



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
June 2011**

**English Literature B**

**LITB4**

**(Specification 2745)**

**Unit 4: Further and Independent Reading**

***Report on the Examination***

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## Introduction

The unit's title, *Further and Independent Reading* is a clear statement of where it fits in the concept of the specification as a whole. The unit is designed to encourage candidates to read more widely than the 'set' texts and to respond in personal and individual ways: in doing this they will address the issues of 'stretch and challenge' which are now required at A Level.

There is no single model for the way this independent reading should be delivered, because we acknowledge that A level English Literature covers a broad spectrum of candidates with wide ranging differences in interest and ability. This diversity is seen among centres, and of course often within centres too. What we have consistently asserted though, is that if marks are to be supported by moderators we need to see candidates working on suitable tasks to which they respond independently.

There is no room in this unit for whole cohorts doing the same text, the same task and the same modelled answer to that task. Nor is there room for centres undermining the spirit of independence by over-relying on previously read texts, or using texts in the comparative section which lack sufficient substance to be an effective point of comparison.

Fortunately we saw little of the practice mentioned above, but where we did, it inevitably limited the moderator's ability to reward positively.

Essentially we saw three broad models for approaching this unit. The first gave complete freedom of text choice to the candidates, with teaching time directed to reading, negotiating tasks, thinking about issues in the anthology, and improving writing skills. The second gave some freedom of text choice, but limited the range, so giving some fixed teaching points, as well as some opportunity for more independent work. The third model gave candidates little choice in the selection of texts, but devised a range of tasks which made sure that candidates, who in such cases tended to be towards the lower end of the ability range, still responded with some degree of independence.

Clearly, while the notion of independent reading is a positive one, it is not something that candidates can do without preparation. The skills required for adopting a personal yet academic voice to make responses to sharply focused questions and issues, supported by relevant reference and quotation are complex and need to be worked on and developed. If acquired early they will be as fruitful in LITB1-3 as they are in LITB4.

**In essence, then, whatever teaching model is used there have to be ways in which the students can take forward the teaching and learning and apply it to their text choices. Careful preparation put in place by centres to deliver the Unit successfully, enables their candidates to achieve according to their ability. This unit makes demands on teachers and candidates to think creatively, which is challenging, but ultimately rewarding when candidates develop confident critical voices through their application of the skills of literary analysis to their chosen texts.**

## Deadlines

Moderators were aware that some candidates had put pressure on their teachers by failing to meet the centre's final deadlines, meaning that folders could not be carefully scrutinized and assessed. Such candidates can place teachers in a difficult position and potentially compromise the centre's submission. This can be a difficult issue around coursework, but centres should try to ensure that there are clear in-house rules governing the deadlines for submission of work to enable teachers to verify its authenticity and include it within their internal moderation process. If candidates are made aware of procedures, preferably in

writing, the responsibility lies with them to meet the department's internal dates for submission of work.

All candidates need to be aware there has to be a corporate responsibility in a group, and that in the external moderation process all candidates are treated the same as part of a generic group.

### **Text choices and tasks set**

The unit involves choosing two texts for comparative work, and a further text for the anthology response.

There were many interesting pairings of texts, and more importantly many interesting reasons for comparing texts. There were many examples of two texts which were thematically connected and this of course is acceptable. For some candidates, though, there is the danger that the theme becomes the main or even only focus for the writing. The standard task 'Compare the ways authors x and y write about topic z' does not always work well. Where a more literary connection (eg unreliable narrators, epistolary novels) or a more cultural connection (eg books that have been perceived as dangerous, books inviting a certain political reading) was made, the responses tended to work much better.

For the anthology response, it is not just a case of any text will do. In fact texts which were clearly in the domains of Feminism or Marxism often produced quite routine responses, whereas texts not necessarily thought of as belonging to such categories often produced more interesting work. There were many examples of texts under discussion where the political theory was matched closely to the known interests of the author: Duffy as a feminist, Harrison as a Marxist for example. These tended to lead to quite obvious responses with little sense of the candidate thinking creatively. It is much better to apply these political positions to texts which you would not obviously expect to be seen in this way. Reverse the orthodoxy above and you get much more interesting potential: Duffy explored through some Marxist ideas and Harrison to some feminist.

Overall it was at times disappointing to see so many texts from the other units appearing in this unit. The legal allowance is that one text previously studied can be revisited across the whole of this unit, so any infringement of this ruling would lead to disqualification. Choosing texts from our other lists can be justified if it allows a candidate to revisit a text from a new angle. It is much less justifiable if it is a convenient way of cutting corners for whole cohorts, who often suggest in their responses that they have no particular interest in going back to the text anyway.

One worrying aspect of the comparative piece was that in some centres candidates wrote about single short poems as one of their texts, or in a few cases as both. This is not permissible. Even if candidates write about full texts for the anthology, they must still compare two full texts comparatively. Inevitably where candidates did write about single poems they often had far too little to say and so gave very unequal responses.

Choosing texts and framing tasks go hand in hand, which is why they have been put together here. Advisers report that they quite frequently get requests which say something like 'I've taught text x so now need some tasks'. The idea of studying a text without knowing what tasks will emerge from the work is a strange one.

It has been stressed at standardising and elsewhere that this specification as a whole favours tasks which require some sort of critical debate. In this way the second part of AO3 *informed by interpretations of other readers* leads the candidate to meaningful work in AOs 2 and 4, realising that they are not dealing with fixed meanings and interpretations. Devising

tasks focused on debate works well in both parts of this unit. While not saying that it is a requirement to frame tasks in this way, it is certainly recommended, especially to teachers who are new to the unit.

