in the question (AO3)
- Therefore, a plan may look like the following:

Thesis statement: Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families as destructive and ultimately self-defeating. He does this to challenge contemporary ideas on family ties and honour, suggesting that conflicts such as these only end in an inescapable cycle of violence.

Topic sentence	Evidence from extract	Evidence from elsewhere in the play
S presents the effects of conflict between C and M as violent and dehumanising	"What ho, you men, you beasts! That quench the fire of your pernicious rage"	Irrational and bestial actions of young men of both families
S presents the effects of conflict between C and M as fatal, even for those who do not fight	"Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace"	The deaths of Romeo and Juliet
S presents the effects of conflict between C and M as destined only to result in death	"Depart" "grave" "death"	"A plague on both your houses"

Shakespeare's methods: Foreshadowing in the prologue; dramatic irony; conventions of tragedy

Contextual factors: conventions of family honour; ideas about social status

Some other tips:

- You do not need to include a counter-argument (disagreeing with the question/including paragraphs which begin "On the other hand"):
- The questions have been designed to enable as many students as possible to write essays
- Examiners say that the inclusion of a counter-argument is often unnecessary and unhelpful
- It can affect your AO1 mark negatively



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- Include evidence and analysis of the extract in the same paragraph as evidence and analysis of the rest of the play:
 - Think of the extract as a stepping stone to the whole text
 - Examiners prefer an “integrated approach”: paragraphs which include related analysis of both extract and the whole play
 - Examiners dislike essays which treat the extract and the rest of the play as “separate entities”: when students analyse the extract in the first half of their essays, and then the rest of the play in the second half of their response – this would mean your answer doesn't cover the full scope of the question, and your AO1 mark would be affected

Writing your essay

Once you have read and evaluated the question, read and analysed the extract and created a clear plan, you are ready to begin writing. Below is a guide detailing what to include.

Your essay should include:

- An introduction with a **thesis statement**
- A number of paragraphs (three is ideal!), each covering a separate point. It's a great idea to start each paragraph with a **topic sentence**
- A **conclusion**

Introduction

- Your introduction should aim to answer the question – clearly and briefly
- The best way to do this is to include a thesis statement
- A thesis statement is a short statement (one or two sentences) that summarises the main point or claim your argument is making:
 - You should include the exact words from the question in your thesis statement
 - Examiners want to see **your own opinion**: your interpretation of what Shakespeare is trying to show
- Your thesis statement should also attempt to explain **why** you think Shakespeare has presented his characters in the way he has: what is he trying to say overall? What is his message?:
 - A good way to think about this is to ask: what is Shakespeare's one big idea in terms of the characters or themes addressed in the question?
 - Include contextual ideas and perspectives to help explain Shakespeare's intentions
 - Including Shakespeare's message or one big idea helps create a “conceptualised response”, for which examiners award the highest marks

- An example of a thesis statement:

Question:



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Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict in this extract
- how Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]
AO4 [4 marks]

Thesis statement:

“Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families as destructive and ultimately self-defeating. He does this to challenge contemporary ideas on family ties and honour, suggesting that conflicts such as these only end in an inescapable cycle of violence.”

Some other tips:

- Introductions should not be too long or include all the details of what each paragraph will include:
 - You will not be rewarded for including the same information twice, so don't waste time repeating yourself
- Write your thesis in the third person, not the first person (don't use “I”):
 - “I believe that Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict...” ≡
 - “Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families as ... in order to show ...” ≡

Paragraphs

- Try to include three separate paragraphs that cover three separate points:
 - This will ensure your response is to what examiners call the “full task”
- Start each paragraph with a topic sentence:
 - A topic sentence is an opening sentence which details the focus of its paragraph
 - It should include the words of the question
 - All topic sentences must relate to your thesis



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- They should be seen as sub-points that provide a more specific and narrower focus than your thesis statement
- Everything that follows a topic sentence in a paragraph must support the point it makes

Example of a topic sentence:

“Shakespeare presents the effects of conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues as fatal, even for those characters who do not wish to fight.”

- Paragraphs ideally include an analysis of both the extract and the whole play:
 - This is what examiners call an “integrated approach”
 - Don’t separate your analysis of the rest of the play into different paragraphs
 - The examiners stated that the best students “dip in and out of both the extract and the whole text to select details which support their argument as appropriate”
- Beware of writing an overly structured paragraph which follows a set pattern:
 - You may have learned PEE, PEAL, PEED or other structures for your paragraphs
 - However, examiners often say that although these are excellent for learning what to include in essays, they can be limiting in an exam
 - Instead, be led by the ideas in the text, and prove your own argument (both the overall thesis, and your topic sentences)

Conclusion

- It is always a good idea to include a conclusion to your essay so that your essay reads coherent and focused on answering the question throughout:
 - This can result in improved marks for AO1
- However, there is no need to spend a long time writing your conclusion:
 - A conclusion for a Shakespeare essay should only summarise the proof you have provided for your thesis
 - It only needs to be two or three sentences long
 - It should include the words of the question and your thesis
 - Remember, you do not get rewarded for including the same information twice

An example of a conclusion:

“In summary, Shakespeare presents the effects of the conflict between the Capulet and Montague families as disastrous, not just for those directly involved in the struggle, but even for those characters who wished to escape the conflict. Romeo and Juliet’s deaths – as well as the untimely murders of Mercutio and Tybalt –

show how irrational family ties and ideas about honour bring about only endless violence and destroy even the youngest and most innocent bound up in these conflicts.”



