

UNIT 4: Prose Passage Questions: tackling the passage questions; commenting on narrative features, preparing material for an essay.

Recommended Prior Knowledge: A reasonable standard of written English and familiarity with reading prose gained at O Level or IGCSE.

Context: This Unit is designed to help students acquire the skills to answer the passage questions on Paper 3. It can be undertaken at any time during the course.

Outline: This Unit addresses the understanding and appreciation of prose, its characteristic features and techniques.

Learning Outcomes	Suggested Teaching/Learning Activities	Resources
<p>1. <u>What To Look For in a Passage</u></p> <p>Students need to develop an awareness and appreciation of the detail of prose writing. In a range of short extracts, students become accustomed to looking for and discussing narrative features and how they contribute to the reader's experience of the text.</p>	<p>The focus here is not on extensive wider reading, but on looking at a range of styles of writing to enable students to put their set text into a literary context. Students and the teacher choose a range of short passages from different periods and types of writing. By initially taking these extracts out of their context, students are encouraged to think about the features of the writing rather than their contribution to the development of plot. As they read and discuss the extracts, students should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the narrative position? Is the passage written in the first or third person? • If the first person, is the narrator an observer or a character in the story? • If the third person, is the narrator omniscient, or an external observer? • Is the narrator's attitude to the events and characters evident? Does the narrator direct the reader's responses? • What is the <i>tone</i> of the writing? Objective, humorous, critical, satirical etc? How is this tone created through language and structure? • Do sentence and paragraph lengths vary, and for what effects? • Are any other writing features used, such as <i>simile</i> and <i>metaphor</i>? 	<p>A range of short prose extracts. Examples could include those used for Unit 1 as well as alternatives such as extracts from <i>Gulliver's Travels</i> (Swift), <i>David Copperfield</i> (Dickens), <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> (Wilde), <i>The Famished Road</i> (Okri).</p> <p><i>The Language of Literature</i> by Adrian Beard (Routledge A Level English Guides ISBN 0-415-28633-6) is useful.</p>

2. Narrative Position

Students develop an awareness and appreciation of narrative position in prose.

Students and the teacher choose extracts for focus on the narrative position. Through discussion, students should consider:

- Is narrative position consistent throughout the text or does this passage present one of a number of alternatives? (This is particularly important in *A Grain of Wheat*, for example).
- How is the narrative position established and maintained?
- Does the author use any specific language to indicate the narrative position?
- Is the narrator involved in the narrative? If so, can the narrator's judgements and views be trusted by the reader?
- Is an external third person narrator objective, or is the narrative written from a character's perspective?

Extracts taken from the Prose text to be studied for the Paper.

3. Language, Imagery and Structure

Students develop an awareness and appreciation of language, imagery and tone in prose.

Students and the teacher choose extracts for focus on language, imagery and structure. Through discussion, students should consider:

- How does the language of the passage create the narrative position?
- Is dialogue mixed with narrative?
- How does characters' speech establish their nature, mood and attitude? Note also the speech verbs.
- How is setting established, and how important is it in the passage?
- Does the passage contain any literary devices, such as *simile*, *metaphor*, *hyperbole*, etc? If so, what do they contribute to the meaning and the reader's response?
- Are sentence and paragraph lengths varied for particular effects? Is syntax within sentences arranged to emphasise particular words or ideas?
- Has the extract been chosen to give a strong opening or closing? This is particularly important if the passage is from the beginning or end of a text, short story or chapter.

Extracts taken from the Prose text to be studied for the Paper.

Exemplar for Unit 4.pdf shows what students might be able to comment on in a passage from *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell.

4. Context

Students develop an awareness of the significance of the context of passages from the Prose text.

Students consider the extracts previously discussed in terms of their context within the text as a whole. Through discussion, students should consider:

- Where in the text does this extract take place? Is it near the beginning or end, or central to the text's development?
- What has happened in the text prior to this passage? Has the text prepared for it?
- What happens in the text following this passage? Does it prepare for or prefigure later events?
- How does the passage develop the reader's understanding of the characters?
- How does the passage develop the reader's understanding of the main concerns of the text?
- Can students make any specific links between this passage and other parts of the text?

Extracts taken from the Prose text to be studied for the Paper.

5. Writing Exam-Style Essays

This prepares students for the type of question they will face for the selected passage essay in the examination (the *b* question).

The selected passage questions (always the *b* option) always ask for a close and detailed commentary on the set passage. Questions frequently ask candidates to 'comment closely' on the extract and focus on a particular aspect of it. The teacher should discuss the implications of these types of questions with the students.

The pointers above give students a working method to approach the passages for this question, enabling them to focus on the writing rather than the plot of the extract. They should, though, always remember that they *must* comment on the effects of any technique they notice and how it contributes to the meaning of the passage. They will not gain marks for spotting the techniques alone.

They are now prepared to attempt their first examination style essay question.

Past papers (available from CIE).