



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

English Literature A

LITA4

(Specification 2740)

Unit 4: Extended essay and Shakespeare Study

Report on the Examination

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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INTRODUCTION

This was the sixth entry for the A2 coursework unit and it was very pleasing to see how well prepared were many students for it. While the chance to enter students for a module worth 40% of the A2 marks in January has been taken by an increasing number of schools and colleges, the June entry remains the default position for most schools. Once more the moderating team saw outstanding work which is testament to the effort and achievement of students and teachers the length and breadth of the country, with much of the very best work apparently the result of individually negotiated tasks, texts and topics which enabled students at all levels to do themselves justice. It is heartening for moderators to find a variety of tasks and texts across a centre's submission, as the centre's work then reflects a range of individual ideas, opinions, interests and analyses. Schools and colleges have chosen to organise this unit in a variety of ways this year, but the best work came from those that taught skills rather than solely content, thus also preparing their students for the demands of the LITA3 examination through the delivery of the coursework unit.

Set against a generally excellent national picture, however, it is disappointing to note that despite this being the sixth Principal Moderator's report for this unit to be reprinted in its entirety in the annual AQA autumn standardisation booklet, a tiny minority of schools and colleges appear to be unfamiliar with some of the most basic requirements of the unit. It is mainly for these centres, therefore, that much of the information below is stated once more.

Most schools and colleges agreed sensibly-framed tasks with their students usually based on a taught Shakespeare text, a second taught text (often a modern play) and a third text (often a novel) which allowed a freer choice. The "compare and contrast the ways in which..." formulation was understandably by far the most popular task, although some candidates chose to compare all texts in the light of a given critical view, which helpfully foregrounded the second half of A03. Both worked well. It is important, though, that all tasks are actually liberating AO2 by incorporating the key verb 'present'; it was surprising to see in some very reliable and otherwise excellent schools and colleges one or two tasks which did not explicitly invite students to conduct their comparative analysis through the prism of form, structure and language.

The number of weaker students who struggled due to having been set a generic teacher-imposed task was, thankfully, very small. It is imperative that tasks are carefully differentiated in this unit - especially when all students write about the same three texts - in order to address individual needs and abilities. They might as well all sit an examination paper if they are not given the freedom to explore their own interests and agendas. It is dispiriting to come across a school in which all students seem to be using a very similar framework and quotations to illustrate an over-scaffolded teacher-led party line, although this approach – which is very much against the spirit of the specification – was thankfully less common this summer.

There were very few folders which grossly exceeded the 3000 word limit for this unit this June, although one or two schools are still allowing this. The approach is almost inevitably self-penalising with regard to AO1 and the tightness of the student's argument, but even when an exceptionally able student proves capable of sustaining an excellent performance throughout an overlong essay, to reward them for doing so

is no less perversely unfair than it would be to allow them to remain in the examination hall for an extra half an hour after all their peers have handed in their papers. **The bottom line is that all students - including those awarded 70/70 – must be within or very close to the word limit and their work should demonstrate those organisational skills which will undoubtedly help them to prepare for the demands of the LITA3 examination, in which being able to compare texts sharply and concisely will be an invaluable asset. The word limit in this unit should be seen as working in the candidates’ favour by excluding a narrative/descriptive approach when there are three texts to cover.**

ADDRESSING THE ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

This section is an edited but substantially unaltered version of the previous Principal Moderator’s Report, as its message is clearly of ongoing relevance.

AO1

With regard to AO1, weaknesses in written expression should not be ignored. Since this is coursework, it is expected that candidates will take the opportunity to check and redraft their work; where this is not the case, it must be reflected in the final mark. The opening paragraph often makes or breaks an essay. Plodding dictionary definitions of a theme usually signal a workmanlike and largely narrative approach. Diving straight into analysis of the first text (and continuing for several pages without bringing in the other two) is unhelpful. Ponderous assertion (often in a misguided attempt to sound academic) is equally redundant; instead students need to define the terms of their essays in their own words, set out with clarity the terms of their debate and use this to shape their argument. These are basic but crucial AO1 skills which will also benefit students in terms of their ability to write well under timed conditions for the LITA3 examination.

