



**General Certificate of Education**

**English Literature**

*Specification A*

**LITA3      Reading for Meaning**

**Report on the Examination**

*2010 examination – June series*

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## General

The first June series LITA3 question paper has been very well received by the examiners, who feel that it was both engaging and fair to the full range of the candidature, while containing items that offer 'stretch and challenge'. One senior examiner reported having 'seen the full range' in terms of quality of responses and that 'most students appeared to find the texts used accessible.' Most scripts were characterised by the candidate, at whatever level of ability, trying to construct meaning from the previously unseen items. In the words of another senior examiner, 'the exam is truly synoptic, truly skills-based and already a huge success.'

The best candidates spent sufficient time reading, thinking and planning. (We recommend around thirty minutes for reading, thinking and planning per question.) They recognised that there is no need to try to write an all-inclusive argument that attempts to cover everything that could be said about the items in question. Instead they often demonstrated a strong overall grasp of the extracts but chose to concentrate a few points, which were developed in detail. In general, candidates resisted the temptation to try to fill their answer books and as one examiner noted, 'the vast majority appear to be answering both questions within the time allowed.'

As was the case in January, a feature of many Band 4 answers was the way in which they developed ideas by comparison and contrast. One examiner observed that 'the best comparative work was based on an integrated exploration of the two texts rather than considering each in turn.' Most of such answers grew from effective planning; major points of comparison had been thought through before the candidate began to write. Another examiner commented that strong answers 'frequently begin with a short paragraph outlining some points of comparison between the texts; this provides an agenda for exploration within the rest of the answer.'

By contrast, some candidates seemed to have come to the examination having already planned their answers. Such candidates structured their answers by writing a paragraph about structure, a paragraph about form and a paragraph about language. Whilst this ensured that they did not simply focus on the subject matter of the items, in the words of one senior examiner, 'it was clearly constraining for the most able students who were rather limited by this approach.' Such an approach also risks encouraging candidates to comment on isolated features without much sense of whole text understanding. Of course candidates need to be guided towards writing about form, structure and language, but it is probably best to allow some flexibility of approach and for candidates to allow their responses to the items on the paper to suggest the most fruitful areas for analysis and comparison.

Another limiting approach was when candidates adopted a 'first one item, then the other, then wider reading' structure. This often impeded candidates' ability to use wider reading effectively to cast light on the unseen items. Wider reading that comes solely at the end of an essay is often viewed by examiners as a mere 'bolt on'; they advise that wider reading should enable candidates to better explore the unseen items, and, for them to do this, they should 'always keep the unseen items in view'. In a similar vein, it was noted that while a wider reading reference often provides a useful bridge between the items, wider reading to wider reading links are less successful and sometimes lead to digressions.

High performing candidates were often those who had been taught how to analyse and compare unseen texts. It was pleasing to see so many answers that were thoroughly engaged with the writers' work and which were able to use terminology to help them analyse and compare. Many were able to compare aspects such as point of view confidently – commenting on specific ways in which the writers used, for example, first person, third person, or even third person with 'a focal character', or 'third person that that privileges the perspective' of a

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character. Also pleasing were analyses of form and genre: some candidates commented impressively on effects arising from viewing Item A as a *bildungsroman* or Item D as a comedy. Others had obviously been taught how to comment on structure and could use terms such as 'tension', 'climax' and 'anti-climax' to help them analyse and compare the items. At the other end of the scale, some candidates could name literary techniques, but struggled to comment on their effects, or to relate such features to overall meaning. Candidates should be reassured that the examiners are seeking to reward their understanding. Indeed understanding underpins achievement on all the assessment objectives. For example, the marking grid for AO1 requires them to communicate 'relevant knowledge and understanding' and for AO2 it requires them to 'demonstrate detailed critical understanding'. Spending time thinking about the effects of literary devices and the overall meaning of an item is time well spent.

While many candidates deserve congratulation for having demonstrated their 'unseen skills' so well, some perhaps allowed their preparation to become unbalanced, seemingly having placed insufficient emphasis on skills and too much on wider reading extracts. Indeed one senior examiner specifically recommended that some centres spend more time practising unseen skills, since she read 'many scripts crammed full of wider reading references but with precious little analysis of the extracts on the examination paper'.

