2021 English Literary Studies Subject Assessment Advice

Overview

Subject assessment advice, based on the 2021 assessment cycle, gives an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, and the quality of student performance.

Teachers should refer to the subject outline for specifications on content and learning requirements, and to the subject operational information for operational matters and key dates.

School Assessment

Assessment Type 1: Responding to Texts

The more successful responses commonly:

* showed a strong analytical approach and established the development of an argument in terms of how authors position readers to develop ideas and viewpoints. Therefore, those students who could expand their analysis beyond how devices shape an understanding of theme and character to how ideas, values and perspectives are developed achieved more highly against the performance standards
* demonstrated clear evidence in terms of connections between texts in comparative writing tasks, rather than writing paragraphs with ‘blocked’ discussion of texts
* showed a range of text forms — including essays, considered paragraphs, multimodal pieces, annotated scenes, and if suitable, comparative writing
* conveyed insight into the range of ways in which authors of different text types use such conventions and stylistic features to influence readers
* used evidence appropriately and fluently to support observations
* communicated in a register that was clear, logical, and convincing
* demonstrated an understanding of literary metalanguage and used it effectively to support their responses.

The less successful responses commonly:

* created formulaic texts that only included character analyses or theme discussions which limited students’ ability to discuss their knowledge and understanding of how authors position readers to contend with issues within texts
* adopted a perceived academic style or ‘overwriting’ that served to make their work less precise and clear and often involved convoluted sentences or misused terms
* approached the critical perspective task as if the perspective in question was a device to only explore aspects of characterisation rather than a ‘lens’ through which to interrogate ideas, perspectives, and values
* attempted to answer questions that were limiting rather than challenging; for example, writing on a general theme without any requirement to analyse and develop a clear point of view
* included ‘blocked’ quotations rather than embedding ‘pithy’ quotations
* examined only one perspective or two very similar ‘lenses’ in the critical perspectives task (e.g. moral and philosophical, or feminist and gender)
* created texts that often seemed ‘formulaic’ and were in essence only slight variations of the same response, with students following the same argument, discussion points and conclusions
* attempted comparison that was either arbitrary in nature or too ‘blocked’ and without appropriate analysis of similarities and differences
* produced texts that still required basic editing and formatting.

Assessment Type 2: Creating Texts

In this assessment type, students create one transformative text linked to another text, with a writer’s statement (1500 words, or 9 minutes, or equivalent in multimodal form). The text chosen as the basis for this task may or may not come from the texts in the shared studies, and the accompanying writer’s statement should outline the choices the student has made in terms of the text type, audience, and purpose. Additionally, students create one written, oral, or multimodal text (1000 words, or 6 minutes, or equivalent in multimodal form) and demonstrate understanding and mastery of the features of the chosen text type.

The more successful responses commonly:

* demonstrated an in-depth awareness of the text type (its stylistic features and conventions), audience, and purpose
* demonstrated an understanding and analysis of devices in both texts within the transformational task
* showed breadth and creativity in the development of different text types across the assessment type
* conveyed skill in creating a persona and in identifying a target audience in oral text productions
* ensured there was the provision of evidence. Teacher grades and comments were supported, where possible, by videos, audio recordings, cue cards, transcripts, photographs, and other relevant artefacts
* conveyed an understanding of audience and purpose relevant to each text type
* showed thought to the ‘weighting’ of each section of the transformation task to enable sophisticated insights into the similarities and differences between the source text and transformation
* created transformation tasks where the text was clearly converted or reimagined from the source text but still explored a similar concept or idea.

The less successful responses commonly:

* read notes in oral presentations without due consideration of the audience and purpose elements of a speech or presentation or the relevant text type
* repeated text types, for example, two persuasive texts, etc. This can limit achievement in Ap1, KU2 and KU3
* created recounts where little thought was given to the development of ‘voice’ or the skill of indirect observation
* were not clear in regards to the conventions of the text type they were creating
* resorted to a ‘retelling’ of the text types rather than comparative analysis in the transformational task
* included two lengthy writers’ statements for each creating text task, shifting the emphasis to analysis
* used source texts in the transformational task that had questionable literary merit or a lack of literary devices; for example, artwork such as paintings and photographs, or very popular songs, where the emphasis is more on musical effects and production values rather than lyrics with sophisticated and perceptive quality
* created transformational tasks where the source text was too similar in text type and style to the transformed text
* created straightforward informational texts that contained little literary or aesthetic merit, thus limiting the opportunity to draw on their knowledge and experience of genre and literary devices
* wrote only brief or cursory comments in the writer’s statement as consideration was not given to the ‘weighting’ of each part of this task
* used source texts in the transformational task that had questionable or zero literary merit; for example, artwork such as paintings and photographs, or very popular songs, where the emphasis is more on musical effects and production values rather than lyrics with sophisticated and perceptive qualities
* the subject outline clearly states on page 9 that ‘students evaluate some of the literary conventions of the original and transformed text types’ but by employing photographs, artwork or musical compositions, which are not literary, this reduces the students’ ability to achieve highly against KU2, KU3, An1 and An2
* if students are passionate about these art forms then these perhaps are explored in the second AT2 task. For example, a short story in which a painter, musician or photographer struggles to achieve their artistic vision.