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Shakespeare's Methods & Techniques

Writer's Methods and Techniques

Examiners want students to analyse a wide range of Shakespeare's methods (AO2), not just the language. Remember, analysing methods means evaluating all of Shakespeare's choices, which includes a lot more than just the lines he wrote for each character. It includes characterisation, form, structure and even stage directions. In this guide you will find sections on:

- [Types of Shakespeare play](#)
- [Verse forms of Shakespeare plays](#)
- [How to quote Shakespeare in your essay](#)
- [Analysing Shakespeare's methods](#)

Shakespearean plays

Types of Shakespeare play

- There are three types of Shakespeare play:
 - [Tragedy](#)
 - [Comedy](#)
 - [History](#)
- Each of these forms has particular conventions and structures
- It is important to know the conventions because you can then say how far Shakespeare conforms to or breaks from, these standard conventions and structures

Tragedy

- Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet are tragedies
- Shakespearean tragedies usually consist of:
 - **A tragic hero:** a once-heroic or innocent figure who is destined to die:
 - In Macbeth this is Macbeth
 - In Romeo and Juliet, this is both Romeo and Juliet
 - **Fatal flaw (hamartia):** a character trait that leads to the tragic hero's downfall:
 - Macbeth's hamartia is ambition



Your notes

- Romeo and Juliet both have the same flaw: impulsiveness
- **A foil:** a character who stands in contrast to the tragic hero, who conforms to the typical societal expectations of the era:
 - Banquo is a foil to Macbeth
 - Mercutio acts as a foil in Romeo and Juliet, contrasting Romeo
- **Fate:** all tragic heroes cannot escape their fate or destiny
- **Catharsis:** a moment of shared expression for the audience. Often, this is sympathy for the once heroic figure, and the person they could have been. This is sometimes known as a technique called the **tragic waste**:
 - The deaths of all of Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet evoke different levels of sympathy
- **Conflict:** this can be both external conflict (battles, duels, feuds) or internal (psychological conflict)
- **Final restoration of the status quo:** this means, essentially, that things go back to normal after the death of the tragic hero(s)
- Many of Shakespeare's tragedies follow the same five-part structure:
 1. **Exposition:** this is the introduction to the play for the audience, and an introduction to the themes and atmosphere. **Foreshadowing** often occurs in the exposition
 2. **Rising Action:** here is when the tragic hero's fatal flaw is exposed and an inevitable chain of events starts
 3. **Climax:** this is the turning point in the play where the tragic hero has come too far to go back. In the language of tragedy, this is called **peripeteia**
 4. **Falling Action:** the tragic hero finally comes to the realisation that they are to be defeated, or is doomed. This moment of realisation is called the **anagnorisis**
 5. **Denouement:** normality and the natural order is restored

Comedy

- This type of play includes Much Ado About Nothing, The Tempest and The Merchant of Venice
- Shakespearean comedies usually consist of:
 - Comedy:
 - Puns (a pun is a humorous play on words)
 - Slapstick (humour involving physical comedy, or embarrassment)
 - Characters who function as comic relief (these are funny characters used to contrast the play's more serious themes)



Your notes

- Elements of the fantastical, supernatural or magical:
 - Unlike in a tragedy, this would not be presented as evil, but mischievous, or even positively miraculous
- Unbelievable coincidences
- Mistaken identity/gender swapping/characters in disguise
- The subversion of societal norms:
 - Shakespeare often challenges contemporary taboos
- Plot twists
- Philosophical themes:
 - Shakespeare also includes weighty themes in his comedies: prejudice and wealth (Merchant of Venice); revenge and nature versus civilisation (The Tempest)
- Evil or bad characters repent at the play's conclusion
- A peaceful resolution of the main conflict, and any other plot twists, which usually involve a wedding
- Many of Shakespeare's comedies follow the same five-part structure:
 1. **Exposition:** this is the introduction to the existing conflict that exists in the world of the play.
Foreshadowing often occurs in the exposition
 2. **Rising Action:** conflict is developed
 3. **Turning Point:** the point in the play when the conflict reaches its height
 4. **Falling Action:** things begin to clear up for the central characters
 5. **Denouement:** the central problem is resolved, and we usually have a happy ending

History

- This includes Julius Caesar
- Shakespearean histories usually consist of:
 - Real historical events and characters
 - Biographical treatments of Medieval English kings, as well as important figures from Roman history
 - Elements of both tragedy and comedy (see above)
 - Commentary on Shakespeare's own society:
 - Although he used historical figures in his plays, they are often about issues prevalent in Elizabethan or Jacobean society



Your notes

- He often explored societal norms and moral values, especially in his Roman plays (plays based on Roman history)
- An examination of fate:
 - We will often see dreams, curses and prophecies
 - Characters often cannot escape their fate
- An examination of power and leadership:
 - Freedom versus authoritarian rule
 - Rebellion against tyranny
 - Ambition
- Lots of his histories served as Elizabethan propaganda:
 - Elizabeth I (a Tudor queen who reigned from 1558 until 1603) was queen when Shakespeare wrote many of his histories
 - These plays celebrate the founders of the Tudor dynasty
 - They criticise rival houses, or historical rivals of the Tudors, such as the House of York in Richard III
- Writing his Roman plays gave Shakespeare more freedom to subtly comment, or even criticise, the House of Tudor and Elizabeth I:
 - Julius Caesar was written at a time of anxiety in England
 - Elizabeth I was refusing to name a successor and there were fears of rebellion or even civil war
 - These are the themes Shakespeare explores in Julius Caesar

Shakespearean verse forms

- Shakespeare used three forms of poetic language when he wrote his plays:
 - Blank verse
 - Rhymed verse
 - Prose
- He uses each of these different forms throughout his plays
- Shakespeare used these different forms of language for dramatic purposes; they performed different functions:
 - To distinguish characters from one another
 - To reveal the psychology of characters



Your notes

- To show character development

Blank verse

- Blank verse consists of unrhymed lines of ten syllables, although it does not always exactly fit that pattern:
 - For example in Macbeth: *"So foul and fair a day I have not seen"*
- Typically in Shakespeare plays, blank verse represents human feelings in speeches and soliloquies. It is the form used the most by Shakespeare
- It is the form most often used for the main characters in Shakespeare's plays, especially when they are speaking of important subjects
- Blank verse is the form of language most often used by characters of high status
- In Romeo and Juliet, all the noble characters speak the vast majority of their lines in blank verse. In Macbeth, the famous soliloquies before the murder of Duncan from Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are in blank verse

