

OXFORD

INTERNATIONAL
AQA EXAMINATIONS

INTERNATIONAL AS AND A-LEVEL

ENGLISH Literature

Teaching guidance

For teaching from September 2017 onwards

For AS exams in June 2018 onwards

For A-level exams in June 2019 onwards

Our specification is published on our website (oxfordaqaexams.org.uk). We will let centres know in writing about any changes to the specification. We will also publish changes on our website. The definitive version of our specification will always be the one on our website; this may differ from printed versions.

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INTRODUCTION

This teacher guide complements the specification for the Oxford AQA Exams International AS and A-level English Literature and should be read alongside it and the sample materials. This guide will provide the following for teachers and prospective teachers of this course:

- An overview of this specification's philosophy and approach to the study and assessment of AS and A-level English Literature
- A unit-by-unit look at what is required in learning and assessment
- Suggested possible routes through the course

SECTION 1 – OVERVIEW

This specification has been designed by an expert team to give international students an interesting and rigorous course in English Literature. The course reflects the international contexts in which the students are studying, while at the same time preparing them for further study of the subject (should they wish to do so) at leading universities across the world.

It is not the intention of this guide to make comparisons with reformed UK A-levels, but the retention here of a unitary approach to AS and A-level, plus the freedom to choose genres and texts which allow coherent and integrated units makes this specification an exciting proposition for international centres.

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES (AOs)

The specification has been designed around three assessment objectives which reflect how Literature should be studied at this level. The numerical sequencing of the AOs deliberately reflects this. Here are the AOs in their official version:

- **AO1:** Demonstrate understanding of the ways in which readers find meanings in texts, showing an understanding of genre, the significance of contexts, and the ways in which different interpretations can be found.
- **AO2:** Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts with close attention to authorial methods
- **AO3:** Express informed, personal and argued responses to literary texts, using appropriate concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate writing

AO1 requires students to find meanings in texts. The word ‘meanings’ is in the plural to reflect the fact that meanings of a text or a group of texts are not fixed. Note too that this specification is interested in the ways in which *readers* find meaning. This foregrounding of the reader over other potential sources of meaning (such as authorial biography) leads to broadly cultural views of literature and means that international students are especially well placed to consider texts from new and interesting perspectives. These perspectives form part of the reader’s context; we are especially interested in the cultural contexts that international students will bring to their study.

One particular way in which a reader can interpret a text is through considering it as a representative (or not) of a particular genre. All of the first three units in this course are designed around notions of genre, with texts deliberately chosen to allow debates around where the text ‘fits’ within the specified area.

Consideration of genre, application of context, finding meanings, all inevitably lead to different interpretations of texts. It is important to point out here that students are not required to consider different interpretations before selecting the ‘right one’. Understanding the ambiguity around interpretation, even if you strongly favour a personal reading, is what underlies this AO.

AO2 has been carefully worded to encourage students to look at authorial methods as contributing factors to the making of meanings, rather than as stylistic devices which somehow exist separate from meaning. The notion of ‘shaping’ here should be noted as it points to students engaging with structural and whole-text issues, rather than minor tropes. For example, in a poem, students might consider the sequence of stanzas, metaphors which appear more than once or which are extended, patterns of rhyming which lead to specific emphasis on key ideas.

At no point in this specification will students be asked to look at ‘style’ for its own sake. They will always be looking at how methods make meanings.

AO3 assesses the formal written aspects of the subject which teachers will be familiar with, but here too the emphasis is on a continuity through the AOs. So students look for and find meanings, they consider how these meanings have been shaped, and they write up their findings in a suitable format. Not only do they look for how their set texts are shaped, but they too must shape their responses, write accurately, mix personal response with detailed knowledge of and reference to the texts and show an understanding of how they have arrived at their ideas and meanings. One way in which they may have done this is through further critical reading.

The AOs have been designed in such a way that they form an integrated and holistic approach to the study of literature. It naturally follows therefore that all three AOs are weighted equally in all questions across both AS and A-level. This coherent approach to the study of the subject means that AOs support learning rather than dominate it.

DIFFERENT TASKS AND QUESTION FRAMES

The fact that questions are marked holistically means that the questions themselves have to be framed in such a way that they allow students to engage with all the assessment objectives in their answers.

Here are two examples which show how this works. The first is taken from Unit 2 *Place in literary texts*.

‘Conflict in *The Great Gatsby* emerges more from a clash of cultures than a clash of individuals’.
How far do you agree with this view of the novel?