Student samples submitted for moderation should include all pieces of work for all tasks in an assessment type.

External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Investigation

Part A: Comparative Text Study

This task involves the choice of one text that has been shared by the class paired with an independently selected text and results in an essay comparing both texts of up to 1500 words. The teacher may specify which shared text is to be used, or may provide opportunity for students to select from the range of text types studied: drama, prose, poetry or film. When students select poetry as a text for the essay it is advisable to narrow the study to the work of one poet and multiple poems and a range of stories by one author if they select short stories.

The more successful responses commonly:

* involved the selection of an independent text with literary merit that provided ample scope for detailed analysis
* involved a focus on a manageable concept that was able to be explored within the limit of 1500 words
* were the result of well-developed questions that included a comparative element, a sense of the role of the author, and an element of tension that led to a well-considered answer
* involved an argument that was clearly comparative and involved an exploration of the similarities and differences between texts
* involved a line of reasoning within and between paragraphs so that each unit of thought was logically structured and the whole essay involved a carefully organised argument
* involved an appropriate introduction that foregrounded the central thesis and argument of the essay
* involved well-considered paragraphs that started with clear topic sentences and were structured cohesively with logical transitions
* involved final paragraphs that avoided repetition and instead took a ‘big picture’ approach to the question, finalised the argument, and drew convincing conclusions that supported the overall thesis of the essay
* involved fluently incorporated references to a range of stylistic features and conventions
* involved the exploration of the features of the text types being analysed and drew attention to the contrast between stylistic features when the text types differed
* congruently connected the stylistic features identified with appropriate evidence and a valid effect (positioning the reader/viewer or presenting an idea)
* involved evidence that was fluently embedded into the line of reasoning so that quotations, for example, were naturally incorporated into sentences
* were polished responses in which students had: checked spelling, particularly of key words such as authors’ names and terms central to the metalanguage being used; appropriately used punctuation, particularly of problematic elements such as apostrophes, colons and semi-colons and the delineation of titles; applied the correct techniques of quoting from texts; had carefully checked the accuracy of word choices, particularly in ensuring the correct use of verbs; had been careful in the use of synonyms, realising that words have particular nuances and choosing an uncommon or unfamiliar word might inadvertently result in using it out of context.

The less successful responses commonly:

* did not involve a structured argument and were, instead, a collection of observations about texts that lacked holistic line of reasoning
* involved a sequential, non-comparative exploration of texts
* involved only a few very lengthy paragraphs in which a logical structure was not sustained or many small paragraphs that skimmed over the texts
* sometimes wrote in a convoluted or overly wordy style that lost clarity
* paraphrased or incorporated quotations without acknowledgement into their response
* quotations involved large slabs of quotation that were not integrated into the line of reasoning
* were a recount of events, or descriptions of characters, rather than an analysis of thematic concerns and stylistic features
* focused on a descriptive discussion of author biography rather than textual analysis
* involved the labelling of stylistic features, either without analysis of the way in which these features were used to reinforce/present ideas or the provision of examples that were not clearly connected to that device or explanations about the effect of the feature that were illogical
* focused on an individual poem or short story as one of the texts that did not provide students with ample material to construct in-depth arguments
* were unbalanced, giving much more attention to one text than the other.

Assessment Type 4: Examination

Part B: Critical Reading

The texts displayed a rich range of language, stylistic features, and conventions, and both literal and figurative meanings. This allowed access for less able students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. However, the level of analysis possible in these texts also provided opportunities for more able students to demonstrate higher-order thinking and sophisticated performance, particularly in relation to the level of depth they provide in their analysis and the ways in which they structure their responses. A differentiator was how they explored the nuances of each question and how they compared texts in question 3.