Rhymed verse

- Rhymed verse consists of sets of rhymed couplets: two successive lines that rhyme with each other at the end of the line
 - For example, in The Tempest:
*"Prospero my lord shall know what I have done:
So, king, go safely on to seek thy son"*
- Shakespeare often used rhymed verse to reflect ritualistic and supernatural events in his plays:
 - In Macbeth, the witches speak in rhyming couplets
- However, Shakespeare occasionally uses other forms of rhymed verse within his plays, for example, in the sonnet:
 - A sonnet is usually a standalone love poem of 14 lines
 - Shakespeare uses this form of language when Romeo and Juliet first see each other to reflect the instant love they feel for each other

Prose

- Prose is unrhymed lines with no pattern or rhythm:
 - For example, in Much Ado About Nothing:

This can be no trick. The conference was sadly borne. They have the truth of this from Hero. They seem to pity the lady; it

seems her affections have their full bent. Love me? Why it must be requited.

- Shakespeare used prose for serious episodes, letters, or when characters appear to be losing control of their minds (when it would be unrealistic for them to speak poetically):
 - In Macbeth, Shakespeare has Lady Macbeth speak in prose once she has lost her mind
 - In Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio begins to speak in prose when he is being reckless in his fateful exchange with Tybalt
- Shakespeare also uses prose for low-status characters:
 - In Romeo and Juliet, the nurse and the musicians speak in prose
- Sometimes, Shakespeare uses prose to reflect comedic speeches or dialogue:
 - Nearly three-quarters of the entire play of Much Ado About Nothing is written in prose since it is a Shakespearean comedy



Your notes

How to quote Shakespeare in your essay

- The Shakespeare exam is a closed-book exam, which means you don't get a copy of the play to use in your exam:
 - This means that examiners do not expect you to memorise dozens of direct quotations from the play
 - The extract has been chosen for you to use to answer your essay, which means it will contain many lines that you can use as evidence in your essays
 - As much as you should take a "whole-text" approach to your essay, there will be plenty of excellent quotations that you can, and should, select from the extract first
 - If you are memorising quotations, focus on learning a few, short quotations that are relevant to the key themes in the play you are studying
- The extract should serve as a springboard to the rest of the play:
 - This means that when you are thinking about what other references to include, you should be led by the themes and ideas in the extract and not by the quotations you have memorised
- References don't need to be direct quotations:
 - They can be things that characters say in different parts of the play in your own words
 - They can be references to things that happen in the play or the way that different characters are presented elsewhere



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- Examiners repeatedly stress that textual references are just as valuable as direct quotations when referencing the rest of the play:
 - "You don't get extra marks for more quotations, but you do get more marks for making plenty of interesting comments about the references you have selected."
 - The most important thing is that these references are directly related to the ideas and themes you are exploring in your essay, and provide evidence to prove your thesis

Analysing Shakespeare's methods

In order to achieve the highest AO2 marks, think about methods as Shakespeare's choices, not just the language he is using. What overall decisions has he made in relation to characters, setting, stagecraft, form and structure? For what reasons has he made these choices? What overarching message do they help to convey?

What not to do when analysing Shakespeare's methods

- Don't "spot techniques":
 - Examiners dislike when students use overly sophisticated terminology unnecessarily ("polysyndeton"; "epanalepsis")
 - Knowing the names of sophisticated techniques will not gain you any more marks, especially if these techniques are only "spotted" and Shakespeare's intentions for this language are not explained
 - Instead of technique spot, focus your analysis on the reasons why Shakespeare is presenting the character or theme the way he does
- Don't label word types unnecessarily:
 - Similar to technique spotting, this is when students use "the noun X" or "the verb Y"
 - This doesn't add anything to your analysis
 - Instead, examiners suggest you focus on ideas or images, instead of words or word types
 - Instead of "Shakespeare uses the noun 'scorpions' to show..." use "Shakespeare uses the image 'full of scorpions' to show..."
- Don't limit your analysis to a close reading of Shakespeare's language:
 - You gain marks for explaining all of Shakespeare's choices, not just his language
 - Only focusing on his language, therefore, limits the mark you will be given
 - Instead, take a whole-text approach and think about Shakespeare's decisions about:
 - Form



Your notes

- Structure
- Characterisation
- Stagecraft
- You do not need to include quotations to analyse the above, but you will still be rewarded well by the examiner
- Don't focus only on the extract:
 - You will not be responding to the full task and text, and your mark will, therefore, suffer if you focus only on the extract, and not the wider play overall
 - Use the extract as a springboard to ideas and themes in the rest of the play
- Never retell the story:
 - "Narrative" and "descriptive" answers get the lowest marks
 - Move from **what** Shakespeare is presenting to **how** and **why** he has made the choices he has.