The best candidates engaged productively with alternative viewpoints. Often such views arose from simply considering other ways of reading the items, rather than from named critics or theoretical approaches. Contexts of production and reception have continued to provide useful lines of inquiry. For example, several candidates explored the ways in which the 1960s context might have shaped the Carter extract and many commented on the ways in which the kiss between Melanie and Finn made them, as teenage readers, feel. One candidate, commenting on Melanie 'convincing herself that "at least she would have more experience"', noted that 'the statement is very telling of the modern age in which the novel was written since as readers we witness the lengths that this girl is willing to go to feel more mature and worldly wise, as her culture tells her this is what she should be'. Less helpful ways of reading included trying to adopt critical approaches that had not been fully understood; in such cases the candidates often went on to generalise. This is a potential problem with trying to use a theory when reading an unseen text: the theory must not be simply named; it should be applied, and will only help the candidate when it is being used to enrich a reading of the text. As with other types of alternative readings, it is the quality of the reading that matters, not its source; there are no marks for name-dropping.

In a similar way the use of historical contexts can be problematic. As one senior examiner noted, echoing the comments above, 'historical context is useful but only if they get it right and make intelligent use of it rather than slapping labels on the items. Literary context is often more helpful than historical – those who knew about Gothic literature were in a better position to see what Carter was doing.' The use of literary contexts, however, also carries a caveat: candidates should beware of learning chunks of information on, for example, Renaissance or Romantic literature, and trying to 'import this material wholesale into their answers'. As with wider reading, the best candidates selected only the relevant parts of their contextual understanding, applied this cogently and, in the words of one examiner, 'didn't labour it.' Thus, while there were some unhelpful (and inaccurate) generalisations about Sterne being a Romantic which led to digressions on Romanticism, there were also perceptive readings that viewed Sterne's writing as a precursor to that movement, citing the elevation of feeling over thought and the emphasis on subjectivity, before going on to explore these features and compare them to aspects of the Carter extract.

As with contextual approaches, the aim of wider reading references is to cast light on the unseen items. Candidates should remember that the question paper requires them, across

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both questions, to write about at least three relevant texts (one from each genre). It is possible, therefore, to gain full marks by using three judiciously selected and well-developed wider reading references.

It is worth remembering that Question 1 will always require candidates to refer to wider reading from the genre of the items in that question. Any references to other genres in this question will gain no credit. When answering Question 2 candidates are free to refer to any genre, but they should remember that by the end of their answers they must have covered all three genres. Accordingly, candidates might wish to ensure they have covered the two remaining genres, before making further references drawn from the genre in Question 1.

Candidates should also remember the balance between what they write about the unseen items and what they write about their wider reading. One senior examiner noted the tendency of some weaker candidates to use wider reading loosely and liberally. He advises that 'one of the key words in wider reading is "appropriateness" and that candidates should realise that by no means all of their wider reading knowledge will be used in the examination'. As a guideline, a reasonable balance between comment on wider reading and unseen items is around 60-70% on the unseen items, with the remainder on the wider reading.

Weaker candidates sometimes seemed to rely on wider reading gleaned from the study of extracts. This became obvious to examiners when candidates from the same centre relied on making the same points from the same incidents in the same texts. Often such comments failed to convince the examiner that the candidate had understood the extract fully, especially when he or she seemed to be trying to convey an impression of having read the whole text, while making fundamental mistakes with aspects of the plot or characters. For example, some made errors with authors' names or misspelt those of characters such as 'Katie' for Catherine or Cathy from *Wuthering Heights* or 'Estelle' for Estella from *Great Expectations*. While the odd slip is, of course, permissible, repeated errors and instances of bluffing usually means that the wider reading reference is classified as 'simple', which helps to support a mark in Band 2.

Some of the best references appear to have come from texts that have been studied thoroughly in class. Texts studied in this way tend to be used much more flexibly by the candidates, and the candidates are often much more confident when discussing aspects of genre, form and structure from such texts. Often candidates from the same centre make use of similar texts for wider reading, but the ways in which they do so are impressively varied.

Candidates should be cautious of preparation that is weighted too heavily towards the study of topics. Some examiners noted that a willingness to label items as presenting 'forbidden love', 'destructive love' or 'unrequited love', for example, often hampered individual responses. Similarly, centres should be cautious about constructing a course that is weighted in favour of studying love as formulated by Classical writers. While, for example, studying Platonic ideas of love can help candidates in applying their contextual understanding to unseen items, it is less helpful to study works from Classical literature as wider reading. The specification requires the study of 'literature through time (from Chaucer to the present day)'. It is, of course, permissible to study a work in translation, such as Ted Hughes's translation, *Tales from Ovid*, but centres are reminded that they should seek permission from their consortium advisor/ coursework moderator first.