Students need to show an awareness of their chosen authors at work. The best quotations are brief, frequent and accompanied by analytical comments that do not merely paraphrase the plot or ‘prove points’ but explore the form, structure and language used by the writers. In terms of the ability to frame an argument, some students reached a genuine sense of balanced comparison only in their conclusions. While every essay is, of course, a journey towards a conclusion, these candidates would have done better to turn their essays round and begin with the arguments contained within their final paragraph in order to prevent aimless drift during the essay. More able students, who had absorbed the lessons of balance, overview and close reading which define work at the highest level, produced some magnificent essays which blended a perceptive exploration of all three texts in the light of different readings with great skill. Indeed the most able students produced outstandingly well written academic essays which were a joy to read.

AO2

In order to earn high marks for AO2, candidates need to analyse aspects of all three areas of the triplet – i.e. **form** and **structure** as well as **language**. One moderator noted that while ‘most students seemed comfortable with close analysis of language, many found it difficult to write as confidently on form and structure, and it was

surprising how few considered genre in sufficient detail.’ Whether candidates are writing about texts across one, two or all three genres, they must discuss the specific features of poetry, prose and drama and go well beyond singling out minor lexical items. It is hard to understand why more than one candidate chose to spend a whole paragraph analysing a single word or some arcane punctuation from a lengthy novel rather than looking at much more relevant, challenging and interesting aspects of narrative form and structure. Indeed some schools and colleges over-rewarded their students with regard to AO2, placing them in Band 4 for ‘form, structure and language’ when in fact there was virtually nothing on form or structure (i.e. two-thirds of the AO) at all. In order to enhance AO2, school and colleges need to make explicit to students the ways in which different genres of writing present similar themes or subjects, and the key ways in which narratives can be organised. When they persistently refer to the *readers* of a play, for example, it is a very bad sign.

AO3

In terms of AO3, it is crucial that students interweave and connect their three texts as at times moderators have seen highly rewarded work which is effectively three separate mini-essays as opposed to a through-going comparison; a minority of teachers had failed to pick up upon moderation the fact that some of their students had *never* mentioned more than one text in any one paragraph. In this unit, the best students made sustained, systematic and intelligent comparisons and connections across all three texts in terms of narrative structure, genre, critical debate and context. Moreover, merely trotting out well-worn critical views and implicitly accepting them does not add up to an exploration of different readings; neither does name-checking a critic and writing ‘I agree’. It is only when students show an ambitious and conceptualised alertness to the idea of multiple readings with regard to their chosen texts, evaluate these readings and then use them to develop ideas of their own, that they have fulfilled all the relevant requirements. Responses which cite published critical opinion without engaging with it cannot be as successful as those in which students have considered alternative interpretations of their own and offered credible arguments based on their own informed readings, often based on their understanding of contextual factors. Rather than bolting on some additional commentary, when AO4 was stranded with the second part of AO3, for instance, and candidates considered the different ways in which readers might respond to a given text in the light of the contexts of production and reception, they often did very well. An increasing number of students made good use of named critics to structure their own argument, although it is quite possible to look at other ways of reading texts – from a Marxist, feminist, psychological, dominant or oppositional point of view – without always quoting a secondary source. It was rare to find essays entirely lacking bibliographies and when AO3 was handled well, it undoubtedly enhanced the quality of the candidate’s argument (AO1) too. When students debated the opinions of other readers their work was often genuinely exploratory, engaged and illuminating, and showed a genuinely conceptualised overview of texts and task.

AO4

The message that contextual factors (AO4) are relatively lightly weighted in this unit seems to have fully penetrated schools and colleges, which is very pleasing. Almost all students, therefore, chose their contexts carefully and revealed an excellent awareness of the ways in which the contexts of production, reception, culture, society, history, biography, intertextuality and genre can affect texts.