What to do when analysing Shakespeare's methods

- Take a whole-text approach:
 - This could involve commenting on structure: " 'at the start / this changes when / in contrast...' "
 - This could involve commenting on Shakespeare's choice of form
 - How has he conformed to or subverted the form of tragedy/comedy/history?
 - What deliberate choices has he made with his verse form? Why does he shift to prose or rhymed verse?
 - Think about how characters develop: are they presented differently at different parts of the play? Why has Shakespeare chosen to present this change?
 - Are characters presented differently from each other? Why? What does each represent?
 - Do characters' relationships with each other change? Why might Shakespeare have chosen to do this?
- Remember that characters are constructs, not real people:
 - Think about what each character's function is in the play
 - What does Shakespeare use each character to say about humanity, or about society?
- Always frame your essay with Shakespeare in mind:
 - As the examiners say: "writers use methods, including language and structure, to form and express their ideas – the choices the writer makes are conscious and deliberate"

- Therefore, write that Shakespeare “highlights X”, “suggests Y”, “challenges Z”
- Use the words “so” and “because” to push you to explain your own ideas further:
 - Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as losing her resolve in Act V, Scene I, **because** he is commenting on the fatal consequences of committing a mortal sin like regicide”
- Zoom out to big ideas in your analysis:
 - Go from analysing language, or other writer’s choices, to Shakespeare’s overall intention, or message
 - This should also link to your thesis and argument throughout
 - You can begin these “zoom out” sentences with “Shakespeare could be suggesting that because X, then Y” or “Shakespeare could be using the character of X to challenge contemporary ideas about Y”
- Use modal language to present sophisticated ideas:
 - Using words like “could”, “may” or “perhaps” shows that you are thinking conceptually



Your notes



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Shakespeare: Context

Context

There are only a maximum of six marks available in the Shakespeare question for context. This may not seem like a lot, but six marks can be the difference between two entire grades at GCSE. Furthermore, if you understand how to effectively incorporate contextual understanding of your studied play into your essay, it can even boost your mark in AO1 too, and help you create a more sophisticated and conceptualised response.

Shakespearean England

Below is some general context related to England in which Shakespeare wrote his plays. It should be stressed once again that it is not necessary, or even useful, to memorise all of this historical information, but that the notes below give a general sense of the behaviours and attitudes of Shakespeare's time. Remember, you should only revise those contextual factors that are relevant to the ideas and themes of the play you are studying.

Christianity

- The vast majority of people in Elizabethan and Jacobean England would have been Christian
- They would have believed in the literal word of the Bible:
 - Therefore, they would have believed in God, Heaven and Hell
 - They also believed in the Devil and demons
- Therefore, characters in Shakespeare's plays would have been wary of defying God and the Church's teachings:
 - They would have respected the authority of God and the Church
 - They would have understood the grave consequences of committing sins
- Shakespearean audiences would also have believed in the Great Chain of Being:
- The Great Chain of Being was a belief in an order of things in the universe
- It represented a hierarchy of all things that asserted God's authority at the top of the chain
- In essence, the Great Chain of Being was God's plan for the world
- In Shakespeare's plays, anything trying to disrupt this order is presented as evil
- This order, and therefore God's authority, is almost always restored at the end of a Shakespeare play

Supernatural



Your notes

- Many Shakespeare plays include elements of the supernatural:
 - This can be in the form of evil (for example the witches in Macbeth)
 - Or the fantastical and magical (for example in The Tempest)
- Audiences would have believed all magic was the work of the Devil
- Shakespeare's audiences would have been equally afraid, and intrigued by the supernatural:
 - They believed supernatural events did really occur
 - They believed in the existence of witches and evil spells
 - Despite the fact that magic and witches were associated with the Devil, it was still exciting to see on stage
 - James I – the king when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth – was fascinated by witches:
 - Shakespeare potentially included them in the play to please the king
- Magic and the supernatural represent challenges to the established order:
- They disrupt the stability of the worlds in Shakespeare's plays
- They must be overcome to restore order:
 - For example, Prospero must give up his magic before the resolution of The Tempest

Royal assent

- Shakespeare's plays were written under the reign of two monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I (until 1603) and James I (from 1603 onwards)
- It was useful for Shakespeare to remain in the favour of the sitting monarch:
 - There would be financial benefits for remaining in favour
 - It would also impact his reputation positively
- Therefore, many of Shakespeare's plays can be seen as propaganda for the sitting monarch:
 - Many of Shakespeare's plays written under Elizabeth I indirectly criticised her enemies or historical rivals
 - Macbeth, written under James I, seeks to legitimise his reign
- Shakespeare's audiences believed in the Divine Right of Kings:
 - The Divine Right of Kings was a belief that kings and queens are chosen by God
 - These rulers are, therefore, representatives of God on Earth



Your notes

- This would mean there would be religious consequences for anyone attempting to overthrow a king
- Shakespeare repeatedly presents the overthrow of a rightful king as having disastrous consequences:
 - This can be seen as another way he flattered his royal audience

Audience

- Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed in front of an audience
- The audience would have comprised a wide range of social classes
- It is, therefore, useful to think of what their attitudes and behaviours would have been in general:
 - What were the societal norms of the time?
 - How might these audiences have thought about topics like:
 - Love?
 - Honour?
 - Power?
 - Leadership?
 - Revenge?
 - Religion?
 - Social status?
 - Race?
 - Gender?
- These topics should relate to the play you have studied

Is Shakespeare using his characters, or events in his plays, to **reflect** or **challenge** these societal norms?

What not to do when exploring context

- Do not “bolt on” irrelevant biographical or historical facts to your paragraphs
- Do not see context as history:
 - It is better understood as ideas and perspectives
- Do not explore contextual factors in your essay if they are not:
- Relevant to the ideas and themes of the play in general



Your notes

- Relevant to the question you have been set
- Relevant to the central thesis of your own argument
- Do not only add context at the end of paragraphs, or in some set paragraph structure that includes context:
 - It is much better to incorporate contextual understanding into your argument, or into your analysis of Shakespeare's methods
- Do not include the formulation "An Elizabethan audience would think... whereas a modern audience would think":
 - This takes you away from your own ideas and from answering the question directly
- Do not include analysis of adaptations of the play (for example a film version):
 - This will affect your focus on answering the question
- Do not include interpretations of the text based on literary theory (for example Marxist, feminist, Freudian and Nietzschean theories):
 - These do not contribute to your own interpretation of the text!