It is important that candidates experience a range of texts that come from a range of historical periods. The examiners noted that some students might have been disadvantaged by unbalanced programmes of study: in some cases these contained too many novels, and in others too few texts from before the nineteenth century, or too few drama texts. Centres are reminded that whilst extracts can be helpful for 'unseen skills' practice and for exploring different historical periods, they are required to study six whole texts. (This includes the three that will

have been studied for coursework and it might include an in-house anthology of poetry.) It is good practice to review text choices in the light of the AS course. For example, centres that study the *Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature* at AS will probably need to select some Victorian and pre-Victorian texts for study at A2.

Finally, the quality of candidate's expression was more competent than in January. Most candidates appear to be trying to adopt an academic register. There are, of course, a few areas to consider. Candidates should beware of using terminology in a general sense: terms like 'postmodern' or 'stream of consciousness' must be used precisely or avoided, 'hyphen' should not be used for 'dash' and 'caesura' is best reserved for discussions of verse. Poems do not 'talk about' issues and verse quotations should be laid out as verse; if there is a line break within a short quotation it should be indicated by a forward slash.

### Question 1

This question tested the candidates' ability to compare two unseen items from the same genre and to make relevant wider reading references to texts within that genre, in this case, prose. The vast majority of candidates engaged with the reading material; as one senior examiner noted, there was 'plenty of evidence of excellent close reading skills from a wide range of candidates' on this question.

Successful candidates had thought about both extracts and planned fully. This approach often enabled a candidate to select points of comparison or contrast as the main topics in his or her essay. For example, after generating a range of ideas, one candidate who scored full marks had selected the following main topics: '1) Structure – raising the tension; 2) Elevation "fair fille" vs mundane/ reductive 3) Predator & Prey'. While the answer that followed was much more complex than this part of the plan might suggest, the planning process helped her to focus on comparisons and to craft a logically-structured, cogent essay.

In terms of content, there were a wide variety of points that high-performing candidates made, but a unifying factor was that they demonstrated confident understanding. While relatively few engaged with the complexities of what did or did not take place in Yorick's hotel room, strong candidates were able to make a convincing case for at least one interpretation and recognised that there was no compulsion for them to dwell on any parts of either extract that for them remained opaque. Candidates who scored high Band 4 marks were often willing to risk venturing more challenging interpretations. For example, one candidate who was awarded full marks commented on how 'Sterne describes how he [Yorick] holds the "pen" and she offers to hold the ink well. The pen is a phallic symbol and the well a chalice and Sterne describes the metaphor of Mr Yorick writing "upon anything" and "upon her lips".' This candidate went on to explore the ways in which Sterne presents a seduction through his use of symbolism and suggestion before developing a comparison with Item A, noting that 'whereas Sterne describes the act of phallic penetration with the pen and ink metaphor and the idea of her needle repairing his stock, Carter uses more explicit language to describe how Finn "inserted his tongue between her lips". The effects of language are wildly different as Sterne creates a sexually charged image full of tension and desire, whereas Carter presents a grotesque and repulsive image as the reader identifies with Melanie's "wooden and unresponsive" stance. (The above example is also representative of some of the many fine responses by candidates who were able not only to provide evidence, but to weave apposite quotations seamlessly into the fabric of their prose.)

Other productive lines of argument considered structure and the ways in which the items built tension. One, for example, noted that Carter used a more 'conventional' structure than Sterne, whose novel 'relays to readers the incidents which happen to Mr Yorick in this picaresque

novel'. Several others noted the separate sections in Sterne's novel and were able to analyse aspects such as his desire to create a 'heightened sense of drama, which he achieves as he leaves the narrative unfinished, on the point of a cliff-hanger – "and then!" The reader is left unknowing and unaware of exactly what is happening and thus tension is raised.'

Many considered the ominous foregrounding of the description of the setting in Item A and details such as the pavement which 'glowed as if on a phantom chessboard', often commenting on aspects of the gothic genre. Some compared Carter's use of setting with Sterne's, and many such candidates commented on the romantic associations of Paris. Some also contrasted the open expanse of the 'deserted fun palace' in Carter with the intimate space of the hotel room in Sterne.

Some confident candidates were able to explore the narrative intrusion in Sterne (the first two paragraphs of 'THE CONQUEST') and explored the presentation of the idea that 'Nature's web of kindness' includes some threads of 'love and desire'. Some identified the sexual connotations of final three lines of the paragraph, and while not every candidate fully grasped this, admittedly challenging, part of the extract those who were able to make some sensible meaning from it were rewarded appropriately.