Note the following in this question:

- The reference to ‘clash of cultures’ shows that in this unit about place in literary texts, ‘place’ can refer to the culture of a place as well as its geography
- The question is framed as a debate, with no definitive answer
- Students should find meanings through engaging with the contexts of culture in the novel and also the cult of the ‘great’ individual
- Students should talk about how ‘clashes’ are represented structurally in the novel

The second example is taken from Unit 1 *Aspects of Tragedy*.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Explore the significance of Belle Reve (Blanche’s former home) to the tragedy of the play.

Note the following in this question:

- The centrality of tragedy to the question in this paper
- The requirement for debate is signalled via the use of the word ‘significance’
- Students should find meanings through engaging with possible readings of Belle Reve as a representation of values
- Students should talk about where references to Belle Reve occur in the play and their structural impact.

‘Significance’ is an important term in this specification, both in the framing of the specification itself, and frequently in the framing of specific questions. Significance, as used in this specialist way in the study of Literature, involves investigating all the potential meanings that can be found through considering and evaluating the areas of literary criticism which are detailed in the AOs. So the trigger word ‘significance’ will indicate to students who have been through this course of study that they must consider aspects of genre, context, structure and critical methods.

SECTION 2 – THE FOUR UNITS: HOW THE UNITS FIT TOGETHER

Units 1-3 in this specification are connected in that they all show aspects of genre. Unit 1 looks at aspects of Tragedy, Unit 2 looks at the significance of Place, Unit 3 looks at aspects of Crime writing. Unit 4, which has optional routes, requires an understanding of literary representation.

Understanding *genre* is crucial to this specification. From a theoretical standpoint, labelling texts involves at least two key concepts. One is that all texts, and the reading of all texts, are conditioned by other texts that have gone before. In other words, texts never stand alone – they always relate to other texts. Second is that the endless possibilities of labelling texts highlight the fact that interpretation is not fixed. How we label texts is a critical act, saying something about us as well as the text itself.

Some writers (such as Agatha Christie in Unit 3) knowingly construct texts within generic conventions because they intend their texts to have some of the particular ‘meanings’ that are associated with the genre. Knowing that readers have previous experience of generic texts allows producers of texts to be confident that they will reach their intended audience.

Other writers (such as Charles Dickens in Unit 3) are not specifically aiming to write within a genre, but readers can interpret such texts according to some of the generic conventions they are familiar with. It is also worth noting that genres are never fixed. They are constantly shifting as they adapt to new texts and new readers.

Choosing set texts

In each of Units 1-3 texts have been chosen to allow for maximum flexibility. Some international teachers will have a free hand and will be able to select the texts which best engage their students’ interests. Others may be teaching in more sensitive communities where they have to select texts more carefully according to local values. In either case, students will be able to have a legitimate and worthwhile experience.

Note that at AS-level students cover two drama texts and one each of prose and poetry. At A-level students will study one prose and one poetry text for Unit 4. Two texts are studied for Unit 3, which can be any of prose, poetry and drama.

SUPPORTING THE LEARNING REQUIRED FOR THE UNITS

AS Unit 1 Aspects of dramatic tragedy

Tragedy is a very broad and well-established genre, and is best studied in connection to drama. Students should be aware of the central features of both tragedy, many of which are listed in the specification, and of drama, which is a distinctive literary genre. The fact that drama lacks a single narrative voice, for example, opens up many possible ideas about interpretation.

In this closed book examination, Section A consists of ‘older’ examples of the genre, Shakespeare and others, with students choosing one play to answer on. The questions in this section all involve a specific extract from the play, which is printed on the paper, with a standard question followed by specific bullets, as shown here:

Explore the significance of the aspects of dramatic tragedy in the following passage in relation to the play as a whole.

You should consider the following in your answer:

- *the presentation of Iago and Othello*
- *the dramatic setting*
- *other relevant aspects of dramatic tragedy.*

Note the use of the word ‘significance’ here and the way the question is structured to help students. Note too that students are expected to refer not only to the extract but to the play as a whole. There are no hard and fast rules as to how much should be written on the extract and how much on the rest of the play, but as a rough guide at least 50% of the answer should focus on the given extract.

The expectation is that students will address each bullet point, giving roughly equal attention to each bullet.