What to do when exploring context

- Ensure all your exploration of context is linked to:
 - The themes and ideas Shakespeare is exploring in the play
 - The question you have been set
 - Your own argument
- Understanding that context is about understanding ideas and perspectives:
 - Think: what were the particular attitudes and behaviours of Shakespeare's time that give a greater understanding of a theme or character?
 - Do these societal norms help explain a character's actions, or development, over the course of the play?
 - Is there a reason Shakespeare is exploring a theme? Does he want to reflect or challenge his society's attitudes on a particular issue?
- Some of these ideas are universal, which means that we don't just need to think from the perspective of Elizabethan or Jacobean attitudes and behaviours:
 - Your own understanding of the following ideas is valid and useful to explore:
 - Love

- Conflict
- Revenge
- Power
- Exploration of universal ideas and perspectives is equally valid and awarded marks for context in the same way



Your notes



Your notes

The AQA GCSE Shakespeare Mark Scheme

The mark scheme in English Literature can seem daunting and difficult to understand. This is because there is no “correct answer” for any essay; the exam board does not provide points that need to be included in any essay and, instead, examiners have to use the mark scheme to place an answer into a level.

It is, therefore, essential to understand the mark scheme really well yourself: if you understand exactly what you are being assessed on, you understand how to improve. Below you will find sections on:

- [Translating the mark scheme](#)
- [Understanding the different levels](#)
- [How to get a Level 6](#)
- [Student-friendly mark scheme](#)
- [Tick list for success](#)

Translating the mark scheme

Translating the mark scheme

Here is a simple version of the AQA mark scheme for the Shakespeare question and, below, a student-friendly translation of the mark scheme with expert advice and guidance, broken down into the different assessment objectives.

AO1

What it says: “Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response”

What it means: Write a clear essay with a central argument based on your own opinions. All parts of the essay must directly answer the question

Commentary:

- Examiners want to see what they call a “coherent” response: an answer that relates to a central argument in every part of the essay:
 - This is why it is vital to **plan** your answer first
- This argument should always link directly to the question, so include the keywords of the question in your thesis and your topic sentences
- Examiners want to see your opinions, not the opinions of an imagined Elizabethan or Jacobean audience

Tick list:



Your notes

- Have I included a thesis statement in my introduction?
- Does my thesis statement include a central argument based on my own opinions?
- Does my thesis statement include keywords from the question?
- Have I included topic sentences for all of my paragraphs?
- Do all of my paragraphs directly answer the question?
- Have I included a conclusion that sums up my argument and links to my thesis?

What it says: “Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations”

What it means: Select quotations and references from both the extract and the rest of the play. These must be accurate and provide evidence for the points you make in your argument

Commentary:

- Examiners reward the highest marks to students who relate the ideas and themes of the extract to other parts of the play:
 - To link to elsewhere in the play, use phrases like: “Earlier/later in the play”, “Similarly, in Act X, Scene Y ...”, “Shakespeare also highlights this idea when...”
- References do not need to be direct quotations
- You do not get more marks for more quotations:
 - All references just need to be accurate and provide evidence for your points and overall argument
- All references must be relevant to the points of your essay:
 - Examiners dislike when students include irrelevant quotations

Tick list:

- Have I chosen two or three quotations from the extract?
- Have I linked these quotations, and ideas presented in the extract, to other parts of the play?
- Have I chosen at least three other quotations and references from elsewhere in the play?
- Do all of my references directly support my argument?
 - Does each reference I have included support the points made in my topic sentences?

AO2

What it says: “Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects”



Your notes

What it means: Use analysis of Shakespeare's choices to support your argument. This evidence can be the language used by Shakespeare, as well as the form of play he has chosen and the order of events in the play

Commentary:

- Examiners want students to move away from word-level analysis to whole-text analysis:
 - This means not just focusing your analysis on the language in the extract or quotations you have memorised
 - Instead, think about choices Shakespeare has made in terms of form and structure, contrasts and character development
- This analysis should move from **how** Shakespeare uses language, structure and form, to **why** he does it:
 - What is Shakespeare using his language/characters to say? What is his overall message?

Tick list:

- Does my analysis provide evidence for the points in my argument?
- Have I moved from close word-level analysis to whole-text analysis?
- Have I included an analysis of structure and/or form?
- Have I explained my analysis in terms of Shakespeare's overall message?

What it says: "[...] using relevant subject terminology where appropriate"

What it means: Include terminology on writers' techniques **only** when techniques are explained fully and relevant to your argument

Commentary:

- Examiners don't like what they call "technique-spotting":
 - This is where a student uses (sometimes very sophisticated) vocabulary to name the literary techniques Shakespeare uses without explaining them
- Equally, they don't reward analysis that just names a word class ("the noun X"; "the verb Y"):
 - They think this is "unnecessary and unhelpful"
- Shakespeare's techniques should only be analysed if they provide further evidence to support your argument
- Examiners want students to move from **what** technique Shakespeare uses to **how** and **why** he is using it

Tick list:

- Have I removed any unnecessary technique spotting?



Your notes

- Have I removed any unnecessary naming of word classes?
- Have I explained Shakespeare's use of techniques in terms of his overall message?

AO3

What it says: "Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written"

What it means: Use contextual ideas and perspectives to support your argument and to provide further insight into Shakespeare's choices

Commentary:

- Context is not historical or biographical information that has nothing to do with the ideas presented in a Shakespeare play
- Instead, context should be seen as the ideas and perspectives of Shakespeare's time
- These ideas and perspectives (Elizabethan or Jacobean views on religion, gender, race, etc.) help us understand why Shakespeare presents his play and characters in the way he does:
 - Why do characters behave the way they do?
 - Why is this scene set in this particular place?
 - Why is this theme significant in the text?
- Examiners want to see context linked to the themes and ideas of the play
- All context should also be linked to your overall argument:
 - What further insight does an understanding of the behaviours and beliefs of Shakespeare's era provide for my argument?

Tick list:

- Have I removed any irrelevant contextual information?
- Is all my context linked to the ideas and perspectives of Shakespeare's time?
- Does all my context provide additional insight into my main argument?