The quality of student responses was pleasing, and there were few short answers and unfinished papers. Students seemed to feel comfortable working and communicating in this medium, and teachers had clearly prepared their classes for the task. In further developing the possibilities of the medium it is worth noting the following:

* Students who planned and organised their responses developed more successful answers than those who may have written a lot of material but allowed responses to become unstructured and repetitive. It is important that students understand that quality, not quantity, attracts better marks.
* While there is some facility to copy and paste sections of text within the electronic platform, students who integrated quotes and examples into the line of reasoning fared better than those who used the cut-and-paste function to insert material without wisely incorporating it.
* Practicing editing electronic responses to tasks during the year is highly recommended. It would be good advice to students to ‘reflect before you write’ and/or certainly to review and edit what has been written, even if the time put into this means writing fewer words in each answer.

The more successful responses commonly:

* addressed the question, ensuring that all material was relevant to the answer provided
* answered the question immediately rather than beginning with generic observations that were largely irrelevant
* avoided the repetition of material
* organised the responses around clear ideas that were logical and accessible or around a concept like ‘the extraordinary in the seemingly ordinary’ for example, small moments, objects, sensations etc., creating a more focused response and allowing them to develop a complex and thought-provoking stance
* ensured that the stylistic feature being explored clearly connected, in a logical and demonstrated way, to an idea or ideas
* avoided didactic explanation of stylistic features that relied on discussion about an implied audience (e.g. ‘first persona makes the reader think about what is being compared’)
* avoided exploring the effect of stylistic features as generalised emotional/cognitive outcomes (e.g. ‘helps the reader be more interested in the text’; ‘makes the text more enjoyable’ etc.)
* used specific labels of the stylistic features that revealed an appreciation of the metalanguage appropriate to the text type
* were aware that authors are in control of the text; authors use/explore/construct etc.
* were able to recognise the function of devices in relation to audience response and detail how, in the particular instance of its use, it enabled the author to draw the reader into their persona’s ‘inner world’
* used sophisticated metalanguage and appropriate examples when discussing conventions and stylistic features, and clearly connected these with an effect (in positioning the reader and emphasising ideas)
* provided detailed evidence from the texts to support points and ensured that these references supported the idea being explored
* chose succinct quotations that were integrated into the line of reasoning and avoided copying large slabs of text
* understood the conventions of the text type represented in the examination, particularly features of extended prose
* understood that ‘How’ in each question implied what stylistic and language features have been used by the authors
* appropriately divided their time, paying heed to the recommendations of length as an indication of the relative ‘weight’ of the question
* selected key stylistic features of the texts about which to write, rather than following a formula that led to the exploration of peripheral techniques
* avoided slipping into recount by centring the answer on the question and ensuring – when appropriate – that a particular stylistic feature was at the forefront of the analysis.
* wrote with accuracy, precision and an appropriate application of terminology.

The less successful responses commonly:

* struggled with structuring their answers; they wrote topic sentences that simply repeated the question and did not provide a thesis statement in answer to the prompt
* used a list-like approach to organise the response (‘also… additionally…furthermore…also…’) and slipped into recount by not maintaining a focus upon the central idea at the start of points
* struggled with sentence structure where the sentences ran-on, or in which the subject/verb agreement was inaccurate, or in which word choices made the meaning obscure
* poor verb choices also affected these responses, particularly when describing the actions of the author/s (‘the author transcribes the characters’; ‘the author elucidates the plot’ etc.)
* colloquial or non-conceptual adjectives inhibited the sophistication of the writing (describing ‘strong imagery’ or ‘heavy metaphors’ etc.)
* often relied on quotations without explaining or unpacking them or did not provide evidence to support their claims
* listed techniques and did not provide examples or when they did they did not show how this information helped to address the question; paragraph/s often became observations about stylistic elements without a logical connection to a concept
* tended to repeat the ideas/devices that had been explored in previous questions
* separated the two texts in a comparative question into individual paragraphs and therefore did not address the comparative requirement of the question
* may not have proofread their work as they often had grammar and spelling errors such as author’s names being misspelled, no capital letters, wrong there/their etc.

Specific comments about each question

Question One

Most students were able to consider how Woolf constructs the physical world. While it appears a simple question, the text itself is dense, and the story's environment layered and evoked in various ways, from the broader setting to its minutiae to its impact on those within it and its evocative sensory properties etc. More successful responses explored a range of language and stylistic features and conventions of differing levels of complexity in relation to the physical world presented in the text. Students often considered the location and its description, its impact on the characters, kinaesthetic and tactile appeal, and the bigger picture of humankind's place in it. In less successful responses, students tended to have a narrow focus and often answered in the form of a recounting of points or strayed into a focus on the characters.