Section B consists of more ‘modern’ dramatic examples of the genre. Students write about one play in this section, answering an essay style question which sets up a debate which is central to tragedy in the chosen play. The specimen question paper shows the following aspects being focused upon:

- *Death of a Salesman*: irony, fate and self-awareness, family
- *A Streetcar Named Desire*: the influence of the past, decline in social status, family
- *Hedda Gabler*: gender, thwarted ambition, suffering
- *Waiting for Godot*: the point of existence, the human condition, nihilism
- *Translations*: the importance of language, loss of culture and identity

It is important to note that the overarching title of the paper is *Aspects of dramatic tragedy*, and that teaching of the chosen texts needs to focus on the particular aspects specific to them.

AS Unit 2 Place in literary texts

The specification describes place in literary texts as a ‘cultural genre’. It is not a literary genre in the sense that Tragedy or Crime are, but the multiple significances of place are a key part of many texts. This focus was deliberately chosen for an International Specification, as international students are in an especially good position to understand how places, and their representations, are a key part of the way in which we construct ideas and identities.

The term ‘Place’ has been left deliberately open so that teachers, students and examiners can look at texts from a range of perspectives. As outlined in the specification it can refer to countries, cities, villages or houses, it can refer to social class and social hierarchy, it can refer to places at points in time, and most importantly place can be used symbolically to represent human interaction and human existence.

Earlier in this guide the use of the word ‘significance’ was explored. This unit hinges upon the fact that students will understand that places, both real and imagined, are central to the network of ideas and experiences that are portrayed in a text.

This is an open book exam, with students writing about one prose text and one poetry text. All questions are essay based, with students being encouraged to find and debate possible meanings. Because this is an open book exam, questions, especially on the poetry texts, can ask students to refer to some specific poems as well as their own choice.

Teachers should consider the full ramifications of open book exams. There is the expectation that students will quote accurately, that they will refer to the text accurately and that their knowledge of the text is detailed enough for them to find exactly what they are looking for with a minimum of fuss.

An example of a poetry question is:

‘Hardy’s depiction of place always leads to a feeling of despair’

Discuss this view, considering ‘The Darkling Thrush’, and at least two other poems

Key words here include ‘depiction’ which points to Hardy’s methods, ‘always’ which sets up a debate and ‘despair’ which is also an extreme emotional response. The expectation here is that the named poem be given an extensive coverage, of at least 50% of the answer, with two other poems also covered. In some circumstances there could be coverage of three other poems, but the ‘at least’ generally indicates the best number to opt for.

With regards to *The Darkling Thrush* students might comment on:

- The precise descriptions of the bleak geographical winter setting
- The inhabitants of the setting – the narrator and the bird
- The very specific time setting (Dec 31 1900) and its significance
- The bird as itself expressing hope, or able to be seen as an expression of hope
- The structural progress of the narrative through its stanzas
- The highly ambiguous final quatrain and its relevance to the given task
- How a highly specific sense of place is used metaphorically to open up religious and other ideas

A-level Unit 3 Aspects of crime writing

This closed book examined unit requires students to answer two questions from a selection of eight. There are no limitations around prose/poetry/drama.

Each question should be familiar to teachers and students by this stage of the course, in the sense that the question will be framed as a debate and will involve an aspect of crime writing that is central to the genre and even more importantly central to the text being studied. As with AS, all the AOs are addressed by the question, and the answers are marked holistically.

An example of the type of question is as follows:

'In crime writing we can usually identify with the villain: in Macbeth's case we can't.'

Discuss this view.

It needs to be said here that the texts chosen for study are not necessarily examples, in a pure sense, of crime fiction (although some are). So at first sight it may be surprising to see *Macbeth* in a unit such as this, but when considered more carefully, looking at the play as an example of crime writing opens it up to many different and sometimes less predictable interpretations and discussions. There are therefore considerable implications for how the texts are taught – they must be viewed through the lens of the genre.

Here the question looks at the idea that readers, or in this case an audience, typically have sympathies with a literary villain and so have an unusual set of moral responses. The provocative critical quotation suggests, though, that in this case we can't identify with Macbeth. That indeed may be a tenable point of view by the end of the play, but the careful student is likely to want to consider the earlier scenes and to discuss and illustrate the ways in which Shakespeare structures the play to show the moral ambiguity which can lie behind ambition, a sense of family and loyalty to the status quo.

A-level Unit 4a and Unit 4b Literary representations

Unit 4 at A-level offers a choice of approaches, either (4a) an examination based on responses to unseen prose and poetry or 4b a non-exam assessment (NEA – previously known as coursework) with students doing individual tasks on poetry and prose texts of their own choice.

Although in many cases all candidates in a centre will follow the same route, this does not have to be the case. A centre could, for example, follow the NEA route (4b) with most students, but use the examined route (4a) for those whose circumstances suggest they will do better under examination conditions.