AO4

What it says: "Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation."

What it means: Use specialist terminology and key vocabulary throughout your essay to show a deep understanding of the ideas Shakespeare is exploring. Structure your essay clearly, and spell and punctuate correctly



Your notes

Commentary:

- Although AO4 on its own is only worth 4 marks, using key vocabulary and structuring your essay well will also increase your AO1 marks:
 - Using specialist terminology can help you create a “conceptualised response”, which is rewarded with the highest marks
 - Structuring your essay into clear paragraphs with clear topic sentences will also help you gain top marks for organisation

Tick list:

- Have I included key terminology throughout my essay?
- Have I paragraphed my essay clearly?
- Have I re-read my essay to check for spelling and grammar mistakes?

Understanding the different levels

The mark scheme for English Literature has six levels, with Level 1 at the bottom, and Level 6 at the top. Examiners do not receive a list of points that need to be included for a student's essay to achieve Level 3, say, or Level 5. Instead, the mark scheme contains different “descriptors” for each level:

- “Descriptors” are the:
 - Features that a response is expected to have to achieve at each level:
 - This means: How well a student has responded to the question (the overall quality of the answer)
 - Skills a student is expected to show to achieve each level
 - This means: The specific skills needed to explore and analyse a text
- For example, the “descriptors” for a Level 1 response are:
 - An attempt to answer the question (quality of answer)
 - A narrative or descriptive approach (quality of answer)
 - A simple analysis of the writer's methods and context (skills shown)
- In contrast, examiners expect a lot more for a Level 6 response. The “descriptors” for Level 6 include:
 - Responding to the full task with a well-structured argument (quality of answer)
 - A critical, exploratory and conceptualised approach (quality of answer)
 - Insightful analysis of the writer's methods (skills shown)



Your notes

- An integrated and exploratory approach to context (skills shown)

Essentially, when examiners are putting student essays into a particular level, they are just deciding **how well** the student has displayed the expected features and skills of each assessment objective. So if you understand each AO, and what is required for each AO, you will know how to improve.

What makes a Level 6 answer?

If you want to achieve a Grade 9, you should be aiming for a Level 6 response. Below you will see a table that explains how to move from a Level 5 response to Level 6.

Question:

‘Lady Macbeth is a female character who changes during the play.’

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how far you agree with this view.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this extract
- how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

Part of essay	Level 5	Level 6	Reason
Introduction	<i>Lady Macbeth is a character who changes dramatically over the course of the play. Initially, she is presented as ruthless and remorseless but is later presented as weak and totally consumed by guilt. In the Elizabethan era, regicide was considered a mortal sin, so Lady Macbeth's downfall could be related to her sinful nature.</i>	<i>Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes dramatically over the course of the play: she changes from a ruthless, remorseless woman who is able to manipulate her husband, to one that is sidelined by Macbeth and ultimately totally consumed by guilt. Shakespeare is perhaps suggesting that unchecked ambition and hubris,</i>	The Level 6 introduction is in the form of a thesis statement, which presents an overarching argument that includes Shakespeare as an author making deliberate choices and conveying a message. It is also a response to the full task, because it addresses the word “female” in the question, which the Level 5 introduction does not.



Your notes

		particularly for women, have fatal consequences.	
Topic sentence	<i>Lady Macbeth becomes weaker as the play progresses, and is no longer able to control Macbeth.</i>	<i>Lady Macbeth's strength, and ability to command and manipulate those around her, dramatically diminishes from the first time the audience sees her, in Act I, Scene V, to the last time, here in Act V, Scene I.</i>	The Level 6 response is more specific. Her "strength" is detailed as an "ability to command and manipulate those around her", which is more precise. It also gives a more specific timeframe for her character development, with the inclusion of specific scenes.
Analysis of the writer's methods	<i>Shakespeare shows Lady Macbeth's loss of control by showing her desperation in this scene. She uses imperatives - "wash", "put", "look" - but instead of her using these to command people around her, she directs these at herself, perhaps showing that she has lost authority over other characters, and even over herself. Furthermore, her fragmented speech ("O, O, O") also may reflect her loss of power over herself, and that she is losing her mind.</i>	<i>Shakespeare emphasises Lady Macbeth's loss of control by using contrasting verses forms as the play progresses. Initially, she uses the order and authority of blank verse, which reflects her own power and control. However, in this scene, Lady Macbeth does not use the regular or ordered language of blank verse, but rather the disordered form of prose. This reflects both her loss of status and power (prose is often used by commoners in Shakespeare's plays), but also her own mental illness.</i>	The Level 6 response does not only rely on quotations from the extract for its analysis. Instead, it takes a whole-text approach to the question and focuses on character development: how Lady Macbeth changes over the course of the play. It also analyses verse form, instead of just language, which shows a sophisticated understanding of Shakespeare's methods and intentions.
Context	<i>In Act I, Scene V, Lady Macbeth is presented as commanding, ruthless and strong. In the Jacobean era, women were expected to be nurturing, compassionate and obedient to their husbands,</i>	<i>The first time she is presented to the audience, Lady Macbeth is presented as a very untypical woman: far from being a dutiful and subservient wife, she is shown to be plotting on Macbeth's behalf, speaks of</i>	The context in the Level 6 response is interwoven into the analysis and linked directly to the theme and question. The idea of an "untypical woman" is enough context to add here, as it

	so Lady Macbeth is very unusual for a woman at this time.	him disparagingly (she worries he is too kind to carry out her plan), and is presented as having power over both Macbeth and her surroundings.	focuses on perspectives and ideas, rather than the bolt-on historical information in the Level 5 response. The Level 5 response is less focused on the question as a result.
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Overall student-friendly mark scheme

The GCSE mark scheme can be confusing as it is written for examiners, not students. Below is a translated mark scheme that breaks the assessment objectives into concise, clear instructions.