Wider reading was used to illuminate the discussion of the texts in many ways. One examiner noted that 'the best candidates moved between texts and wider reading with very effective links and frequently used their references as bridges' and that 'comparative vocabulary was carefully used.' Many were able to make wider reading links not just via ideas or subject matter but via aspects of form, structure or language. For example, one candidate compared the use of sensuous detail and the build up of anticipation when Carter described Melanie feeling "the warm breath" of Finn' to the incident in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* when "the skin on my throat began to tingle" as Jonathan Harker recounts how he is set upon by three vampire women.' Setting and pathetic fallacy in Carter were compared to *Frankenstein* when Shelley describes storms and weather. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* were also used as examples pathetic fallacy and romance. Some fine responses compared aspects of the Sterne extract to Fielding's comic style in selected incidents from *Tom Jones*. Several compared the presentation of the male characters in the items to the predatory nature of Alec from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Other texts that produced purposeful wider reading references included *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, *Emma*, *Enduring Love*, *Atonement*, *The Lovely Bones*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *A Room with a View*, *Howard's End*, *Jane Eyre*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Pamela*.

Some selected use of historical and theoretical approaches did enhance meaning when applied by thoughtful candidates. For example, one explored some of the features of Carter and commented that it was written from 'a postmodern perspective, exploring human interactions and relationships on a very personal level. As a modern text, also, the concept of awkward teenage relationships is even more relevant, with early teenage years providing the initial tentative explorations into the world of love.' Yet, for other candidates, asserting contexts led them down blind alleys. One senior examiner read the work of candidates who asserted that Sterne was 'writing in a Victorian period when women had no standing', and others that 'gave lengthy descriptions of the French revolution.' She noted that, at times, 'contextual discussion was so lengthy that candidates ran out of time and failed to address the detail in the texts' and went on to point out that while 'context is important when it informs discussion of the construction and reception of texts, writing lengthy paragraphs on history will not receive credit from the mark scheme.'

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## Question 2

This question tests the candidates' ability to compare two unseen extracts of the remaining genres and invites them to make relevant wider reading references, which may be drawn from any genre. There is also a focus for comparison; in this case it was 'views about the nature of love'.

For most, this was the more challenging question. While the age of the texts might have presented difficulties to some, one examiner noted that 'there were signs of candidate tiredness and of lack of time as the responses were frequently rushed'. Wider reading proved to be enabling, as one examiner noted of Item C: 'the majority of candidates were prepared for some metaphysical material on the paper and most grappled bravely with this, making at least partially successful readings of it'. Sensible candidates who found aspects of the poem challenging were able to demonstrate their overall grasp of the poem and to select two or three points for detailed exploration, which often became points of comparison with D. A less sensible approach was when candidates attempted a full exegesis of the poem and by so doing struggled through parts that had not been wholly understood. Candidates should note that they are not marked by omission, only on what they have actually written. Examiners sometimes felt that candidates had expended so much space and energy on 'difficult' aspects of Item C that they barely found time for D – an item that might have offered more scope for analysis and comparison had they given it more attention.

Many identified poetic techniques competently, often noting aspects such as Marvell's use of personification, and diction drawn from mathematics. Others responded to Marvell's use of iambic tetrameter and quatrains with alternate rhyme. While weaker candidates failed to address effects or commented confusingly on details such as how 'Marvell uses rhyme to give a rhythm' or made what one examiner termed 'all sorts of weird and wonderful claims for the power of pentameter', stronger candidates analysed literary devices with insight. One wrote about the way in which 'Marvell creates a fluid and lyrical poem, yet each stanza is punctuated with a stop, replicating how he is prevented from loving'. Another observed how 'in the first two lines of each of the first two quatrains an expectation is raised, only to be dashed' by the following two lines.

For some, Shakespeare proved as challenging as Marvell. One senior found it 'surprising to note that the Shakespeare extract is not being covered in detail by a significant number of candidates, perhaps due to struggling too long with the Marvell, or it just because the final text on the paper'. Another commented that 'disappointingly few considered this as drama.' Candidates have studied Shakespeare as part of A2 coursework, and centres might wish to consider ways of making connections between the study of Shakespeare for coursework and practice for the examination. Candidates need to be equipped to follow arguments that extending over a long speeches and to be able to consider a scene's potential for creating dramatic effects.