Whichever option is chosen, there are two common threads. The first is that students study one poetry and one prose text, and so complete across the A-level a minimum of two drama texts, two poetry texts and two prose texts. The second is that the teaching and assessment of this unit revolve around students reading a wide range of texts and learning about how representation works, and how it can lead to interpretations.

Representation is used here to emphasise the process of showing a view of the world, rather than the actual world itself, and thus opening up texts to varieties of interpretation. Whichever of the optional routes is chosen, students will be rewarded for their ability to find meanings in texts.

The first three units of this specification have encouraged students to approach literary texts through an understanding of genre, finding significance through:

- analysing the ways texts are constructed and written
- weighing up the importance of contexts
- finding potential meanings and interpretations.

If work in these units has been effective then students should already have a clear idea of the representative nature of literary texts.

In order to give some framework for the possibilities in this unit, four broad areas are identified. How they apply to each of the optional routes (4a or 4b) is described below.

- Representations of Childhood
- Representations of War
- Representations of Women/Men
- Representations of Race/Class/Culture

The key word here is 'representations'. Students need to understand how representation works and how interpretations can arise from the close study of a particular text. It is important to note that, whichever assessment route is taken, the above areas are not topics which are prescribed for detailed study, and students are not expected in their assessment to draw on extensive contextual knowledge of the topic, nor are they expected to refer to wider reading. They are areas which teachers and students can explore through the analysis of their own selected texts, and so practise the skills of literary analysis and interpretation.

In NEA students must write about one poetry text and one prose text. Here a poetry 'text' means at least five poems will be referred to. These poems must be taken from a wider selection from a single poet. An indication of how many poems constitute a poetry text can be found in Units 2 and 3.

- Students cannot choose texts from any of the AS/A-level exam set text lists.
- Texts chosen for study may include texts in translation.
- Texts chosen for study must allow access to a range of critical views and interpretations.
- Each response should be between 1250 and 1500 words. These word limits are important as they allow students to write cogently, with a tight structure.

For the NEA option (4b), it is hoped that students will be reading widely from their course, and will have been encouraged by their teachers to read individually texts which cover some aspects of the areas above. Because this is coursework, and so the students and teachers to some extent set the agenda, how many of the areas above are covered is left to the centre to decide.

As is always the case with NEA, students will require tasks which enable them to achieve across the assessment objectives. Marking criteria are provided in the specification. Oxford AQA Exams will provide support for using the marking criteria and developing appropriate tasks through teacher standardisation.

Clearly if centres do not wish to have individualised reading and tasks for their students then they should choose the examined option.

The reading situation is different for those following the examination route (4a). In essence they will be working with texts in class with a view to developing their skills of managing unseen texts, because in the final examination they will be working with texts they do not know. As has already been stressed above, there is no expectation that students will reference wide reading in all or any of the four areas named above. These areas offer teachers and students some starting points for analysis, both when developing skills in the classroom and when showing the skills in the examination room. It is recommended that students work with examples from each of the four stated areas, in both poetry and prose, as part of their preparation for the examination.

The examination paper will consist of one prose text and one poetry text, both of which must be responded to. Each text will represent a different area from the four above.

The best way of developing reading skills, whichever route is taken, is for students to engage with some theoretical approaches to literature which are relevant to the units and texts they are studying. This is especially important for students intending to continue the subject at university level. The main point to stress here is that some reference to theories while teaching the texts can be used to encourage the development of debates and arguments around the potential meanings of texts. There is, though, absolutely no requirement for students specifically to mention theories or critics in their answers.

A final suggestion in this guide is that students should be introduced from the outset of their course to some basic ideas about narrative, for understanding about narrative, in its broadest sense, opens up many possibilities when it comes to finding meanings (AO1) and considering how meanings have been shaped (AO2). Suitably employed and accurately used, specific terms about narrative can also help a student to show they are using 'appropriate concepts and terms' (AO3).

CONCLUSION

The Oxford AQA Exams International AS and A-level English Literature is an exciting new opportunity for schools and colleges outside the UK to study an AS/A-level course which contains many similar features to the UK qualification, while at the same time having distinctive features of its own. This short teachers' guide is an introduction to the course at the point of its inception. Further reports, advice and guidance will be offered once the course is up and running.

Teachers should note that in due course there will be approved text books (details of which can be found at oxfordaqaexams.org.uk)

GET HELP AND SUPPORT

Visit our website for information, guidance, support and resources at

oxfordaqaexams.org.uk

You can contact the English team directly at **english@oxfordaqaexams.org.uk**