Assessment Objective	Number of marks	Meaning
AO1	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write a clear essay with a central argument based on your own opinions All parts of the essay must directly answer the question Select quotations and references from both the extract and the rest of the play Quotations must be accurate and provide evidence for the points you make in your argument
AO2	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use analysis of Shakespeare's choices to support your argument Evidence can be analysis of the language used by Shakespeare, as well as the form and structure of the play Include terminology on writers' techniques only when techniques are explained fully and relevant to your argument
AO3	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use contextual ideas and perspectives to support your argument and to provide further insight into Shakespeare's choices
AO4	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use specialist terminology and key vocabulary throughout your essay

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| | | ▪ Structure your essay clearly, and spell and punctuate correctly |
|--|--|---|



Your notes

Tick list for success

Marking your own essays can be difficult. However, if you use the tick list below, you can see which features and skills you have – and haven't – included in your answer. If you can say 'yes' to all of the questions below, your essay should be heading toward the highest level.

AO1

- Have I included a thesis statement in my introduction?
- Does my thesis statement include a central argument based on my own opinions?
- Does my thesis statement include keywords from the question?
- Have I included topic sentences for all of my paragraphs?
- Do all of my paragraphs directly answer the question?
- Have I included a conclusion that sums up my argument and links to my thesis?
- Have I chosen two or three quotations from the extract?
- Have I linked these quotations, and ideas presented in the extract, to other parts of the play?
- Have I chosen at least three other quotations and references from elsewhere in the play?
- Do all of my references directly support my argument?
 - Does each reference I have included support the points made in my topic sentences?

AO2

- Does my analysis provide evidence for the points in my argument?
- Have I moved from close word-level analysis to whole-text analysis?
- Have I included an analysis of structure and/or form?
- Have I explained my analysis in terms of Shakespeare's overall message?
- Have I removed any unnecessary technique spotting?
- Have I removed any unnecessary naming of word classes?
- Have I explained Shakespeare's use of techniques in terms of his overall message?

AO3

- Have I removed any irrelevant contextual information?

- Is all my context linked to the ideas and perspectives of Shakespeare's time?
- Does all my context provide additional insight into my main argument?

AO4

- Have I included key terminology throughout my essay?
- Have I paragraphed my essay clearly?
- Have I re-read my essay to check for spelling and grammar mistakes?



Your notes



Your notes

Shakespeare: Model Answers

Model Answers

Below, you will find a full-mark, Level 6 model answer for a Shakespeare essay. The commentary below each section of the essay illustrates how and why it would be awarded Level 6. Despite the fact it is an answer to a Macbeth question, the commentary below is relevant to any Shakespeare question.

As the commentary is arranged by assessment objective, a student-friendly mark scheme has been included here:

Assessment Objective	Number of marks	Meaning
AO1	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write a clear essay with a central argument based on your own opinions All parts of the essay must directly answer the question Select quotations and references from both the extract and the rest of the play Quotations must be accurate and provide evidence for the points you make in your argument
AO2	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use analysis of Shakespeare's choices to support your argument Evidence can be analysis of the language used by Shakespeare, as well as the form and structure of the play Include terminology on writers' techniques only when techniques are explained fully and relevant to your argument
AO3	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use contextual ideas and perspectives to support your argument and to provide further insight into Shakespeare's choices
AO4	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use specialist terminology and key vocabulary throughout your essay Structure your essay clearly, and spell and punctuate correctly

Model Answer Breakdown

The commentary for the below model answer as arranged by assessment objective: each paragraph has a commentary for a different assessment objective, as follows:

- **The introduction** includes commentary on all the AOs
- **Paragraph 1** includes commentary on **AO1** (answering the question and selecting references)
- **Paragraph 2** includes commentary on **AO2** (analysing the writer's methods)
- **Paragraph 3** includes commentary on **AO3** (exploring context)
- **The conclusion** includes commentary on all the AOs

The model answer answers the following question:



Your notes



Your notes

Macbeth

Read the following extract from Act 5 Scene 1 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, the Doctor and the Gentlewoman watch Lady Macbeth sleepwalking.

LADY MACBETH Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two. Why then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

5 **DOCTOR** Do you mark that?

LADY MACBETH The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o'that, my Lord, no more o'that. You mar all with this starting.

10 **DOCTOR** Go to, go to; you have known what you should not.

GENTLEWOMAN She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that. Heaven knows what she has known.

LADY MACBETH Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O.

15 **DOCTOR** What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged.

GENTLEWOMAN I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

DOCTOR Well, well, well –

GENTLEWOMAN Pray God it be, sir.

20 **DOCTOR** This disease is beyond my practice; yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holily in their beds.

LADY MACBETH Wash your hands, put on your night-gown, look not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave.



Your notes

25 **DOCTOR** Even so?

LADY MACBETH To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate.
Come, come, come, come, give me your hand; what's done
cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.

'Lady Macbeth is a female character who changes during the play.'

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how far you agree with this view.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth in this extract
- how far Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes in the play as a whole.

[30 marks]

Level 6, Full-Mark Answer

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes dramatically over the course of the play: **she changes** from a ruthless, remorseless woman who is able to manipulate her husband, to one that is sidelined by Macbeth and, ultimately, totally consumed by guilt. **Shakespeare is perhaps** suggesting that unchecked ambition and hubris, particularly for women, have fatal consequences.