Question Two

Most students explored how they were engaged with the text and drawn into the narrator's thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Stronger responses drew in a range of ways that Beattie did this, first-person, anecdotes, simile, metaphor, symbolism, a nostalgic tone, etc. They considered their effects showing a clear understanding of the author as the creator. Less successful responses made unsubstantiated statements about the reader rather than textually provable statements about the choices of the author. These were usually statements about how the reader would feel emotionally reading the text or based on the idea that the reader was/became the narrator's lover (and thus was involved in the text).

Question Three

This response required a comparative element. More successful responses included a discussion of the similarities and differences in how the authors use devices to 'reveal the power of the seemingly ordinary'. Integration of the comparative element of the response was clear in more successful answers. Less successful answers often dealt with the texts separately and only identified a limited range of devices in a descriptive manner.

The following notes were provided to markers for the process of assessing the critical reading. As general principles markers were instructed that:

* The critical reading was to be marked as a whole. Material relevant to particular questions may have appeared in the response to other questions and markers were instructed to credit this material.
* It was not required that students address each of the aspects covered in these notes. These are only a guide to the possible responses that students may have provided. Equally, students may have written about additional aspects not covered in these notes.
* The suggestions of length were guidelines only (students may have written more or may have written less; it was the quality of the answer that was to be assessed).

1. How does the author of Text 1 construct the physical world of their story? (approximately 200-300 words)

* The way Woolf presents the size and shape of the beach enables readers to visualise the dimensions of the physical world.
* Orientation; Woolf provides a birds-eye perspective before moving in closer across the text to an intimate setting where the protagonist’s hand [burrows] into the sand.
* Rich description, kinaesthetic and tactile imagery.
* Hones in on the smallest of objects – a piece of glass – and describes its physical qualities and the larger elements of the physical world blur.
* Personification of the physical world; the boat in ‘the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat’, the objects related to the men, such as the walking stick that ‘seemed to be asserting’ its opinions and the piece of glass whose heart ‘leaps with joy’ and is given the last line ‘but it was I, I, I!’
* Presents the physical world as diminishing the human participants in it, the men initially presented as ‘one small blackspot’. This figures-in-a-landscape introduction represents the idea that the physical world dominates the human world and endures/persists beyond the two young men.
* On another level, the physical world is constructed as a playground – for walking, talking, skimming, digging, and finding unusual objects.
* Woolf reminds the reader of the simple pleasures of interacting with the natural world that baffles, surprises, diminishes us etc.

2. How does the author of Text 2 attempt to bring the reader into the narrator’s inner world? (approximately 200-300 words)

* First person perspective where the individual is addressing an unnamed ‘you’ the reader is positioned as.
* Structured as a series of personal, intimate anecdotes — from the chipmunk incident, to wallpapering, to tying a white towel turban, like a crazy king of snow etc., many memories shared.
* Beattie changes the perspective and then directs the narrative to the individual and claims, you remember it differently. Offers the reader an understanding that an individual’s interior world is only ever one part of the story. Draws the reader into the world of the narrator’s imagining, by seeing how it differs from that of others.
* Her ‘interior world’ has many unresolved regrets. After the second paragraph this ‘story’ becomes the tale of revisiting a past of unresolved differences.
* Symbolism and metaphor — the ‘black shroud over the pool’ and the sense of loss.
* Beattie takes elements of the physical world and endows them with symbolic meanings, imploring the reader to see the narrator’s interior world through the intense feelings each item carries in imagination and memory.
* Presents the inner turmoil of the narrator’s interior world. Returns to see her place whilst returning for the funeral of her neighbour, Allen, symbolically reflecting the death of her relationship.
* Sense of romantic nostalgia attached to these memories undercut as the narrator speculates about the attitudes of their guests to the relationship that clearly did not last – ‘Now I think they probably guessed it wouldn’t work’.
* Seasonal and geographical settings, a country home in winter, appeals to a universal sense of wellbeing, and draws us towards love’s private intimacies, in imagery of ‘the house's secrets, like wallpaper under wallpaper’.
* Rhetorical questions (‘Did they talk about amazing things because they thought we'd turn into one of them?’; ‘Remember the night out on the lawn…?’ ‘Who expects small things to survive …?’
* Subtle images of failure and loss, ‘as hopeless as giving a child a matched cup and saucer’, ‘the black shroud over the pool’, that close off the memories as all the more precious for being ephemeral.
* The crocuses that are blooming in the front garden become, for the narrator, symbolic of what has been lost as they are ‘just a few dots of white, no field of snow.’ This symbolism culminates in blanketing snow and the metaphorical ‘artery’ that is ‘cleared.
* The last line seems to resolve the I/you tension that has been at the core of the narrator’s interior conflict: …’neither of us could have said where the heart was’. This suggests that there is still regret but perhaps more perspective and understanding.