It was said above that the task ‘Compare the ways authors x and y write about topic z’ did not always work very well. The reasons for this are clear. Candidates often struggle to make presentation ( AO2) a main focus, so instead they revert to writing about themes ( which does not appear in any of the AOs). If we take topic z to be *love*, for example then we have typically seen the task:

*‘Compare the ways Austen ( in Pride and Prejudice) and Bronte ( in Wuthering Heights ) present love’*

This task inevitably leads to a lot of writing about the topic, so what we have been urging centres to do, instead, is to create a debate. A much better task might be:

***To what extent do the two authors use buildings to represent potentially significant but essentially different aspects of social relationships?***

Or

***Is it fair to say that the worlds of both texts are ultimately shaped not by love but by social class?***

With these tasks the resulting answers are less predictable and more likely to show both engagement with the AOs and an answer framed by debate and independent thinking.

Staying with ‘love’, one centre set the task for ‘Great Gatsby’ and ‘Great Expectations’ as follows:

*Show how Fitzgerald and Dickens present different kinds of love in their novels.*

This again did not lead to very interesting work.

Another centre though asked the following:

***To what extent can Gatsby and Pip be seen as questing knights in search of the perfect but unattainable woman?***

And for a different candidate:

***Both authors use the word ‘Great’ in their titles. Is it possible to see the word used ironically in each case?***

These did lead to genuinely explorative tasks and in the process made it clear that interesting readings emerged because the texts were being viewed comparatively in ways that they might not have been if the texts had stood alone.

**Having all AOs assessed at the same time, in equal proportion, does allow some flexibility in task setting and writing, and provided candidates know that they must write about form/structure/language, and that they need to contextualise their ideas, using debate as a starting point does seem to produce more interesting and ultimately more successful responses.**

### **The Comparative Piece**

This report has already highlighted how important task-setting is here. Too often, it seemed, candidates were engaged in the task of comparing texts because they had to, rather than because in comparing texts, interesting ideas can emerge as connections are made.

The least interesting responses were those which mechanically worked through a list of likenesses, trying to discuss both texts at the same time. The more successful responses tended to look at each text for a fair amount of time, building up an interpretation, before then moving onto the second text and finding some similarity but also some difference.

As all the assessment objectives are tested here AO1 cannot be ignored. Band 4, for example, requires clear argument and use of critical vocabulary expressed accurately. Higher Band responses, therefore, need to be well structured, cohesive and in Band 6 technically fluent.

### **The Anthology Piece**

This again seems to have worked well. In the best cases, candidates drew on the critical anthology for their core ideas, read and thought a little more widely about some key concepts and then made the text under discussion carry the bulk of the analysis.

The political readings section has been mentioned earlier. It is worth repeating, though, that the anthology offers various approaches that can be used to investigate texts. A common error, which seemed to be endorsed by teachers because annotation did not highlight this, was to take a perfectly acceptable text, say Larkin's 'Whitsun Weddings' and then to explore the poems as though Larkin was a Marxist. Candidates seemed to think their job was to find where Larkin was being Marxist – an unlikely scenario – rather than to see Marxist criticism, if applied to the poems, opening up some interesting ideas on what Larkin is, and is not, saying in his poetry.

The metaphor section worked well at times, but only when candidates were being asked to debate the potential significances of the metaphors and symbols which they were identifying. Merely identifying metaphors did little when judged against the marking criteria.

Although least used, the critical value section often led to some of the best work, including some writing that was not in essay format. Here, for once, candidates felt enabled to write with a personal voice.

### **Assessment**

The moderation process is designed to ensure parity across centres and a fair deal for all candidates. **The best folders for moderation purposes were those with clear and critical marginal annotation, clear and critical summative evaluation and some sense of the dialogues that took place within internal standardising.** In centres where this is all shown, then moderation is usually very straightforward. There are many centres, though, where the only annotation is positive, and this inevitably makes moderators wonder how marks have been arrived at. Not surprisingly these centres tended to be over-generous with their marking compared to those who were prepared to disclose both positive and negative points. **Centres are reminded that the annotation on a script is aimed at the moderator, not the student.**

## **Bibliographies**

While we are not, at A Level, asking for the referencing conventions of higher education, we do require bibliographies which let us know which texts have been read, which editions of those texts have been used, and what supportive critical material (including that given out in class) has been accessed. We also require accurate word counts.

## **Administration**

Moderators understand that much of the admin these days is undertaken by exams officers, but there are certain aspects of administration which do help us greatly. This year there was a huge increase in the number of centres using postal services which require either a signature, or the recipient to be in at the time, or both. This is not helpful to the process and often results in inconvenience and delays. First class conventional post is required please.

We also ask that:

- Marks on the cover sheet should be correctly added up and match the marks on the mark sheet
- Where there are 20 or fewer candidates, all folders should be sent by the deadline, with the mark sheets
- Folders should be secured with treasury tags: loose pages are a nightmare and plastic folders horribly inconvenient to handle

## **Conclusion**

It was most encouraging to receive messages from centres during the year, in which they said how much they and their students enjoy working on this unit. Many moderators have reported that they have seen much interesting and challenging work, suggesting that the teaching has often been refreshing and thoughtful. This report inevitably has focused on areas for development/improvement, but overall the unit had had a most encouraging second year which can now be built on further.

## **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**

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