Item D was chosen partly for the rich language that Shakespeare uses to explore a view of love, and it was indeed surprising that relatively few analysed literary aspects such as imagery in much depth. (Examples of potential readings are cited in the Indicative Content section of the Mark Scheme.) Several, however, commented on some of the rhetorical features of Berowne's speech and some explored how it might be performed on stage, suggesting some ways that the actor playing Berowne might give an engaging performance, and how he could use gestures and his full vocal capacities to enliven his monologue to convince his immediate audience of lords and entertain his wider audience in the theatre. One examiner remarked that 'better candidates' often heard 'Shakespeare's own voice' in that of Berowne.



High performing candidates also responded in a number of other impressive ways. For example, one noted that the extract began with the lords speaking verse, then explored how their unity of thought was conveyed by the way in which one lord's line rhymed with another's and by the shared line between Dumain and Berowne. He continued, commenting on the shift to blank verse at the beginning of Berowne's monologue and went on to discuss the way in which the extract ended on a suitably conclusive note with the King's two exclamatory utterances, which showed the audience that Berowne's persuasion had achieved its desired effect.

Strong candidates chose productive areas of comparison: one explored the argumentative elements of both items and commented succinctly that 'the poem is governed by fact and the play by emotion.' Personification was a popular focus for comparison, which enabled candidates to develop comparisons that explored language. Other candidates compared the jaded complexity of Marvell's view of love to the more lively and innocent view of Shakespeare. As one put it, 'Whereas Marvell uses complicated conceits to paradoxically reveal how his loves are apart yet together, belying a more clinical approach to love and a weariness through the use of such diction as "vainly" and "impossibility", Shakespeare creates a more fresh impression, of the realisation of love for the first time. Berowne could deliver his speech in a rallying tone, a dynamic call to arms for the three men who have not loved before.'

There were a great many helpful references to wider reading. The best links used quotations and referred closely to specific moments from wider reading texts. For example, one candidate contrasted the point in *Much Ado About Nothing* 'when Claudio denounces his love in order to save his honour' with the extract from *Love's Labour's Lost* in which 'Berowne encourages the lords to denounce their honour in order to find love'. Other Shakespeare plays also provided purposeful links including *Othello*, *Measure for Measure* and *Romeo and Juliet* (which offered a useful connection with the ill-fated love in Marvell).

In general, drama was under-used for wider reading, and some candidates were unable to recall texts in sufficient depth to comment on language, structure or theatrical effects. In some cases, wider reading was linked without much reference to meaning, for example, by commenting on elements such as the lack of stage directions in the Shakespeare extract before contrasting this with the wealth of stage directions in a play by Tennessee Williams.

There were many helpful links to poetry, particularly to other metaphysical poems such as 'To his Coy Mistress', 'The Flea' or 'A Valediction: forbidding mourning.' Usually it was the quality of the preparation that determined the effectiveness of the link; those poems that candidates knew in detail often cast most light on the unseen items and frequently led to impressive comparisons of form, structure or language.

Attempts to explore contexts often did little to help weaker candidates. As one senior examiner noted, 'there tended to be large chunks of imported notes on the Renaissance and the Metaphysical period that bore little relationship to the meaning of the extracts. A cohort of candidates spent a long time explaining Socrates' and Plato's ideas of love, but used their knowledge in such a way as to detract attention from the extracts.' By contrast, stronger candidates made illuminating use of specific contextual details. Some, for example, exploited their knowledge of mythology to enrich their readings of Berowne's speech and his allusions to figures such as Apollo, Bacchus and Hercules.

**Note**

Although the main purpose of this report is to summarise the ways in which candidates responded to the demands of the LITA3 paper, it also offers advice on how centres can prepare candidates effectively for future examinations. Centres should use it in conjunction with the June 2010 Mark Scheme, which contains not only the relevant assessment grids but also Indicative Content for each question. While not intended to be prescriptive, teachers and students might find this useful when considering potential approaches to the unseen items, as well as ways in which comparisons and wider reading references might be made.

Centres are thanked for preparing so thoroughly their candidates to work with the new numbering system and the new style answer book. The majority of candidates responded well to the changes to the June 2010 exams, but where difficulties were experienced, centres are asked to draw candidates' attention to the comprehensive range of guidance material that is available on this subject in order that they are confident about what is required of them in future examinations. Support available on this issue includes Guides for teachers and students, and specimen question papers and mark schemes showing the changes in action. All documents published in support of the changes to exams can be accessed via notices published on all qualification homepages, all subject notice boards, and on the parent and student area of the web.

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