3. Compare the ways in which the authors of both texts reveal the power of the seemingly ordinary. (approximately 400-600 words)

* Both Woolf and Beattie hone in and focus on the 'seemingly ordinary' through actions, objects and memories.
* The titles lead the reader to focus on the ordinary – Woolf tells us to look at solid objects and consider what gives things meaning. Beattie's title reinforces the power of the ordinary, where one word has many layers and facets. Snow permeates much of the narrative. The titles draw our attention to the power of these seemingly ordinary things to tell us great truths about life, love and the human imagination.
* Through contrast, the ordinary seemingly has its own magic. Woolf devotes a whole paragraph with long descriptive sentences on the finding of the glass and embeds imaginative scenarios as to its origin. The ordinary object seems to have powers tied to the past, other cultures and stories, the beauty in the eyes of the beholder.
* The same understanding is evident within Beattie's text through the first-person perspective, the narrator revealing people forget years and remember moments. This is reflected in visual imagery embedded in the stories and moments shared: the child who witnessed ice cream truck door opening and hundreds of popsicles crashing out, to the man standing on the beach, sand sparkling in the sun and finding a diamond ring etc.
* Rich imagery and characterisation. Woolf has her protagonist, John, journey from being a frustrated individual, obviously disillusioned by the political climate, to childishly flinging himself down in the sand and digging.
* Woolf chooses to focus on this childlike manner, highlighting his silence and fixation on the task and the visual image of his eyes filling with wonder; the power here is being able to lose oneself in a moment.
* Rather than engaging in one moment in time and a linear narrative, Beattie provides stories within a story and a series of flashbacks. Through this multi-layered narrative, with shifts in perspective, Beattie engages with the concept that in life, the magic of life only comes from moments at the end of the day, it is the ordinary which makes up the fabric of our lives.
* Beattie uses the narrator's personal voice to explore ideas of time and memory. For the narrator, none of these memories are ordinary, showing both the joy and wonder experienced by the narrator and how the narrator's version of the story is only a partial one.
* Woolf has a very controlled omniscient narrative voice that takes the reader from the distant view of the two men walking in the massive coastal landscape to the very particular account of each man's activity on the beach. The narrative style presents the idea of the triviality of human endeavour at a given time in the context of the enduring grandeur of the physical world.
* The ordinary lump of green glass receives the kind of detailed attention from the narrator that imitates the thought process of its finder, John. His fascination suggests the powerful idea of the human quest for something beyond the reality of the present.
* Ordinary objects: 'the black shroud', always inadequate, over the neighbour's pool, the ordinary house where 'three or four crocuses' struggled to survive, 'the snow plough', prompt the narrator's awareness that the nostalgic view of the time spent with her lover in the snow was only ever a partial view, based on selected memories that ignored 'ordinary' realities.
* Contrasts, Beattie's enormous field of Queen Anne's lace, which is the sky as the narrator remembers it in the snow, contrasts with the reality of 'three or four crocuses...just a few dots of white'. Woolf's Charles serves as the foil for John in his attitudes and behaviour. Charles is presented as in the present – he skims rocks while John contemplates the meaning and origin of the lump of glass retrieved.
* Woolf suggests the wonder associated with collecting things, ordinary things, is something children have. With his ordinary/extraordinary piece of glass, John has regained some of that wonder, even as Charles has not.
* Woolf and Beattie construct their short narratives around relatively familiar, mundane activities – divertingly aimless exploration at the beach; setting up a home in the country – which they imbue with a sense of wonder.
* Both imbue ordinary objects with characteristics that make them extraordinary; Woolf's personification of the walking stick, detailed description and speculation of the glass, Beattie's imagery and symbolism of refurbishing the house etc. These demonstrate a connection between ordinary objects and the power of the imagination to find meaning in the mundane, the seemingly ordinary becoming extraordinary.
* Within their resolutions, Beattie and Woolf capture the essence of the power in the ordinary. Woolf's anthropomorphism of the stone and its voice 'but it was I, I, I!' reveals there is beauty in the smallest object; this power is in the eye of the beholder. Beattie's resolution reveals the power of the ordinary with bitter poignancy, the narrator remembering that winter, the snow, the word, their lips etc., many small moments of tenderness and regret.