Commentary:

- The introduction is in the form of a thesis statement
- It includes a central argument based on my own opinions
- It includes keywords from the question:
 - **"Shakespeare presents** Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes dramatically over the course of the play"
- It takes a whole-text approach, referencing changes across the whole play:
 - **"she changes** from a ruthless, remorseless woman who is able to manipulate her husband, to one that is sidelined by Macbeth and, ultimately, totally consumed by guilt."
- It acknowledges Shakespeare as an author making deliberate choices and conveying a message:



Your notes

- **"Shakespeare is perhaps suggesting that ..."**

- It includes modal language to show a conceptualised approach

Lady Macbeth's strength – and ability to command and manipulate those around her – dramatically diminishes from the first time the audience sees her, in Act I, Scene V, to the last time, here in Act V, Scene I. The first time she is presented to the audience, Lady Macbeth is presented as a very untypical woman: far from being a dutiful and subservient wife, she is shown to be plotting on Macbeth's behalf, speaks of him disparagingly (she worries he is too kind to carry out her plan), and is presented as having power over both Macbeth and her surroundings. This dominance can be seen in her use of imperatives, both when she is directing Macbeth to disguise his true intentions to Duncan (and be a "serpent underneath"), and later, more forcefully, when she orders Macbeth to "give" her the daggers. This shows that Lady Macbeth has almost assumed the dominant position in their relationship, and taken on the typically 'male' characteristics of authority and strength (whereas Macbeth's "kindness" can here be seen as a sign of weakness). However, there is an irony in Shakespeare's use of imperatives later in the play: in Act V, Scene I, Lady Macbeth is shown to have lost her power to command those things around her and her use of imperatives ("Out, damned spot! Out, I say") speaks more of abject desperation than her authority. She has lost the power to command her husband, her surroundings and even her own mind. Shakespeare could be suggesting that the unusual power dynamic presented at the beginning of the play is unnatural, and that, as a woman, Lady Macbeth would never be able to maintain this type of authority without succumbing to madness.

Commentary:

- The paragraph begins with a topic sentence
- Topic sentence directly addresses the question (the "change" the character undergoes)
- Topic sentence has a narrower focus than the thesis statement
- The whole paragraph is related to the topic sentence
- The paragraph includes at least one reference to the extract
- The paragraph includes multiple references to the rest of the play
- All references are linked to the question and support the argument of my topic sentence

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a character whose self-control and authority over her own mind evaporates by Act V. We see this in the repetitious and fragmented language Shakespeare has her use in this scene. The repetition of several words and phrases ("to bed"; "come"; "O") shows a character who is not in control of her own thought processes and has lost agency over her own mind. Shakespeare emphasises this by using contrasting verse forms for Lady Macbeth as the play progresses. Initially, she uses the order and authority of blank verse, which reflects her own power and control. However, in this scene, Lady Macbeth does not use the regular or ordered language of blank verse, but rather the disordered form of prose. This reflects both her loss of status and power (prose is often used by commoners in Shakespeare's plays), but also her own mental illness. Indeed, the description of her having a "disease" in this scene is ironic, since earlier in the play she describes Macbeth as "brainsickly" and "infirm":

it is now she who is the weaker of the two. Perhaps Shakespeare uses this role reversal once again to suggest that women assuming positions of dominance is unnatural and may lead to mental decline.

Commentary:

- The analysis provides evidence for the points in the topic sentence (all evidence relates to Lady Macbeth's mental state)
- Whole-text analysis of Shakespeare's methods, not just focused on the extract
- Not just analysis of Shakespeare's language, but also of form
- The analysis includes other wider choices made by Shakespeare:
 - Characterisation
 - Structure
- All analysis is explained fully in terms of the question and my own argument
- The analysis explained in terms of Shakespeare's overall message

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a character who loses her resolve over the mortal sin of regicide as the play progresses. Initially, Lady Macbeth is presented as a character who believes that both she and her husband will be able to evade the typical consequences of committing a crime – the murder of a king – that would have been seen as truly heinous. Not only is it a crime punishable by death, but the religious consequences would be dire: eternal punishment in Hell. Shakespeare presents her as acknowledging the seriousness of the crime in Act I, Scene V where she references Heaven and Hell prior to the murder of Duncan, but she believes, arrogantly, that she is strong enough to evade capture, as well as cloak herself from feelings of guilt and remorse. Her hubris is also shown later in the play, after the regicide has been committed, when she tells Macbeth that “a little water clears us of this deed”, implying that it will be straightforward to escape the psychological impact of committing a mortal sin. However, by Act V, Scene I Lady Macbeth is shown to have completely lost her resolve, and is haunted by those psychological impacts: she sees blood, which symbolically represents guilt, on her hands, which she cannot wash off. Indeed, later she states that Duncan had “so much blood in him”, an admission that a little water could never have cleansed the guilt from her conscience (“what's done cannot be undone”). This irony is highlighted again by Shakespeare when Lady Macbeth states that “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand”, the hyperbole emphasising the enormity of her crime. Shakespeare could be suggesting that no one can escape the psychological and theological consequences of regicide. Indeed, the Doctor states that he has never seen anyone in Lady Macbeth's state die “holily”, echoing Lady Macbeth's own earlier reference to Hell.

Commentary:

- Does not include any irrelevant historical or biographical facts
- All context is linked to the topic sentence (“loses resolve over the mortal sin of regicide”) and the argument as a whole



Your notes

- All context is integrated into analysis of Shakespeare's methods
- Understanding contextual ideas and perspectives provides additional insight into my main argument
- Context is sometimes implied, rather than explicit. This still shows sophisticated awareness of ideas (here about religion and Hell)

In conclusion, Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a female character who changes from a character who assumes dominance over her husband and her surroundings, to a woman who loses all agency. Moreover, initially, Shakespeare presents her as a character who seemingly has the mental fortitude to deal with the mortal sin of regicide with a clear conscience, but this mental strength also evaporates. Shakespeare could be issuing a warning to those people who believe they can escape the psychological and theological consequences of sin, especially if they are women who assume an atypical and unnatural position of power.

Commentary:

- The conclusion uses keywords from the question
- The conclusion links to the thesis
- The conclusion sums up more detailed arguments outlined in the topic sentences of all paragraphs
- It also gives a fuller understanding of Shakespeare's intentions, based on ideas explored in the essay



Your notes