POETRY COLLECTIONS: THE REMINDER REPEATED

The June 2010 report for this unit stated:

[The] Coursework Guidance document for this unit states that while a collection of poetry is permissible as a second or third text, it must be a cohesive body of work which will bear comparison with a Shakespeare play and another full-length work. However, against all previous advice to the contrary, delivered through teacher support meetings, the official guidance document mentioned above and the Principal Moderator's report on the [first] January 2010 examination series, a tiny minority of centres allowed students to write about a 'lame duck' third text which consisted of only one or two short poems by different authors. If poetry is used, it is far better to choose a collection by one author which enables the students to take an overview at times as opposed to writing about isolated poems as totally separate entities. They need to convey a clear sense of the poetry text as a cohesive body of work as opposed to a seemingly random patchwork add-on. When writing about a collection of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, for instance, one would expect some discussion of the contexts of production and reception to lead the student into a discussion of the fact that at first these poems met with very little critical or commercial success. On the contrary, Browning's technically innovative but initially inaccessible choice of poetic form, with its unstable narrative perspective, was widely seen as opaque and obscure. Unfortunately, while aptly chosen poetry texts have served students well in comparative coursework since the days of the popular 660 specification, even the most able students are apt to "go through" their chosen poems very thoroughly, framing an often excellent piece of literary appreciation, but not really connecting the poems or seeing them as parts of a whole text.

While this warning has now been taken to heart by the vast majority of schools and colleges, there was still some evidence of it again this June – two years later. To repeat: poetry collections need to be preferably a published collection, or at least a full listing of the poems studied must be submitted in advance to the centre's AQA coursework moderator. It has been made plain ever since the specification was launched that any poetry text chosen must be the equivalent of a full-length novel or a Shakespeare play – yet at least one school awarded full marks this June to a student whose third text was a single poem. While many schools and colleges are now seeing the difficulties inherent in offering a poetry text in LITA4 and sensibly opting to avoid them by keeping poetry for the LITA3 examination, another model of good practice is to offer a longer poetry text such as Byron's *Don Juan* or one of the *Canterbury Tales*. **Only when students clearly see their poetry text as a cohesive body of work rather than a random patchwork collection of separate items will poetry work in this unit.** This is the teaching model with which all schools and colleges wishing to offer a poetry text should follow.

MARKING AND ASSESSMENT

AOs 1, 2 and 3 are each worth 21 marks each here, with AO4 being worth 7 out of the maximum possible mark of 70. It was very good to see that centres had made use of the full mark range available and most teachers had paid close attention to each AO when marking in order to trace variations in their students' performances across the range of skills tested.

A potentially useful marking model is printed below, although schools and colleges are advised to adopt a holistic best-fit approach to decide the final band and mark rather than taking a harshly numerical approach.

	AOs 1, 2, 3	AO4	
Upper band 4	21, 20		7
Lower band 4	19, 18, 17		6
Upper band 3	16, 15, 14		5
Lower band 3	13, 12, 11		4
Upper band 2	10, 9, 8		3
Lower band 2	7, 6, 5,		2
Upper band 1	4, 3, 2		1
Lower band	1, 0		0

It is very helpful for the moderator to see the comments of at least two teachers at the end of each essay as evidence that internal moderation has taken place. Moderators sometimes had problems confirming a centre's marks when the summative comment at the end of the essay or on the CRF made vague reference to the band descriptors in the mark scheme but failed to provide evidence of these by highlighting and annotating the relevant sections in the body of the essay itself.

The most accurate marking occurs when teachers identify not only the good features of a candidate's work but also weaker, contentious or erroneous sections. Teachers who undertake a written commentary within the margins of the essay are demonstrating that close attention has been paid to the work and that every attempt has been made to be rigorous, fair and accurate. Most importantly, perhaps, this commentary, once done, allows the moderator to see how the final mark came to be awarded within the school or college. It was excellent to see teachers making explicit reference to current AQA standardising materials and stating how far they felt their own students' work exceeded or failed to match a particular essay. Where moderators see clear, convincing evidence of a robust internal application of the national standards, the school's marks are always endorsed.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

Converting marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below:

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.